

Review - Spheres of Influence in International Relations

Written by John Berryman

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JOHN BERRYMAN, OCT 7 2014

Spheres of Influence in International Relations: History, Theory and Politics

By Susanna Hast

Ashgate, 2014

On his flying visit to Warsaw en-route to the D-Day celebrations in June 2014, reviewing Russia's relations with Ukraine, President Barack Obama stated that, 'The days of empire and *spheres of influence* (emphasis added) are over. . . Bigger nations must not be allowed to bully the small'. His warning echoed that of Vice-President Joe Biden in Kiev in 2009 who reminded his hosts that the U.S. did 'not recognize – and I want to reiterate it – *any sphere of influence* (emphasis added). We do not recognize anyone else's right to dictate to you (Ukraine) or any other country what alliances you will seek to belong to or what bilateral relationships you have'. Such warnings, and suggestions by EU officials Jose Manuel Barroso and Herman Van Rompuy that Russia's behaviour is inconsistent with the practice of international relations in the twentieth century, are dismissed by Moscow as patronizing and self-serving justifications for NATO's eastward enlargement and the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP), advancing *their* spheres of influence to the very borders of Russia itself.

Given that the concept of spheres of influence is so frequently employed in political discourse and yet relatively neglected in the academic study of international relations, Susanna Hast's thoughtful and penetrating study represents a welcome and timely effort to provide a 'critical analysis and reassessment of [this] concept with an interest in normative and theoretical questions arising from the past and present' (p. vii).

Hast's first three chapters frame this idea and explore from a normative angle the place of spheres of influence in international society. Recognizing that it is a concept that has been contested, Hast employs a constructivist approach to understand its place in the realm of international discourse and dialogue. She identifies two core features in her definition of a sphere of influence: 'exclusion of other powers and limitation of the independence or sovereignty of the influenced state' (p. 6). Drawing on the classic study by Lord Curzon of the 'Great Game' for spheres of influence in Asia conducted by the British Empire and the Russian Empire, the theoretical and comparative Cold War works of Hedley Bull, Paul Keal, and Edy Kaufman, and the more recent studies by Barry Buzan and Robert Jackson, she emphasises that Great Powers have historically assumed a managerial responsibility in the international system and have sought to promote stability and order by means of tacit understandings which underpinned the management of regional spheres of influence. She also observes that, whilst commonly perceived as the victims of Great Power arrangements in a balance of power game, small powers and influenced states can actually utilize their influence relationships to play the Great Powers against each other. However, in concordance with Bull and Jackson, Hast concludes that although spheres of influence fulfil necessary functions as an idea and foreign policy tool in the maintenance of international order, it is often at the price of systematic injustice to the rights of smaller nations and states.

In her fourth chapter Hast provides an overview of the (rather marginal) place of spheres of influence in the writings of those who in the aftermath of the First and Second World Wars were concerned that a shift towards regional groupings and a system of super-states might usher in some sort of world government which would mark the end of the pluralist Westphalian system of sovereign states. She focuses on the writings of Friedrich Naumann and Carl Schmitt in Germany, E.H. Carr and George Orwell in England, and Walter Lippmann in the U.S. Only with the post-

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war establishment of the huge Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe and consolidation of Washington's spheres of influence in the Americas and Western Europe did disputes over the character and legitimacy of the respective spheres of influence once more enter centre stage.

In her fifth chapter Hast carefully interrogates the decades of Cold War debates but concludes that a critical examination of spheres of influence in the post-Cold War years has yet to begin. Indeed, she indicates that her study was stimulated by her observation that western studies of Russian foreign policy in relationship to the post-Soviet space have employed the concept of spheres of influence in a pejorative fashion 'almost like a mantra' (p. 14). And it is certainly the case that with the eastward enlargement of NATO and the EU, and the development of the EaP as post-modern project to advance the structural and normative power of the EU within the six states of the shared 'eastern neighbourhood', Moscow has sought to uphold its traditional sphere of influence in a zero-sum game. Hast notes that some Western analysts suggest that Russia's efforts have been underpinned by an imperial culture or 'temptation' which helps shape Moscow's view that there are countries contiguous to Russia's borders in which it has historically 'privileged interests' or 'zones of vital interest' (p. 16). However, she questions whether, as suggested in some publications of the EU-sponsored European Council on Foreign Relations, a sphere of influence policy is uniquely Russian. All Great Powers and regional powers, whether it be Russia or the EU – or the U.S., China, India, Israel, Australia, and ex-colonial powers such as Spain or France – are concerned to discourage hostile political alignments on neighbouring territories or block deployment of foreign forces and military infrastructures on strategically sensitive territories, irrespective of the wishes of their sovereign authorities. Exploring the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis as an illustrative incident, Hast demonstrates that in its determination to secure the withdrawal of Soviet missiles from the neighbouring state of Cuba and thereby safeguard America's national security, Washington took no account of the fact that the missiles were deployed with the full support of the sovereign authorities in Havana to enhance Cuba's national security.

As Hast notes, apart from utilizing the asymmetric disparity in military power it enjoys in the shared neighbourhood, in the current struggle for influence within the shared neighbourhood, Moscow has employed an increasingly sophisticated and diffuse range of 'soft power' instruments. As well as institutional proposals for a new security architecture in Europe, Putin has accelerated the development of economic integration towards a Eurasian Economic Union. Embracing Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, plus Armenia and possibly Kyrgyzstan, in Putin's vision from 2015 the Eurasian Union will provide a developing link between Europe and the dynamic Asia-Pacific region, enhancing the position of Russia and her partners within an increasingly multipolar and regionalized world order. Indeed, Hast points up the vision by Andrew Hurrell of a possible future world order 'made up of large 'region-states' which might have a variety of internal forms of organization – including perhaps old-style spheres of influence, hegemonically centred institutionalism and unequal forms of federal union' (p. 11). For Ukraine, the focus of the current struggle for influence in the shared neighbourhood, it seems clear that neither Washington nor Brussels nor Moscow wish to shoulder responsibilities for this divided and near-bankrupt state, but neither do they wish to see it fall within the rival sphere of influence. The 'Great Game' continues.

About the author:

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