Spheres of Influence:

The Architecture of Power in World Politics

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15 April 2026

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Chapter 1: The Enduring Relevance of Spheres of Influence

Spheres of influence have returned to the heart of global politics. For decades, policymakers in Washington dismissed them as illiberal relics of a bygone era, swept away by the rise of the modern liberal international order. That post-Cold War consensus is now breaking down. In recent years, China and Russia have made spheres impossible to ignore, from Beijing's expansive claims in the South China Sea to Moscow's war in Ukraine. More recently still, the United States itself has openly joined this shift. Beginning in President Donald Trump's second term, Washington has begun speaking directly in spheres-based terms and, with actions such as the 2026 overthrow of Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela, acting accordingly. Spheres are no longer invoked only to describe the behavior of rivals; they have become central to debates about American power and strategy. This raises urgent questions: What exactly are spheres of influence? Why do great powers seek them? And under what conditions do they promote peace or provoke conflict?

These questions lie at the heart of this book. In the chapters that follow, I will argue that spheres are not relics of the past but enduring features of great power politics. Far from being historical anachronisms, spheres form the very architecture of power in world politics. They define how great powers compete, expand, and coexist. From postwar peace settlements to alliance formation to the drawing of borders, spheres have shaped many of the most consequential decisions in history. Thus, to make sense of today's global challenges and craft effective foreign policy, we must stop wishing spheres away and start understanding how they work.

Toward that end, this book advances four core arguments.

First, great powers seek spheres because they protect their core national interests in a competitive security environment. Chapter 2 will show that states with spheres are stronger, safer, and wealthier than those without. Consequently, when a state enjoys a clear power advantage in a geostrategically important region, it will almost certainly try to establish a sphere there. This logic is timeless and applies to states of all ideological stripes. Whether they were a monarchy, democracy, communist state, or fascist regime, every single great power in the modern era—including, and some might say, *especially*, the United States—has sought to create its own sphere. China and Russia are no different today. Thus, contrary to the hopes of some idealistic policymakers, spheres cannot be eliminated from the international system because they are hardwired into its structure.

Second, whether spheres become a source of war or peace depends on where they fall in their lifecycle. Spheres evolve through distinct phases, each with different implications for global stability. The creation phase is often the most dangerous. To build a sphere, an aspiring leading state must consolidate control over weaker states in the contested region while excluding rival powers. These efforts tend to provoke nationalist resistance from within and geopolitical friction from without. Both dynamics can lead to conflict, as the same logic that compels states to build spheres also drives their rivals to resist them. And when wars do erupt over spheres, they can be catastrophic. Indeed, as Chapters 5 through 7 will show, some of the deadliest wars in history—including both World Wars—were triggered in large part by clashes over spheres.

Yet most bids for a sphere do not escalate into war. Rival powers often tolerate the creation or expansion of a foreign sphere when the costs of contesting it are too high or when more pressing

threats loom elsewhere. For instance, Chapter 4 shows how the United States gradually carved out a sphere in the Western Hemisphere over the 19th century. Despite its global naval dominance, however, Britain largely chose not to resist American expansion militarily—not because it welcomed U.S. ascendancy, but because it lacked the capacity to confront Washington while managing its European security threats and a sprawling colonial empire. Similarly, Chapter 9 shows how, by the mid-Cold War, the United States had tacitly accepted Soviet control over Eastern Europe, judging that forcibly challenging Moscow in its own backyard would be too dangerous. In some cases, great powers have gone even further, explicitly directing the division of spheres among themselves. For instance, Chapter 5 shows how, in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, Europe's leading states carved out mutually recognized spheres that formed the basis of the Concert of Europe, which helped sustain peace on the continent for most of the 19th century.

This discrepancy raises a crucial question: When will a great power's bid for a sphere be resisted or accommodated? Chapter 3 offers a theory to explain this variation. Wars occur when a rival's sphere directly threatens a state's core security interests and that state believes it has the disruptive capacity to break it apart, either alone or by leveraging discontent within the sphere. Historically, such conditions are comparatively rare. More often than not, great powers, constrained by strategic necessity, reach a *modus vivendi* with the expanding power, recognizing its sphere to avoid direct conflict.

Third, once established, spheres can promote stability between great powers. Spheres evolve through three phases: creation, existence, and breakdown. While the creation and breakdown phases can be treacherous, the existence phase can be a force for great power peace by clarifying boundaries of interest, reinforcing deterrence, and reducing the risk of miscalculation. In this way, the stabilizing effects of spheres parallel those often attributed to nuclear weapons in the International Relations (IR) literature.[1] Like nuclear proliferation, the process of creating a sphere is fraught with danger, as rivals have strong incentives to prevent adversaries from gaining the strategic advantages that come from one. But once established, spheres—much like robust nuclear arsenals—can foster stability by clarifying red lines and encouraging mutual restraint.

Finally, I turn to the question of how states most effectively create and maintain spheres. Given the enormous strategic advantages that spheres confer, one might expect great powers to pursue them relentlessly and ruthlessly at every opportunity. Yet this book finds that such an approach is often counterproductive. In the creation phase, overly aggressive bids to build or expand a sphere can provoke the very coalitions they are meant to prevent. Chapters 6 and 7, for instance, show how Germany and Japan's violent attempts to carve out spheres during World War II ultimately destroyed both regimes. Likewise, during the existence phase, how a leading state governs its sphere matters enormously for its durability. Spheres maintained through coercion alone tend to provoke nationalist backlash, which erodes compliance, raises the costs of control, and creates openings for resistance. Chapter 9, for instance, shows how the Soviet Union's reliance on political repression left it unable to sustain its authority over Eastern Europe once its coercive capacity weakened in the late Cold War. By contrast, spheres grounded in co-optation, economic integration, and security guarantees prove far more resilient because they reduce incentives for defection. This helps explain why the United States continued to wield substantial influence in Western Europe after the Cold War, long after the Soviet threat had disappeared. The broader point

[1] For the classic articulation of this argument see Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

is this: the impulse to build spheres may be hardwired into great power politics, but success requires managing them with a blend of strength and restraint.

Taken together, these arguments show that spheres are not a peripheral feature of great power politics. For better and worse, they are a central part of the security competition between great powers. In that sense, spheres are best understood as tools: instruments that great powers can use to protect their interests and manage rivals. And like any tool, their impact depends on how they are wielded. On the one hand, it is true that competitions over spheres have been a principal cause of great power wars, including both World Wars. But spheres have also served as the foundation for some of history's most consequential peace settlements—from the Concert of Europe to the Cold War division of Europe. Agreements regarding spheres have also formed the basis of wartime alliances, as when Britain, France, and Russia used agreements over spheres to resolve their disputes in Persia and Central Asia in order to form the Entente before World War I, and when Roosevelt and Churchill tacitly accepted the creation of a Soviet sphere in Eastern Europe to hold together the Grand Alliance during World War II. In short, spheres have been woven into the fabric of great power relations for centuries.

Yet, despite this centrality, spheres have received comparatively little systematic attention in the IR literature.[2] Indeed, while their critics often deride them as the quintessential example of cynical *Realpolitik* policymaking, few modern Realist theories of war mention spheres except in passing. Canonical Realist works of the last century, such as E.H. Carr's *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939,* Hans Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations* (1948)*,* Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* (1979)*,* and John Mearsheimer's *Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001)*,* scarcely mention spheres at all.[3] And while spheres figure in the worldviews of political theorists such as Friedrich Naumann, Carl Schmitt, George Kennan, Walter Lippmann, and Hedley Bull, few modern IR theorists have analyzed them systematically.[4] This book aims to fill that gap by examining every major great power competition over spheres since 1815, reconstructing the strategic logic underpinning state behavior to build a theory of how spheres shape patterns of war and peace.[5]

These arguments also have direct relevance to contemporary U.S. foreign policy debates—a topic to be discussed in greater detail in the Conclusion. Despite the enduring centrality of spheres, I

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[2] On the surprising absence of discussions of spheres within the IR literature: Amitai Etzioni, "Spheres of Influence: A Reconceptualization," *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 39, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 117-132; Filippo Costa Buranelli, "Spheres of Influence as Negotiated Hegemony: The Case of Central Asia," *Geopolitics* 23, no. 2 (2018): 378-403, https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2017.1413355; Susanna Hast, *Beyond the Pejorative: Sphere of Influence in International Theory* (Rovaniemi: University of Lapland, 2012); Hast, *Spheres of Influence in International Relations: History, Theory and Politics* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014); and Van Jackson, "Understanding Spheres of Influence in International Politics," *International Politics* 58, no. 3 (2021): 341-362. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-021-00288-5.

[3] E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1939); Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948); Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979); John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001).

[4] For an excellent history of the intellectual evolution of the concept of a 'sphere of influence,' see Hast, *Spheres of Influence in International Relations.*

[5] Correlates of War Project, *State System Membership List, v2020 and Great Powers Data, v5.0*, ed. J. David Singer, Stuart Bremer, and John Stuckey, version 5.0 (Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, 2020), https://correlatesofwar.org/data-sets/state-system-membership.

argue that the prevailing wisdom in Washington has combined amnesia regarding America's own sphere-building behavior with the belief that all foreign spheres must be violently resisted. This conviction has been so deeply held, and so widely shared, that for most of the post-Cold War era it functioned as an article of faith that transcended party lines.

Even in an era of heightened partisanship, opposition to foreign spheres has united Republican and Democratic administrations alike. "The United States and our friends and allies," U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice asserted in 2008, "are confident in our vision for the world… in which great power is defined not by spheres of influence or zero-sum competition."[6] Her Democratic replacement as Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, concurred: "The United States does not recognize spheres of influence."[7] Successive administrations maintained the same position. The Obama administration cast spheres as incompatible with an interconnected world; Trump's 2017 National Security Strategy warned that China and Russia sought to establish spheres near their borders; and Biden warned of the threat to the liberal world order from "those who wish to dissolve the community of democracies and our supporting institutions in favor of a more parochial international order—where power rules and spheres of influence lock in divides among nations."[8]

Beginning in 2025, this long-standing consensus has begun to show visible strain—not over the legitimacy of foreign spheres, which remained broadly rejected across the political spectrum, but over whether the United States itself should openly acknowledge and defend its own. During Trump's second term, his administration has embraced the necessity of an American sphere in the Western Hemisphere far more explicitly than any of his predecessors in the post-Cold War era.[9] Yet while Trump's approach has found a few converts, much of the foreign policy establishment has treated his rhetoric and its accompanying policies as a radical departure from U.S. tradition. As this book argues, however, that interpretation is misleading. The United States has long engaged in sphere-building in practice, even while denying the legitimacy of spheres in principle. One point of continuity between Trump and his predecessors, however, is that this new candor about America's own sphere has, as of yet, not been matched by any corresponding acceptance of foreign spheres. Asked in March 2025 about the possibility of dividing the world into spheres by recognizing Chinese or Russian interests, Secretary of State Marco Rubio was blunt: "We don't talk about spheres of influence."[10]

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[6] Condoleezza Rice, "Secretary Rice Addresses U.S.-Russian Relations at the German Marshall Fund," speech, Renaissance Mayflower Hotel, Washington, DC, September 18, 2008, U.S. Department of State, https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2008/09/109954.htm.

[7] Hillary Clinton, "Clinton and Putin Disagree on 'Occupation' of Georgia," *NATO Source* (blog), Atlantic Council, July 6, 2010, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/natosource/clinton-and-putin-disagree-on-occupation-of-georgia/.

[8] Barack Obama, "Remarks by President Barack Obama at Suntory Hall," *The White House*, November 14, 2009, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-suntory-hall. Donald Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: White House, December 2017), 25, https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf; Joseph Biden, "Remarks by Vice President Joe Biden at the World Economic Forum," *The White House*, January 18, 2017, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2017/01/18/remarks-vice-president-joe-biden-world-economic-forum.

[9] *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: White House, November 2025), https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf, 15-18.

[10] Edward Wong, "Trump's Vision: One World, Three Powers?" *The New York Times,* May 26, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/26/us/politics/trump-russia-china.html.

In this sense, Rubio's response reflects a long-standing tradition in U.S. foreign policy. Publicly condemning foreign spheres is hardly new in Washington. At the turn of the 20th century, American leaders cited the desire to prevent China from being partitioned into spheres as justification for its 'Open Door Policy.'[11] Before World War I, President Woodrow Wilson rallied Americans against "such traditional concepts as the balance of power and spheres of influence."[12] During World War II, Franklin Roosevelt lauded the creation of the United Nations for promoting "a common ground for peace" that "ought to spell the end of the system of unilateral action, the exclusive alliances, the spheres of influence, the balances of power, and all the other expedients that have been tried for centuries—and have always failed."[13] At the end of the Cold War, President George H.W. Bush expressed satisfaction at avoiding "a post-Yalta arrangement" in which he was "sitting with the Soviets to divide spheres of influence."[14] Indeed, as Hal Brands and Charles Edel aptly conclude, "for more than two centuries, American leaders have opposed the idea of a world divided into rival spheres of influence and have worked hard to deny other powers their own."[15]

Given this long-standing resistance to foreign spheres, it is unsurprising that Washington has harshly condemned more recent moves by Russia and China to expand their own spheres. For instance, Chapter 10 will show how following Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia, its 2014 annexation of Crimea, and its 2022 invasion of Ukraine, senior U.S. officials from both parties repeatedly declared that the era of spheres was over and that Washington would never recognize Russia's illegitimate claims to a sphere. As the Russian-Ukrainian conflict heated up in February 2022, Secretary of State Antony Blinken captured the consensus view in Washington: "One country can't exert a sphere of influence to subjugate neighbors to its will. Those principles are important not only in Europe, they're important around the world."[16]

For Russia's part, Moscow agreed that it was a competition over spheres that was driving tensions with Washington over Ukraine—namely, however, Washington's effort to incorporate Ukraine into a U.S.-led Western sphere. As Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov explained during a January 2022 press conference following failed discussions with Blinken: "We discussed spheres of influence today…. We see that these areas are still being 'settled,' and new territories are being

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[11] U.S. Department of State, "Open Door Note, September 6, 1899," in *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1899), https://loveman.sdsu.edu/docs/1899firstopendoornote.pdf; Raymond A. Esthus, "Protectorates and Spheres of Influence," in *Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy*, ed. Alexander DeConde et al., 2nd ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2002), https://www.americanforeignrelations.com/O-W/Protectorates-and-Spheres-of-Influence.html.

[12] J. A. Thompson, "Woodrow Wilson and World War I: A Reappraisal," *Journal of American Studies* 19, no. 3 (December 1985): 327, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27554645; Daniel Fried, "100 Years Later, Wilson's Fourteen Points Deserve Another Look," *New Atlanticist*, January 1, 2018, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/100-years-later-wilson-s-fourteen-points-deserve-another-look/.

[13] Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Address to Congress on the Yalta Conference," March 1, 1945, *The American Presidency Project*, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-congress-the-yalta-conference.

[14] Liviu Horovitz, "The George H.W. Bush Administration's Policies Vis-à-vis Central Europe: From Cautious Encouragement to Cracking Open NATO's Door," in *Open Door: NATO and Euro-Atlantic Security After the Cold War*, ed. Daniel S. Hamilton and Kristina Spohr (Washington, DC: Foreign Policy Institute, 2019), 74, https://transatlanticrelations.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Open-Door_full.pdf.

[15] Hal Brands and Charles Edel, "The Disharmony of the Spheres," *Commentary*, January 2018, 21, https://www.commentary.org/articles/hal-brands/the-disharmony-of-the-spheres/.

[16] Antony J. Blinken, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken with Stefan Kornelius of *Süddeutsche Zeitung*," U.S. Department of State, February 19, 2022, https://2021-2025.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-with-stefan-kornelius-of-suddeutsche-zeitung/.

drawn into our Western colleagues' sphere of influence... We are not claiming zones of influence. But what NATO is doing now with regard to Ukraine clearly shows that NATO considers Ukraine a sphere of its influence."[17]

As the 2022 Russia-Ukraine War illustrates, understanding how states compete over spheres will be central to 21st-century world politics. Policymakers and analysts have thus turned to history to shed light on whether the United States should try to prevent China and Russia from expanding their spheres. But which historical analogies are relevant? Would acquiescing to Russian influence over Ukraine be akin to granting Hitler control over the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia during the 1938 Munich Conference and encourage Russia to embark on a campaign of continental conquest? British Prime Minister David Cameron, for instance, has made that case, arguing, "We run the risk of repeating the mistakes made in Munich in '38. We cannot know what will happen next. This time we cannot meet Putin's demands."[18] Or would acquiescing to a Russian sphere allow Moscow to become a 'satiated power,' as Otto von Bismarck claimed Germany to be following the acquisition of Alsace-Lorraine during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, and usher in a period of great power peace?[19]

History bears witness to both the perils and the possibilities of spheres. Some great power bids for a sphere—such as Germany's and Japan's efforts during the Second World War—wrought destruction on an unprecedented scale. With the benefit of hindsight, we can also see that pre-war deals made with Britain and the Soviet Union that expanded German influence—first, the Sudetenland at the Munich Conference in 1938 and then Poland in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939—did not deter Germany from further aggression.

Yet, we cannot ignore the instances where established spheres have served as the foundation for a lasting peace between rivals. Respected statesmen such as Klemens von Metternich, John Quincy Adams, George Canning, Otto von Bismarck, Winston Churchill, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and George Kennan recognized their benefits as well. The Concert of Europe (1815-1914), in which the European great powers divided the continent into mutually recognized spheres, gave Europe its longest stretch of peace in the modern era until the Cold War. And let us also not forget the Cold War itself, during which the uneasy balance between the American and Soviet spheres in Europe, however fraught, prevented a catastrophic clash between the superpowers. Insofar as the Cold War also corresponded with the creation of a "liberal order" within the U.S.-led bloc, it is difficult to claim that all spheres are automatically illiberal or damaging to weaker states.

Given this wide variation in the historical record, treating all spheres as inherently good or bad makes little sense. Instead, they are tools, and like any tool, their impact depends on how they are wielded. To dismiss them outright is to ignore the fundamental dynamics of great power politics.

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[17] Sergey Lavrov, "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Answers to Media Questions at a News Conference Following Talks on Security Guarantees with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Geneva, January 21, 2022," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1795493/.

[18] Ian Traynor and Ewen MacAskill, "David Cameron Warns of 'Appeasing Putin as We Did Hitler,'" *The Guardian*, September 2, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/sep/02/david-cameron-warns-appeasing-putin-ukraine-hitler.

[19] Lord Odo Russell, "Bismarck Tells the British Ambassador that Germany has Achieved its Legitimate Objectives (February 11, 1873)," in *German History in Documents and Images*, German Historical Institute, https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1853.

Policymakers must therefore develop a more nuanced understanding of when any given sphere will likely lead to competition or pave the way toward cooperation.

Definitions: What are Spheres of Influence?

Before analyzing how spheres work, we first need to define what they are. Despite their long history, defining "spheres of influence" remains challenging.[20] Although powerful states have been creating spheres since antiquity, the term only came into common usage in the latter half of the 19th century.[21] Today, it is perhaps most often used pejoratively to criticize rivals' behavior.[22] These imperialistic connotations make many leaders hesitant to admit their own state's desire for a sphere, muddying efforts at definition. Further complicating things, the term overlaps with adjacent concepts in IR—empire, regional hegemony, hierarchy, suzerainty, and protectorate—and is interpreted differently across theoretical paradigms.[23] Moreover, spheres exist along a continuum in both the degree of control exerted by the dominant state and the level of consent from subordinate states to this arrangement.[24]

Another recurrent difficulty lies in distinguishing sphere-building from conquest. Some great powers have first established a sphere as a precursor to direct territorial annexation—as with Prussia's consolidation of influence over the German states before unification in 1871. In other cases, sphere-building and annexation have proceeded simultaneously. Nazi Germany's dismemberment of Czechoslovakia in 1938-39 illustrates this: the Czech lands were directly annexed while Slovakia became a nominally sovereign but effectively subordinate puppet state. This variability complicates efforts to precisely define the concept and delineate the boundaries of any given sphere. No single definition will be perfect and choosing one inevitably involves conceptual trade-offs. Nonetheless, I have tried to adopt a definition that captures the most common contemporary usage and maximizes relevance for current policy debates.

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[20] For discussions of the challenges of defining spheres, see Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977); Paul Keal, "Contemporary Understanding about Spheres of Influence," *Review of International Studies* 9, no. 3 (July 1983): 155-172, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20096980; Amitai Etzioni, "Spheres of Influence: A Reconceptualization;" Heini Nyyssönen, "Spheres of Influence: A Few Reflections on the Concept," *Corvinus Journal of International Affairs* 1, no. 3 (2016), https://doi.org/10.14267/cojourn.2016v1n3a4; Buranelli, "Spheres of Influence as Negotiated Hegemony: The Case of Central Asia;" Hast, *Beyond the Pejorative*; Hast, *Spheres of Influence in International Relations;* and Van Jackson, "Understanding Spheres of Influence in International Politics."

[21] Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, 219.

[22] Hast, *Beyond the Pejorative,* chaps. 1-2, and Hast, *Spheres of Influence in International Relations.*

[23] Bull, *The Anarchical Society;* Etzioni, "Spheres of Influence;" Buranelli, "Spheres of Influence as Negotiated Hegemony;" Nyyssönen, "Spheres of Influence;" Hast, *Beyond the Pejorative;* Hast, *Spheres of Influence in International Relations;* Van Jackson, "Understanding Spheres of Influence in International Politics."

[24] Keal, "Contemporary Understanding about Spheres of Influence;" Buranelli, "Spheres of Influence as Negotiated Hegemony;" Van Jackson, "Understanding Spheres of Influence in International Politics." Spheres exist along a continuum in terms of control by the dominant power. At one end are clear cases where a powerful state exercises undeniable authority, effectively reducing subordinate states to satellite nations and this arrangement may be formalized through explicit agreement. At the other end, the arrangement is more ambiguous: a leading state may view a country as within its sphere while granting it significant autonomy, resulting in a looser and more contested relationship. A similar continuum exists in terms of subordinate states' consent to the arrangement. Some may resist inclusion in a sphere, viewing it as coercive or illegitimate. Others may welcome the arrangement if the dominant power provides valued public goods such as security, economic support, or diplomatic backing.

With those caveats in mind, I define a *sphere of influence* as a geographic region where one powerful state exerts dominant control over the foreign policy of weaker states and seeks to exclude other great powers from significantly intervening in that territory. The hallmark of a sphere is that the leading power has primary influence over the foreign security and economic orientations of subordinate states.[25] The leading state may tolerate limited involvement from other great powers in the region but draws the line at actions that could change the foreign policy orientation of the subordinate states—such as forming military alliances or economic unions with rival great powers, engaging in significant arms transfers, establishing military bases or stationing nuclear weapons in the region.[26]

Two aspects of this definition warrant closer attention. First, for a region to qualify as a sphere, one great power must exert dominant influence over the foreign policies of subordinate states, and the other great powers in the system must recognize—or at least decline to contest—that influence. In other words, any state can unilaterally claim a sphere, but if other great powers continue to intervene in the region as usual, the assertion is meaningless. This complicates definition, since states are often reluctant to publicly acknowledge a rival's sphere for fear of legitimizing it.

To that point, I distinguish between *spheres of influence* and *contested regions*. *Spheres of influence* are regions where the dominant state's influence is either formally or informally recognized—and not actively contested—by the other great powers. Within spheres, the leading state's predominant influence is not being actively challenged. Formally-recognized spheres are codified through legal agreements or treaties between great powers demarcating the boundaries of their respective spheres. Historical examples include the spheres established at the Congress of Vienna (1815), the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 dividing Persia, and the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (1939) partitioning Eastern Europe between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.

Informally-recognized spheres, on the other hand, are tacitly created through deterrence—not through legal agreements, but through the unilateral exercise of power by one predominant state deterring other states from intervening in the region. In these cases, the other great powers may not like the situation, they may even publicly denounce it, but if their actions do not actively challenge the leading state's influence in the region, they are, in effect, tacitly acknowledging the rival's sphere. The Cold War's informal division of Europe provides a striking example. While the United States and the Soviet Union remained fierce global competitors, Chapter 9 will show that,

[25] This is not to suggest that the leading state exerts no influence over the domestic politics of subordinate states. While it may not directly control their internal affairs, its influence over foreign policy often shapes domestic trajectories as well. For the sake of analytical clarity, however, this project focuses specifically on how dominant powers shape the foreign policies of subordinate states within their spheres.

[26] On this point, see David A. Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 53: "One particularly salient historical relationship is a sphere of influence in which a dominant state possesses the authority only to limit subordinate's cooperation with third parties. In such spheres, the subordinate need not cooperate actively with its dominant state, but it is prohibited from entering alliances or other interactions with others." See also David J. Myers, "Threat Perception and Strategic Response of the Regional Hegemons: A Conceptual Overview," in *Regional Hegemons: Threat Perception and Strategic Response*, ed. David J. Myers (London: Routledge, 2019), 1-25. https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780429304217-1/threat-perception-strategic-response-regional-hegemons-conceptual-overview-david-myers.

by the mid-Cold War, neither made significant efforts to redraw the territorial boundaries of the other's sphere within Europe.[27]

Contested regions, by contrast*,* are regions where one state is seeking a sphere, but one or more great powers are actively challenging that assertion. A historical example is the Korean peninsula during the Korean War, during which both superpowers supported efforts to unify the peninsula within their respective spheres. Another is U.S. efforts to support Tito's policy of non-alignment from Moscow during the Cold War. In both cases, the territory remained contested because a rival power actively challenged the leading state's influence through military, economic, or diplomatic means. Today, the two most consequential contested regions in world politics are undoubtedly Ukraine and Taiwan.

This distinction between contested regions and established spheres is central to the arguments presented in Chapter 3 on the lifecycle of spheres. That chapter outlines three key phases: creation, wherein the leading state consolidates control over a contested region; existence, wherein it has neutralized internal and external challenges to its rule; and breakdown, wherein its dominance is once again being actively challenged. For clarity, I refer to the relevant territories as "contested regions" during the creation and breakdown phases and as "spheres" during the existence phase.

A final definitional consideration is that spheres are fundamentally about great powers shaping subordinate states' *foreign* policy—particularly their military alliances and major trade-policy orientations. I use this distinction to exclude colonial empires from this study, in which great powers also dictate *domestic* policies of subordinate states. Some readers may object, noting that the two phenomena are similar and that colonial powers often described their colonies as belonging to their "sphere of influence." Nonetheless, I have decided to exclude colonial empires because they differ from spheres in their structure of control (direct governance versus indirect influence), their legal status (colonies lack sovereignty; subordinate states within spheres retain it), and their historical context (colonial empires were most prominent before 1945 and are therefore subject to different norms regarding sovereignty and nationalism than those affecting modern spheres).

The Conventional Wisdom on Foreign Spheres

Before outlining my own theory of spheres, it is important to examine how it departs from the dominant view in Washington. This section unpacks the core assumptions behind that conventional wisdom; the next offers a systematic rebuttal. Although recent developments—most notably the Trump administration's willingness to speak openly about an American sphere in the Western Hemisphere—have begun to complicate this picture, the views described here continue to reflect the prevailing consensus across much of the U.S. foreign policy establishment regarding *foreign* spheres.

The prevailing perspective in Washington rests on two deeply held assumptions. First, it views spheres as inherently malign. Second, the conventional wisdom holds that spheres can—and should—be eliminated from the international system. In this telling, spheres are viewed as relics of 19th-century *realpolitik*, discredited by two world wars, and buried by the rise of the liberal

[27] For an excellent discussion of how great powers create spheres via tacit understandings see Keal, "Contemporary Understanding about Spheres of Influence."

international order. But with China and Russia now accused of reviving them, the U.S. policy prescription is clear: Washington must resist any foreign sphere from taking root to protect the vulnerable states threatened by them and to preserve the global order. Former Secretary of State Antony Blinken summarized both elements of this worldview in a 2021 interview:

> "The notion of having a sphere of influence is a concept that should have been retired after World War II. We don't accept the principle of spheres of influence. The principle that another country cannot simply change the borders of its democratic neighbors by force; the principle that another country does not have the right to tell another country what its policy should be, with whom it can associate—those are principles that are in play here, in Ukraine, by Russia's actions. But they're also relevant to many other parts of the world. And if we allow those principles to be violated with impunity, then that is going to send a message not just to Russia. It is going to send a message in other parts of the world as well—that rules don't matter; that countries can behave any way that they want; that might makes right. That is a recipe for an international system that falls apart. That is a recipe not for cooperation but for conflict. And it's a very bad recipe that we are determined to stand against."[28]

This statement distills the conventional view: spheres are illegitimate, dangerous, and archaic. Yet, as the next section will argue, that view is based on flawed assumptions. It misreads history, ignores the stabilizing role spheres have often played, and fails to grasp the range of forms they can take. But before turning to critique, however, it's worth looking more closely at the logic driving the consensus position in Washington.

Assumption 1: Spheres are Inherently Harmful

Among U.S. policymakers, there is widespread agreement that spheres are harmful, both to the states trapped within them and to the liberal world order at large. Internally, spheres are criticized for violating the sovereignty of weak nations, entrenching authoritarian regimes, and blocking the spread of democracy. Externally, they are seen as disrupting the global balance of power, emboldening revisionist actors, and eroding international law and the U.S.-led rules-based international order.

At the state level, spheres are condemned as tools of domination that enable powerful authoritarian states to violate the sovereignty of weaker ones, both harming their citizens and undermining the broader struggle for a liberal world order. As Hal Brands argues, "Russia's and China's spheres of influence would inevitably be domains of coercion and authoritarianism. Both countries are run by illiberal, autocratic regimes; their leaders see democratic values as profoundly threatening to their political survival… The practical consequence of acceding to authoritarian spheres of influence would be to intensify the crisis of democracy that afflicts the world today."[29] In this view, spheres are fundamentally coercive, with powerful states imposing their will on weaker ones.

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[28] Antony J. Blinken, interview by Olena Removska, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 6, 2021, U.S. Embassy in Ukraine, https://ua.usembassy.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-with-olena-removska-of-radio-free-europe-radio-liberty/.

[29] Hal Brands, "Don't Let Great Powers Carve Up the World," *Foreign Affairs*, April 20, 2020, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-04-20/dont-let-great-powers-carve-world.

As Barack Obama explained, an effective security order must be "based—not on spheres of influence, or coercion, or intimidation where big nations bully the small—but on alliances of mutual security, international law and international norms."[30]

Economically, spheres are also viewed as a threat to the liberal economic order, enabling dominant powers to redirect trade and investment in their own favor at the expense of subordinate states.[31] Warning of the dangers arising from a potential growth in the Chinese sphere, for instance, Brands warns, "China, in particular, is a mercantilist power already working to turn Asian economies toward Beijing and could one day put the United States at a severe disadvantage on the world's most economically dynamic continent. Washington should not concede a Chinese sphere of influence unless it is also willing to compromise the 'Open Door' principles that have animated its statecraft for over a century."[32]

Reversing these lines of reasoning, the prevailing view also holds that defending liberal democracies like Ukraine and Taiwan from absorption into authoritarian spheres is part of a broader ideological struggle between democracy and authoritarianism. As Anne Applebaum puts it, "Putin is right about one thing: A free, prosperous, democratic neighbor is a threat to his autocratic regime."[33]

Beyond these moral and ideological arguments, the conventional wisdom holds that spheres pose a particular strategic threat to the United States. The expansion of Russian and Chinese spheres would usher in a dangerous era of multipolarity, weakening American leadership and emboldening revisionist states to pursue further territorial ambitions.[34] Robert Kagan encapsulates this perspective, warning that "Accepting spheres of influence is a recipe for disaster," as doing so "would return the world to the condition it was in at the end of the 19th century, with competing great powers clashing over inevitably intersecting and overlapping spheres."[35] Proponents of this view often draw on the "Munich Analogy," arguing that recognizing a rival state's sphere amounts to appeasement and risks emboldening further aggression—just as England and France's 1938 deal with Nazi Germany over the Sudetenland failed to prevent the Second World War. As Brands warns, "Conceding a sphere of influence to a great-power challenger might not produce stability but simply give that challenger a better position from which to realize its ambitions."[36]

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[30] Barack Obama, "Remarks by President Obama at the University of Queensland," *The White House*, November 15, 2014, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/11/15/remarks-president-obama-university-queensland.
[31] David A. Lake, "Economic Openness and Great Power Competition: Lessons for China and the United States," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 11, no. 3 (2018): 237-270, https://academic.oup.com/cjip/article-abstract/11/3/237/5057992; Alexander Cooley and Daniel H. Nexon, *Exit from Hegemony: The Unraveling of the American Global Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).
[32] Brands, "Don't Let Great Powers Carve Up the World."
[33] Anne Applebaum, "The U.S. Is Naïve About Russia. Ukraine Can't Afford to Be," *The Atlantic*, January 3, 2022, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/01/ukraine-russia-kyiv-putin-bluff/621145/.
[34] Thomas Wright, "Putin Is Taking a Huge Gamble," *The Atlantic*, December 10, 2021, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2021/12/russia-putin-ukraine-invasion/620890/.
[35] Robert Kagan, "Backing into World War III," *Foreign Policy*, February 6, 2017, https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/06/backing-into-world-war-iii-russia-china-trump-obama/.
[36] Brands, "Don't Let Great Powers Carve Up the World."

Assumption 2: Spheres Can and Should Be Eliminated

Given these perceived adverse effects, the second strain of Washington's conventional wisdom holds that spheres can—and should—be eliminated from the international system. Spheres are seen as relics of an outdated era, incompatible with the modern liberal world order. For many Western policymakers, the notion evokes images of 19th-century diplomats in smoke-filled rooms, dividing the world to suit their interests—a colonial anachronism with no place in the contemporary world. Secretary of State Blinken captured this sentiment: "One country does not have the right to exert a sphere of influence. That notion should be relegated to the dustbin of history."[37]

According to this perspective, spheres fundamentally clash with the principles of the rules-based international order, wherein state sovereignty is said to be paramount, international law governs interstate relations, and traditional power politics is no longer considered acceptable. Vice President Biden made this point forcefully in a 2009 speech in Ukraine, "We reject the notion of spheres of influence as 19th century ideas that have no place in the 21st century. And we stand by the principle that sovereign states have a right to make their own decisions, to chart their own foreign policy, to choose their own alliances."[38] Secretary of State Hillary Clinton concurred in 2010, "With respect to Russia's claims to any sphere of influence, the United States flatly rejects that. We are living in a time when independent sovereign states have the right to make their own decisions about organizations they wish to join... No country should be told what they can or cannot do by any other country." This, she argued, is "the world we live in today," and any suggestion otherwise "has to be rejected out of hand."[39]

In this view, those who defend or invoke spheres today are, as Kate Mallinson puts it, "stuck in a neocolonialist view of the world."[40] Efforts by Russia and China to expand their spheres are similarly cast as a regression to dangerous and antiquated policymaking. Michael McFaul, former U.S. Ambassador to Russia, commented that "Putin thinks as a kind of 18th-century or 19th-century leader about spheres of influence."[41] German Chancellor Angela Merkel echoed this in 2014: "First in Georgia back in 2008 and now in the heart of Europe, in Ukraine, we are witnessing a conflict about spheres of influence and territorial claims, such as those we know from the 19th and 20th century but thought we had put behind us."[42] EU High Representative Josep Borrell similarly

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[37] Antony J. Blinken, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken at a Press Availability," U.S. Department of State, December 21, 2021, https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-at-a-press-availability-9/. See also Peter Beinart, "When Will the U.S. Stop Lying to Itself About Global Politics?," *The New York Times*, January 13, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/13/opinion/us-russia-putin-ukraine.html.

[38] Joseph Biden, "The Vice President: We Stand By Ukraine," *The White House Blog,* July 22, 2009, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2009/07/22/vice-president-we-stand-ukraine

[39] Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Joint Press Availability with Georgian President Saakashvili," July 5, 2010, U.S. Department of State, https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/07/143973.htm.

[40] Kate Mallinson, "Myth 07: Russia Is Entitled to a Defensive Perimeter — A Sphere of 'Privileged Interests' Including the Territory of Other States," in *Myths and Misconceptions in the Debate on Russia*, ed. Keir Giles et al. (London: Chatham House, May 2021), https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/05/myths-and-misconceptions-debate-russia/myth-07-russia-entitled-defensive-perimeter-sphere.

[41] Isabelle Khurshudyan, "Putin Dreams of a Russian 'Sphere of Influence,'" *Washington Post*, January 8, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/01/08/russia-putin-kazakhstan/.

[42] Angela Merkel, "Policy Statement by Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel on the Situation in Ukraine," *Federal Foreign Office*, German Bundestag, March 13, 2014, https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/140314-merkel-ukraine-260760

warned in 2023: "There is no place for 'spheres of influence' in the 21st century… What is at stake is the respect for the UN Charter and the whole international order, which should not be the rule of the strong, but the rule of law."[43]

Taken together, the policy implication of these beliefs is clear: by actively resisting Russian and Chinese spheres and continuing to promote the expansion of the liberal world order, U.S. policymakers believe they can eventually eliminate spheres from the international system altogether. In this view, spheres are not structural features of global politics, but outdated practices embraced by authoritarian regimes that can be stamped out through sustained resistance and the spread of liberal values.

Why the Conventional Wisdom on Spheres is Wrong

While, at first blush, the conventional wisdom against spheres may seem compelling, a closer analysis exposes weaknesses in both core assumptions. To begin with the bad news for the conventional view: the claim that spheres can be relegated to the "dustbin of history" is wrong.[44] Spheres have been a persistent feature of international relations for centuries. They existed in the past, persist in the present, and as long as states endure, so too will spheres. The belief that spheres were rendered obsolete by the rise of the liberal world order, only to be revived by China and Russia, is a misconception. Spheres cannot be removed from the international system because they are a fundamental product of it.

Now, however, the good news for the conventional wisdom: spheres are not always the threat they are made out to be. Leading states have displayed a wide range of behaviors toward the subordinate states within their spheres. While some have undoubtedly abused their dominant positions, others have cultivated mutually beneficial relationships that enhanced the wealth and security of all—and even promoted democracy on occasion. In some instances, the benefits have been so great that weaker states voluntarily sought entry into a sphere. Nor are spheres necessarily a "recipe for disaster" for global stability that opponents claim. To the contrary, once established, they can decrease the likelihood of war between great powers.

An American Blind Spot

American policymakers' insistence that spheres are relics of a bygone era, only now being resurrected by China and Russia, is a self-serving delusion.[45] Chapter 2 will argue that as long as the international system remains anarchic, powerful states will inevitably attempt to carve out spheres to safeguard their security and expand their political influence. As Graham Allison rightly observes, "Going forward, U.S. policymakers will have to abandon unattainable aspirations for the

[43] Josep Borrell, interview by Civil.ge, *Delegation of the European Union to Georgia*, September 7, 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/interview-josep-borrell-eu-high-representative-european-union-foreign-affairs-and-security-policy_en?s=221.
[44] Blinken, "Remarks by Antony Blinken at Press Availability."
[45] Beinart, "When Will the U.S. Stop Lying to Itself About Global Politics?;" Peter Beinart, "America Needs an Entirely New Foreign Policy for the Trump Age," *The Atlantic*, September 16, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/09/shield-of-the-republic-a-democratic-foreign-policy-for-the-trump-age/570010/.

worlds they dreamed of and accept the fact that spheres of influence will remain a central feature of geopolitics."[46] Ted Carpenter concurs: "Spheres of influence have always played a major role in international affairs, and despite assertions by prominent members of the American foreign policy community, they still do."[47]

Washington's insistence that spheres are bygone relics is particularly hypocritical, given America's own long history of maintaining a sphere in the Western Hemisphere. As Chapter 4 will detail, the Monroe Doctrine (1823), a cornerstone of American foreign policy for nearly two centuries, is nothing short of an overt declaration of an American sphere over the entire Western Hemisphere. Since then, the U.S. has jealously guarded its backyard, brooking no significant interference from external powers—as, for instance, the Soviets learned the hard way during the Cuban Missile Crisis. America's sphere is so deeply ingrained in Washington's psyche that it is often taken for granted, even forgotten. As British analyst Anatol Lieven wryly notes: "It is incredible but again and again, I have found myself at meetings discussing Russia and China in Washington at which I have been the only person to point out that America does after all have its own sphere of influence in Central America and the Caribbean. Not just that, but a sphere of influence which is not doing very well either economically, or to a great extent, in terms of real democracy either."[48]

Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT) echoed this sentiment in a Congressional speech before the Ukraine War, asking,

> "Does anyone really believe that the United States would not have something to say if, for example, Mexico or Cuba or any country in Central or Latin America were to form a military alliance with a U.S. adversary? Do you think members of Congress would stand up and say, well, you know, Mexico is an independent country and they have the right to do anything they want. I doubt that very much."[49]

The claim by modern American policymakers that they do not recognize spheres stems from the unipolar moment following the Soviet collapse, when American power was temporarily unrivaled. Washington faced no great power challengers in the regions it dominated—the Western Hemisphere, Western Europe, and East Asia—nor in the areas it looked to expand into, such as Central and Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Much of the world effectively operated as an American sphere.[50] Given the negative connotations, U.S. policymakers avoided the term, opting for euphemisms like the "liberal world order" or "rules-based international order" to describe the regions where Washington had consolidated its influence. But the effect was the same. As Allison writes of this period: "U.S. policymakers had ceased to recognize spheres of influence… not

[46] Graham Allison, "The New Spheres of Influence," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-02-10/new-spheres-influence.
[47] Ted Galen Carpenter, "Striking a Deal with Russia on Spheres of Influence," *Cato Institute*, May 12, 2019, https://www.cato.org/commentary/striking-deal-russia-spheres-influence.
[48] Anatol Lieven, "America and the Imperial Project: A Talk with Anatol Lieven," *Asia Society*, accessed May 7, 2025, https://asiasociety.org/america-and-imperial-project-talk-anatol-lieven.
[49] Julia Johnson, "WATCH: Bernie Sanders Compares Ukraine Aid to Iraq War, Urges No Intervention," *Washington Examiner*, February 10, 2022, https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/893421/watch-bernie-sanders-compares-ukraine-aid-to-iraq-war-urges-no-intervention/.
[50] Allison, "The New Spheres of Influence."

because the concept had become obsolete. Rather the entire world had become a de facto American sphere. Spheres of influence had given way to a sphere of influence."[51]

Now, as the unipolar moment has passed and rival powers like China and Russia are looking to expand their own influence, Washington's amnesia about its own sphere has become a strategic liability. It blinds policymakers to the realities of great power competition and prevents them from formulating effective strategies to deal with it.

Spheres: A Matter of Fact, Not Morality

The conventional wisdom that views spheres as inherently bad and in need of automatic resistance is flawed in three ways. First, this argument reflects a misunderstanding of what spheres actually are. Spheres should not be treated as normative statements affirming a great power's right to dominate a region. To acknowledge that a state has a sphere is not to endorse its actions but simply to recognize the reality of its political dominance. Spheres are descriptive, not prescriptive.[52] They map the boundaries within which states are unwilling or unable to challenge each other's influence.

Hedley Bull astutely observed that there is a crucial difference between recognizing the fact of a sphere and recognizing its legitimacy: "We should distinguish an agreement or understanding between two powers to recognize the *fact* of one another's preponderance in some area, from an agreement to recognize each other's *rights* in that area." Reflecting on Soviet-American relations during the Cold War, he continues, "It is one thing for the United States and the Soviet Union to recognize the fact that certain parts of the world are within each other's spheres of influence; it is another to treat such spheres of influence as legitimate. A sphere of influence, moreover, which in one country's view exists as a matter of right, may in another country's view exist only as a matter of fact."[53]

This distinction is crucial. Recognizing that a foreign country has a sphere does not grant it a blank check for immoral behavior. It simply acknowledges existing power dynamics. The U.S. never hesitated to denounce Soviet repression in Eastern Europe, even as it begrudgingly accepted the reality of the Soviet sphere. The moralizing impulse that clouds contemporary discussions of spheres is thus often misplaced. The purpose of theorizing about spheres is not to embrace them as inherently good but to understand their role in the international system.

Spheres can be Mutually Beneficial

Beyond this fundamental misconception, the conventional wisdom suffers from a second flaw: the assumption that spheres are necessarily unjust for the weaker states within them. They can be, but they are not always. The character of a sphere is shaped by the choices of the leading state that presides over it.

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[51] Ibid.
[52] Emma Ashford, *First Among Equals: U.S. Foreign Policy in a Multipolar World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2025), 127-130.
[53] Bull, *The Anarchical Society,* 220.

Consider the Cold War division of Europe into American and Soviet spheres. U.S. actions during and after World War II replaced fascist regimes in Italy and Germany with democratic governments, and American economic aid rebuilt war-torn nations and integrated them into a liberal capitalist system. Yes, there were instances of Washington strong-arming its allies and covertly meddling in their domestic affairs.[54] But American influence in the region was overwhelmingly welcomed—in the oft-cited words of Geir Lundestad, an "empire by invitation."[55] The American sphere in Western Europe was built on a mix of coercion and consent, but it ultimately fostered democracy and prosperity.

As this example shows, spheres do not need to rely on brute force. The allure of economic aid, security guarantees, and the promise of a better future can sometimes be enough to draw weaker states into a stronger state's orbit voluntarily.[56] To this point, Chapter 3 will show that great powers typically employ both 'sticks' (coercive tools) and 'carrots' (incentives) when constructing a sphere, with some relying more heavily on one than the other. Occasionally, the carrots alone are so compelling that weak states voluntarily seek entry into a sphere.

A prominent example is the expansion of the American sphere from Western Europe to Eastern Europe after the Cold War. As Chapter 10 will show, beginning in the 1990s, Washington sought to expand its influence eastward through NATO expansion, democratization programs, and European Union enlargement.[57] Many post-Soviet states found these initiatives inherently desirable: they offered economic growth and a security guarantee against a resurgent Russia. Multiple Central and Eastern European states petitioned to join NATO and the EU, effectively placing themselves within an American-led Western sphere. Although this inevitably involved ceding some sovereign control over foreign policy, these states considered it a worthwhile trade-off given the relatively benign nature of American influence compared to the potential danger posed by Russia.

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[54] On the use of covert action and coercion against Western European allies during this period, see Marc Trachtenberg, *Between Empire and Alliance: America and Europe During the Cold War* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003); James Callanan, *Covert Action in the Cold War: US Policy, Intelligence and CIA Operations,* (I.B. Taris, 2009); Lindsey A. O'Rourke, *Covert Regime Change: America's Secret Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018);.

[55] Geir Lundestad, "Empire by Invitation in the American Century," *Diplomatic History* 23, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 189-217, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24913738.

[56] On the numerous security and economic incentives for weaker states to align themselves with more powerful states see: Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); James D. Morrow, "Alliances and Asymmetry: An Alternative to the Capability Aggregation Model of Alliances," *American Journal of Political Science* 35, no. 4 (1991): 904-933, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2111499; Michael N. Barnett and Jack S. Levy, "Domestic Sources of Alliances and Alignments: The Case of Egypt, 1962-73," *International Organization* 45, no. 3 (1991): 369-395, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2706736; Randall L. Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security* 19, no. 1 (Summer 1994): 72-107, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2539149; David A. Lake, "Escape from the State of Nature: Authority and Hierarchy in World Politics," *International Security* 32, no. 1 (2007): 47-79 https://www.jstor.org/stable/30129801?seq=26; Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations;* Stephen M. Walt, "Alliances in a Unipolar World," *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (2009): 86-120; David A. Lake, "Legitimating Power: The Domestic Politics of U.S. International Hierarchy," *International Security* 38, no. 2 (2013): 74-111.

[57] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018); John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (2014): 77-89, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24483933.

Of course, Western analysts balk at calling this region part of an American sphere. They prefer euphemisms like "liberal world order" or "rules-based international order" to describe American relations with these countries, thereby obscuring the power dynamics at play. But whether achieved through sticks or carrots, the result, in practice, has been a sphere: a region where the United States exerts predominant influence over the foreign policy of subordinate states and seeks to exclude rival powers from doing the same.

The broader point is this: powerful states have choices. They can rule their spheres with an iron fist or cultivate them with a velvet glove. History is replete with examples of the former, but the latter is not only possible but, in the age of nationalism, increasingly necessary. The Conclusion will argue that spheres built on mutually beneficial arrangements are more likely to endure than those built on repression.[58]

Spheres can Enhance Global Stability

The final flaw in the conventional wisdom is the assumption that spheres are inherently destabilizing. While the pursuit of spheres has at times ignited conflict, established spheres can also serve as potent instruments for peace. As Chapter 3 will explain, whether a state's bid for a sphere leads to stability or instability depends mainly on the structure of the international system.

Moreover, Chapter 3 will argue that, once a sphere is established, it can have a stabilizing effect on great power relations.[59] Spheres can function as buffer zones between rivals, help clarify a state's interests by setting clear boundaries and red lines, suppress conflict between subordinate states within a sphere, and foster reciprocal restraint as great powers may forgo opportunities to destabilize a rival's sphere in hopes of preserving systemic stability.

Historical experience highlights the stabilizing effects of spheres. As Chapter 4 will demonstrate, the American sphere in Latin America has helped to deter significant European intervention in the region for nearly two centuries. Similarly, the Concert of Europe, discussed in Chapter 5, shows how, following the Napoleonic Wars, Europe's great powers maintained peace for much of the 19th century by mutually recognizing one another's spheres and relying on this shared understanding of the political order to manage disputes as they arose. Finally, as Chapter 9 will illustrate, the tacit division of Europe into American and Soviet spheres was arguably the biggest factor that kept the Cold War cold.

Implications for U.S. Strategy

The critique above suggests that the United States faces a broader range of potential outcomes regarding foreign spheres than the conventional wisdom acknowledges. If spheres are understood as tools of statecraft rather than inherently malign phenomena—and if they can be wielded

[58] Morrow, "Alliances and Asymmetry;" Lake, "Legitimating Power."
[59] Lindsey A. O'Rourke and Joshua R. Shifrinson, "Squaring the Circle on Spheres of Influence: The Overlooked Benefits," *The Washington Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (2022): 105-124, https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2022.2090762.

benevolently or destructively, stabilize or destabilize the international order—then a reflexive policy of automatically opposing all foreign spheres is not warranted.

In practice, spheres pose two interrelated strategic challenges for American policymakers. The first challenge concerns how Washington should maintain its existing sphere and respond to foreign threats within it, such as the recent growth of Chinese influence in the Western Hemisphere. During Trump's second term, for instance, U.S. policy in the Western Hemisphere has reflected a heavy-handed approach to this challenge, including the 2026 intervention in Venezuela, repeated threats of military action in Mexico, Colombia, and Cuba, and demands for concessions involving Greenland, the Panama Canal, and even Canada.[60] Yet coercion-heavy strategies tend to provoke nationalist resistance and raise the long-term costs of control—dynamics that can ultimately cause a sphere to unravel. At the same time, passivity in the face of encroachment is unlikely to preserve a sphere either. The challenge, then, is to find the balance between these extremes—maintaining credible deterrence against external encroachment while governing the sphere in ways that sustain the willing cooperation of states within it.

The second concerns how to respond to the creation or expansion of foreign spheres, such as Russia's bid for control of Ukraine or China's interests in Taiwan. While allowing a rival to expand its sphere may shift the balance of power, it does not follow that every foreign bid for a sphere must be reflexively opposed. Some foreign spheres may pose little threat to existing U.S. national interests; others may even serve them by counterbalancing a more dangerous adversary. Under certain conditions, acknowledging a rival's sphere can reduce tensions and lower the risk of war. Further complicating matters, this second challenge is intertwined with the first. For instance, some argue the United States must resist Chinese expansion in Asia to prevent Beijing from accumulating the power needed to penetrate America's own hemisphere, while others contend that a smarter approach would be to reach a mutual agreement with China over spheres for the sake of preserving America's current position in the Western Hemisphere.

At the same time, the prevailing view is undeniably correct in one respect: ceding a contested region to a foreign sphere will, by definition, reduce American influence and shift the global balance of power in a rival's favor.[61] Furthermore, while I will challenge the received wisdom regarding the 1938 Munich Conference—arguing in Chapter 6 that Britain and France's actions were more about buying time to prepare for war than a naïve appeasement of Hitler—I nonetheless acknowledge that "Munich scenarios" can arise, in which preemptively containing a foreign sphere is the wise course. Similarly, while I dispute the notion that all spheres must be built upon repression, specific historical cases—Nazi Germany being the prime example—indicate that some states, once in control of a region, will behave ruthlessly toward civilian populations, creating a compelling moral rationale for intervention.

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[60] Jack Nicas, "The 'Donroe Doctrine': Trump's Bid to Control the Western Hemisphere," *The New York Times,* November 17, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/11/17/world/americas/trump-latin-america-monroe-doctrine.html.

[61] On how power vacuums are filled by competing great powers, see Moritz Graefrath, "Power Vacuums in Great Power Politics: The Consequences of Retrenchment and Collapse" (PhD diss., University of Notre Dame, 2023), https://curate.nd.edu/articles/thesis/Power_Vacuums_in_Great_Power_Politics_The_Consequences_of_Retrenchment_and_Collapse/24869997.

Fortunately, few states today face the extreme security challenges or ethical dilemmas facing Europe in 1938. Rather than assuming every bid for a sphere is a replay of Munich, a more prudent approach is to evaluate each case on its own terms. Moreover, as the United States transitions from a unipolar to a multipolar world, its relative power is diminishing.[62] Attempting to counter every challenge to its global influence risks overextension—a costly error that could hasten American decline rather than prevent it.[63]

In that spirit, the Conclusion will explore two critical questions: how the United States should manage its own sphere, and under what conditions it should recognize or contest another great power's sphere. A central claim of this book is that restraint is often the prudent response to both challenges—not only as a strategic imperative but often as a moral one as well. As the case studies show, attempts to block a rival's influence frequently backfire, leaving weaker states caught in the crossfire. Chapter 10 illustrates this tragic dynamic in Ukraine. The war has devastated the country, killed hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian and Russian soldiers, poisoned Russia's relationship with much of Europe, and drawn the United States into a costly proxy war. All parties are worse off than they would have been had the war been avoided. This suggests that, if a prewar settlement preserving Ukrainian neutrality and avoiding war had been possible, it would have served the *ex ante* interests of all sides. Even for those who doubt that such a deal was feasible or wise, the current trajectory of the conflict—marked by slow but steady Russian territorial gains—raises difficult moral questions about the timing, costs, and wisdom of continued escalation versus pressing for a ceasefire. To navigate such dilemmas, we need an accurate theory of how spheres function as tools of statecraft and how they shape the international order.

Roadmap for Book

The remainder of the book proceeds in three parts: two theory chapters, seven case studies, and a conclusion offering policy recommendations.

Chapter 2 argues that spheres are not historical anomalies but predictable outcomes of an anarchic international system, outlining the military, economic, and political incentives that drive great powers to pursue them. Chapter 3 develops a lifecycle theory of spheres, examining how they are formed, contested, and sustained over time, and identifying the conditions under which a great power's bid for a sphere is most likely to escalate into conflict or result in peaceful accommodation.

The case study chapters then apply this framework to seven major episodes of great power competition over spheres since 1815—taken together, the full universe of such cases in the modern era. Chapter 4 analyzes the United States' creation of a sphere in the Western Hemisphere and Britain's gradual shift from resistance to accommodation over the course of the 19th century. Chapter 5 examines the Concert of Europe, the most durable example of a formal, explicitly

[62] Christopher Layne, "This Time It's Real: The End of Unipolarity and the 'Pax Americana,'" *International Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (2012): 203-213, https://www.carlanorrlof.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/ThisTimeItsReal.pdf.

[63] For the classic articulation of the imperial overstretch argument see: Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987).

negotiated spheres arrangement among great powers, tracing how the settlement forged at Vienna in 1815 sustained great power peace for decades before ultimately breaking down under the pressures of nationalism and shifting power. Chapter 6 turns to Germany's bid for a sphere before and during World War II, probing the strategic logic behind the Munich Agreement and the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact to clarify the conditions under which sphere settlements with revisionist powers are most likely to succeed or fail. Chapter 7 examines Japan's pursuit of a sphere in East Asia, analyzing how Russia and the United States alternated between *accommodation* and *contestation* as Japan's ambitions grew between 1868 and 1945. Chapter 8 shows how the United States came to tacitly accept a Soviet sphere in Eastern Europe during World War II as a pragmatic tool for sustaining the Grand Alliance. Chapter 9 traces the Cold War spheres settlement—from its origins in the late 1940s, through the tacit accommodation of *détente*, to its erosion as shifts in the balance of power opened the door to renewed competition. Chapter 10 examines the post-Cold War era, showing how the collapse of the Soviet Union enabled the United States to expand its sphere deep into areas Russia had long considered its own—a process that ultimately culminated in the 2022 war in Ukraine.

The Conclusion distills the historical lessons from these cases to address two pressing challenges: how the United States should manage its own sphere, and under what conditions it should recognize or contest a rival's. It then applies the book's framework to the wars in Ukraine and the emerging U.S.-China competition over Taiwan, arguing that informal sphere arrangements, while imperfect, may offer the most