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# Spheres of Influence: A Reconceptualization

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“Spheres of influence” (SOI) are best defined as international formations that contain one nation (the influencer) that commands superior power over others. For the formation to qualify as an SOI, the level of control the influencer has over the nations subject to its influence must be intermediary: lower than that of an occupying or colonizing nation, but higher than that of a coalition leader. Importantly, the means of control the influencer employs must be largely ideational and economic rather than coercive. Thus, it can be argued that, under the Monroe Doctrine, much of Central and South America was in the United States’ SOI, and currently, North Korea is in China’s SOI, while Japan is in that of the United States.

Viewing the current international order through the lens of SOI provides unique insight into twenty-first century challenges and fills important gaps in international relations theory. However, the considerable literature on international relations largely ignores SOI as a theoretical concept, even as case studies illuminate the strength of the theory, as will be shown in Part I of this article. To the extent that SOI are studied, they tend to be criticized for being incompatible with the rule-based, liberal international order.

This article examines SOI from a realist’s viewpoint (Part II), adds a psychological evaluation of the concept (Part III), and then addresses the question of whether SOI and the liberal international order can be reconciled (Part IV). It closes by seeking to understand the role SOI can play in helping countries avoid the Thucydides Trap—in which tensions between

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rising and established powers lead to war—specifically by analyzing the cases of China, Russia, and the United States (Part V). This analysis reveals that SOI contribute to the international order because they promote deter-

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#### PART I: A MUCH-NEGLECTED INTERNATIONAL FORMATION

of the Geneva Graduate Institute.<sup>1</sup> Paul Keal of the Australian National University also authored a seminal article on SOI that was published in 1983, in which he argued that although SOI are “unacceptable” from the standpoint of international norms, they may serve as a “device for limiting the danger of armed conflict between superpowers.”<sup>2</sup>

A review of the international relations literature on SOI reveals the dearth of existing research. The foremost English book on the subject published in the twenty-first century is *Spheres of Influence* by Susanna Hast

Beyond this, as Hast herself recognizes, not much has been written about this subject. She writes in *Spheres of Influence*:

The concept is characterized by a conflict between the lack of theoretical interest in it in IR and, at the same time, the frequent use of it in political discourse. Sphere of influence is a contested concept that has awaited theoretical assessment from a historical perspective for too long. The problem with spheres of influence is that there is no debate on the meaning of the concept. It simply *is* in its simultaneous vagueness and familiarity.<sup>3</sup> She adds, “One explanation for the lack of interest in conceptualizing spheres of influence is that there are already plenty of other concepts describing international influence.”<sup>4</sup>

By contrast, there exist considerable descriptive and historical writings on particular spheres, such as the Western Hemisphere, namely the United States’ SOI under the Monroe Doctrine,<sup>5</sup> and the United States’ and USSR’s SOI during the Cold War.<sup>6</sup> However, these tend not to draw general conclusions about SOI’s particular nature as a form of international relations.

One reason SOI are considered to be “historical” is because most are

geographical. An SOI does not necessarily encompass only or mainly an area that abuts the influencing power. The USSR, for instance, included Cuba in its SOI. However, most areas considered to be a part of an SOI seem to share features with what the Russians call the “near abroad.”<sup>7</sup> One key reason for this frequent geographical proximity between SOI and the influencing power is that SOI can contribute to the influencing power’s security by keeping other major powers at some distance, beyond the SOI. However, with the advent of long range missiles, surveillance satellites, unmanned aerial vehicles, and cyber communications for spying and, potentially, cyber warfare, territorial distances have come to be viewed as less important. Militaries pay increased attention to what is called the “distant battlefield” where machines controlled from afar conduct the fighting, and to rapid deployment forces that can be positioned with little regard to distance.<sup>8</sup>

These developments in warfare technology help explain the decline in interest in SOI, which tend to be “local.”<sup>9</sup> The following discussion seeks to show that despite these developments, SOI have a significant role to play in underpinning the international order.

## **PART II: ASSESSING SOI FROM A REALIST PERSPECTIVE**

From a realist viewpoint, a given superpower has no reason to oppose other powers extending their influence by forming an SOI over other nations, as long as these attempts do not infringe on the superpower’s core interests. This is because SOI tend to contribute to war avoidance, especially when the SOI’s boundaries are clearly defined. To put it differently, the default realist position regarding SOI is that given the risk and cost of war, it is preferable to reduce the probability that two or more powers will fight each other by respecting each other’s SOI. The main exception to this rule occurs when an SOI undermines the other power’s core interests, such as the security, political or regime stability, or economic well-being of that nation or its allies.

Realism is a very large theoretical tent, and there are significant differences among realists. During the Cold War, such a realist position led the United States to support authoritarian regimes, as long as they were anti-Communist,<sup>10</sup> and to not send troops in support of uprisings against Communist regimes if they were in the Soviet SOI.<sup>11</sup> This position supports the United States’ current policy of allying itself with Arab authoritarian states, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, whose human rights records are particularly poor.

SOI can contribute to war avoidance because they constitute tacit agreements whereby some nations are under the tutelage and patronage of a given power. Competing powers will not seek to dislodge these nations from one SOI solely to encompass them in their own (or in a non-aligned camp). Thus, during the Cold War, the West mostly did not try to dislodge nations from the USSR's SOI. Moreover, the West avoided coming to the aid of pro-democratic uprisings in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia because these nations were in the USSR's SOI; this helped avoid a major confrontation with the USSR, but failed to promote human rights and democracy in these nations.<sup>12</sup> The USSR was less scrupulous in respecting the West's SOI, but it did limit itself to largely economic and ideological means—with some notable exceptions—in its efforts to pull nations out of the Western SOI and into its own sphere.

Paul Keal argues that mutual respect for the USSR's and the West's respective SOI failed because the United States and the USSR were dragged into proxy wars in Vietnam and Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup> However, one may argue that these wars took place because the lines of the superpowers' respective SOI in these two areas were not clearly marked. This point has also been made with reference to the Korean War.<sup>14</sup>

Cuba was the main exception to this rule. It clearly was in the USSR's SOI, and the United States tried to use force to dislodge it. However, this exception supports the main point: such action entailed a great risk that the superpowers would engage in war. In short, as long as SOI have clearly-drawn and respected lines and do not harm either superpower's core interests, they seem to prevent superpowers from warring with each other.

International relations scholars now fear that the United States may become involved in a major war with China.<sup>15</sup> To the Chinese, it seems as if the United States will not tolerate a Chinese SOI along China's borders.<sup>16</sup> Critics point to the United States' efforts to include in its own SOI not only Vietnam (a Communist former ally of China), but also Cambodia and Burma, both of which are currently considered to be part of China's SOI. Others argue that in this case, as in others, the risk of war between the superpowers would be reduced if the United States permitted China to create an SOI out of some of the nations on China's borders, such as North Korea, or allowed those same nations to serve as a neutral buffer zone.<sup>17</sup>

The increase in tensions that resulted from the USSR's placement of missiles in Cuba, the United States' placement of missile bases in Turkey and of elements of a missile defense shield near the USSR's (later, Russia's) borders, and NATO's expansion to the East, all support these observations about the potential role of SOI in war avoidance. That failing to separate

national powers leads to tension is also evident in the Middle East, where mutually hostile nations abut each other, with no mitigating SOI existing between them. For instance, Iran and Saddam's Iraq directly bordered each other, as do Israel and Hezbollah-dominated Lebanon today.

Recent developments in Ukraine highlight the role SOI play in avoiding conflict. As John Mearsheimer showed, the 2014 conflict in Ukraine seems to have ensued, at least to some degree, because the West has historically tried to extend the European Union and NATO to the East; the West sought for more and more former Soviet Republics, including those on the border with Russia, to join the West's SOI.<sup>18</sup> Russians claim that the United States committed itself to a moratorium on expanding NATO to the East in exchange for Soviet withdrawal of troops from East Germany.<sup>19</sup> By contrast, the United States claims no such commitment was ever made.<sup>20</sup> Historian Mary Elise Sarotte shows, on the basis of recently realized documents, that no formal commitment was ever made, but the United States did "hint" that it would so limit NATO's expansion.<sup>21</sup> However, even if no formal foundation for Russia's outrage exists, the question stands: Why continue to expand NATO deeper into the East, all the way to the borders of Russia?

This question became particularly acute when Ukraine was encouraged to seek closer ties with the EU rather than Russia, a move that—Russia stressed—was often followed by membership in NATO.<sup>22</sup> Russia continues to consider NATO an antagonistic military alliance, despite many speeches by NATO leaders that have claimed otherwise.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, Russia, which was recovering from a period of anarchy and economic decline, sought to build an SOI to encompass the same nations. From these former pieces of the Russian empire, John McCain calls Ukraine the "crown jewel."<sup>24</sup>

Ruth Deyermond, an expert in post-Soviet security, explains in an op-ed that Russia's ability to exercise power over Ukraine is especially critical to Russia's conceptualization of itself as a great power, which is critical to "Russia's identity."<sup>25</sup> Ukraine is also important for Russian trade, it serves as a major shipping route for Russian energy exports,<sup>26</sup> and it has become "a normative battleground" insofar as Ukraine must choose between the Russian-led Eurasian Customs Union and the EU's Free Trade Area.<sup>27</sup> There are thus powerful reasons for Russia to seek Ukraine's participation in Russia's SOI.

What effects on the West's core interests would follow from Ukraine being in Russia's SOI rather than that of the EU? From a realist viewpoint, such a development would have no significant negative effects. Indeed, if Russia were to annex Ukraine entirely, it would make little difference to the

West's security or its flow of raw materials, energy, or other core interests.<sup>28</sup> By contrast, if Russia lost Ukraine, it would lose its only access to the Black Sea and, through it, the Mediterranean Sea.

While the move to include Ukraine in the West's SOI seems to have provided no significant gains to the United States' core interests, it has

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damaged several Western core interests. It led to some loss of Russian support in dealing with Iran, the closure of a United States military base in Kyrgyzstan that had played a key role in supplying U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan,<sup>29</sup> and losses to the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction program.<sup>30</sup>

In short, from a realist perspective, there was no reason for the United States to align with those who sought to encourage a Ukrainian shift from

Russia's SOI to the West's. Allowing Ukraine to remain in Russia's SOI would not have undermined core U.S. interests, but would have reduced the probability of an armed conflict in Ukraine, and would have served core Russian interests. In essence, encouraging Ukraine to shift seems to have caused losses to the United States' core interests.<sup>31</sup>

### PART III: PSYCHOLOGICAL AND DOMESTIC FACTORS

Campaigns by one superpower to counter the rise of another's SOI have a negative psychological effect, whether or not these campaigns affect core interests and even if the campaign uses mainly non-coercive means. The power whose SOI is corroded tends to feel that this development threatens its security. A realist may well scoff at the very notion that nations as actors have psychological responses, which the phrase "feel threatened" implies. To a realist, nations have no psyche and cannot have emotional responses. They are affected by the relative size of their economies, militaries, and other such "hard" power factors. Their leaders draw rational conclusions based on these factors. However, there is ample historical evidence that governments frequently act and react as if they were people, subject to emotions. Nations often act because they sense they have been humiliated or insulted, because they are "angry" at a superpower, or because they are "jubilant" that their soccer team won a match a thousand miles away.<sup>32</sup>

I concur with others who hold that the application of these psychological terms is appropriate because, in the modern era, many countries' masses have invested part of their personal identities and senses of self in the nation as if it were their immediate community.<sup>33,34</sup> When events take place that the citizens of a nation view as offensive—for example, when Japanese Prime Minister Shinzō Abe visited the Yasukuni Shrine, which many Chinese and South Koreans believe honors war criminals—millions of these citizens feel personally offended and expect their governments to react accordingly.<sup>35</sup> Thus, a combination of domestic politics and ego explain why nations act like persons. Regardless of whether one views these sentiments pejoratively (as war fever or jingoism) or positively (as patriotism), they have often led to conflicts in the past. Historians and international relations scholars have pointed out the roles such emotions played in the 2006 Lebanon War, 1995–96 Taiwan Straits crisis, Russian-Ukrainian tensions, the U.S. War on Terror, among others.<sup>36</sup>

SOI can help mitigate this sense of threat by creating separation zones, or buffer states, between superpowers, allowing each superpower a measure of influence over the nations on its borders, limiting the ability of the other superpowers to exert influence over those nations, and keeping the others superpowers' forces physically out of the area. That is, the reality of separation, which has an objective security benefit, engenders a secondary benefit: psychological assurance, a *subjective* sense of security. This is particularly the case when SOI are explicitly defined, which reduces the chance of misunderstandings about the spheres' geographical scope and the limits of commitments to respect them. These psychological considerations provide a non-realist but valid reason to support SOI, assuming they meet the basic criteria already cited.

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#### PART IV: RECONCILING SOI AND THE LIBERAL ORDER

At first blush it may seem that SOI violate key normative assumptions and legal principles that form the foundation of the liberal international order. The most important assumption of this order is that countries will respect what might be called the Westphalian norm, namely that no nation



will interfere in the internal affairs of another nation.<sup>37</sup> SOI, which by definition entail intervention by one power in the affairs of one or more other nations, seem to fly directly in the face of this overarching key principle.

Applying compliance theory demonstrates how SOI can be reconciled with the liberal international order. Compliance theory defines power as the capacity of organization A to make organization B follow a course set by A, which can be met by normative power, exemplified by persuasion and influence; utilitarian power, which yields material rewards; and coercive power, which relies on the use of force for influence. This compliance typology has been previously applied to international relations.<sup>38</sup>

Applying it to the study of SOI, one notes that SOI rely mainly on utilitarian power (e.g., the offer or withholding of foreign aid, credit, investment, and markets) and normative power (e.g., ideological appeals). Hast captures this point by comparing SOI to other terms in international relations theory such as regional security complex, empire lite, regionalism, and soft power.<sup>39</sup> A superpower coercing another nation to follow its commands, on the other hand, entails occupation or colonization or military alliance, not an SOI. The term “sphere of dominance” might be most appropriate in these cases. Keal states:

What is meant by this is that the influencing power ‘resort[s] to force and the threat of force, but this is not habitual and uninhibited but occasional and reluctant.’ An influencing power prefers ‘to rely upon instruments other than the direct use or threat of force; and will employ the latter only in situations of extremity and with a sense that in doing so it is incurring a political cost.’<sup>40</sup>

Granted, the difference is one of degree rather than an absolute one. Some superpowers use a few means of violence to maintain control over an SOI. And superpowers that rely mainly on violence to maintain their control over other nations—as occupying powers do—employ some economic and ideational means. Still, it is not unduly difficult to determine when an SOI turns into a zone of dominance. For example, Iraq was in the Soviet SOI until 1990, but it moved into a Western zone of dominance in 2003.<sup>41</sup>

The next step is to realize that only the application of coercive power violates the liberal international order. Those who state that nations should forswear interfering in the internal affairs of other nations and include any and all influence in the definition of “interference” often overlook this point. As Javier Solana of the Brookings Institution pointed out, there has been widespread outcry in Greece against EU “interference” in its domestic economic affairs, even though the European Union has not used force to



affect the changes it wishes to see.<sup>42</sup> However, non-lethal, non-coercive power violates neither sovereignty nor the Westphalian norm. Foreign aid, credit, investment, and state-sponsored broadcasting are fully compatible with the liberal international order.<sup>43</sup> In short, SOI—which rely mainly on non-coercive means of influence—are compatible with the most important foundations of liberal international order. They violate neither the Westphalian norm nor respect for self-government.

#### **PART V: SOI AND THE TRANSITION TO A LESS HEGEMONIC WORLD**

SOI can make a major contribution to the changing international order, especially in the near future. Changes to the world's distribution of power in recent decades are variously characterized as shifts from a world dominated by one power toward a multipolar world.<sup>44</sup> The shift is believed to have taken place because either U.S. power has declined due to economic and internal political weaknesses, or because other powers, especially China and Russia, have risen. Even those who hold that statements about the decline of the United States as a global power are exaggerated, because “the American system, for all its often stultifying qualities, has also shown a [great] capacity to adapt and recover from difficulties,” agree that the United States must make some changes to its foreign policy. Indeed, as Robert Kagan writes, “the distribution of power among nations, and between nations and non-state actors, is constantly in flux.”<sup>45</sup>

The following discussion builds on the hypothesis that the global redistribution of power so far has actually followed a pattern different from all those listed above. Namely, the United States continues to be the only global power, but nations that so far have had neither the capability nor, it seems, the intention to become global powers are becoming, or seek to become, regional powers. China and Iran are major examples because both these countries seek to increase their regional influence, just as the United States did during a similar stage of development when it announced and implemented the Monroe Doctrine, but do not seek to compete with the United States over maintaining a world order.<sup>46</sup> Turkey, the European Union, Japan, India, and Brazil are also often listed as regional powers, but they have shown much less ambition and capacity to project power even in their own region.<sup>47</sup>

The United States hence faces two major options when it comes to dealing with rising regional powers: First, it can view moves by new powers that seek to develop SOI in the areas that abut their lands as violations of the international order, adhering to a role as the guardian of that

order. This approach can be called hegemonic maintenance. To the extent that the United States adopts this view, it will seek to deny rising regional powers any increase in influence over their neighbors. On the other hand, the United States can view the rise of regional powers as acceptable, as long as they use non-coercive means and do not conflict with the U.S. core interests or the U.S. role in maintaining the liberal international order on a global scale. This strategy is known as superpower accommodation.

The United States, in effect, often acts as if it has deliberated on the matter in the terms here employed and chosen to follow the hegemonic maintenance strategy. This strategic choice is most evident in the United States' treatment of China, which includes declaring that the United States views the tiny, unsettled Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands to be part of Japan and hence will protect them with its full power.<sup>48</sup> The same choice is reflected in the U.S. drive to establish military bases in, and alliances with, many nations on China's borders, in encouraging these nations not to join Chinese economic development pacts, and in seeking to lure nations that are in China's SOI into the United States' own.<sup>49,50</sup> The same is true for the United States' treatment of Russia.

Critics are concerned that hegemonic maintenance will lead the United States to fall into what has been referred to as the Thucydides Trap, which holds that war will ensue if an old power will not yield to a rising one, or will yield only little and grudgingly.<sup>51</sup> These critics stress that such an outcome is not inevitable; in four out of eleven such clashes since 1500, including when the United Kingdom accommodated the rise of the United States, the antagonists worked out a peaceful accommodation.<sup>52</sup>

These statements overlook the fact that, at least currently and for the foreseeable future, China's main ambitions and capabilities are regional rather than global.<sup>53</sup> Thus, accommodating its rise is much less challenging than it might appear. While Russia seeks to play the role of a global power, it has few of the resources needed to back up this ambition, and its main efforts are aimed at restoring a regional role.<sup>54</sup> Allowing these rising powers to develop regional SOI would allow the United States to maintain its global position, but, for reasons already discussed, would reduce the probability of an armed conflict.

To reiterate, all this holds true only as long as the regional powers rely on economic and ideational means rather than force to build up their SOI. Russia clearly crossed the line in Ukraine, and China so far has been careful not to use its military to expand its SOI. Upon close examination, China's various moves that have been referred to as "aggressive"<sup>55</sup> and "provocative"<sup>56</sup> have, with rare and minor exceptions, involved only weak measures,

such as stating claims to an expanded Exclusive Economic Zone and Air Defense Identification Zone, positioning an oil rig, carrying out civilian and coast guard patrols, and so on.

In conclusion, one finds that SOI—defined as zones of influence achieved largely through ideational and economic means—contribute to the international order because they reduce the risk of war. A realist is hence likely to hold that they should be opposed only if they violate the core interests of the nation that tolerates the development of such a sphere by another nation. Psychological considerations lead to the same conclusion. SOI not only serve as a tangible buffer zone, but also contribute to a sense of security. Moreover, from a liberal viewpoint, SOI need not conflict with the rule-based international order, because their norms ban only coercive interference by one nation in the internal affairs of others, not influence by non-lethal or traditional soft power tactics such as media broadcasts, student exchanges, and trade, among others. Finally, SOI seem to have a major constructive role to play in helping a prevailing global superpower, such as the United States, adapt to a rising regional power, such as China.<sup>f</sup>

#### ENDNOTES

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- 9 Note that the spheres of influence of major powers such as those of Russia, China, and the European Union are adjacent to their borders. See for example: Richard Weitz “Nervous Neighbors: China Finds a Sphere of Influence,” *World Affairs Journal*, March/April 2011, <<http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/nervous-neighbors-china-finds-sphere-influence>> (accessed March 23, 2015); Steven Erlanger, “The World; Learning to Fear Putin’s Gaze,” *New York Times*, February 25, 2001 (citing Russian President Putin’s statement that the countries of the former Soviet Union are in Russia’s “sphere of influence”); Hiski Haukkala, “The EU as a Regional Normative Hegemon: The Case of European Neighbourhood Policy,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 60 (9) (2008), 1601-1622.
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  - 11 Gunter Bischof, “United States Responses to the Soviet Suppression of Rebellions in the German Democratic Republic, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 22 (1) (2011). (“Under Presidents Dwight Eisenhower and Lyndon Johnson, the United States refrained from intervening during the three major Cold War crises in the Soviet bloc in 1953, 1956, and 1968.... Washington ultimately respected the Yalta arrangements and tolerated the Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. Next to grudging respect for the Yalta outcomes, the ultimate spectre of mutual destruction in a nuclear war ‘compelled’ the superpowers towards co-existence.”)
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