

Preface

Spheres of influence and understanding about them remain part of international politics and for better or worse will continue to be (Keal 1983, 225).

Ever since the most distant lands were discovered and international relations became global in scale, the challenge of humanity has been to organise the political map of the world. It has never been possible to make the world one, and few have even wanted this. In the end, the division of people by borders of nation-states took place. However, the state is not a perpetual and stable unit of the international system, but one that has been challenged from the day it was introduced – by the states themselves with asserted hierarchies and great power management. Spheres of influence are part and parcel of this world of states and their hierarchical relations. *Sphere of influence*¹ is an idea which takes a stance on the very core question of International Relations¹ (henceforth IR): how is the world divided politically?

This study is a critical analysis and reassessment of the concept of sphere of influence with an interest in normative and theoretical questions arising from the past and the present. The concept is characterised 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.² *Sphere of influence* is a contested concept which has awaited theoretical reassessment 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. Indeed, the term is very well known, frequently deployed, especially when describing Russian foreign policy. Its recurrent use in language testifies to its being part of our political imagination. This imagination is founded upon past experiences, namely, the spheres of influence of the Cold War. Regardless of whether we see the Cold War as a thing of the past, or as something still visible as a mentality of division and difference, international relations have entered a new era. In this new era, we still find the concept of sphere of influence attesting to the need to contest the concept itself.

What then is it that makes a sphere of influence ‘special’; what separates it from other ideas on influence? It is the concept’s pejorative connotation, that is, the notion that it is a form of influence which implies contempt and disapproval.

1 ‘International Relations’ refers to the discipline, ‘international relations’ to relations among international actors.

2 This is not to say that influence beyond borders has not been studied in theoretical terms within IR, but only that there is no interest in contesting the concept.

More specifically, it often means contempt for and disapproval of Russia's foreign policy. Much as no theoretical work has been done on spheres of influence within the discipline for some 30 years, neither has the pejorative nature of the concept been discerned. This prompts the questions: where do the pejorative uses of the term *sphere of influence* come from? Has the concept of sphere of influence always had pejorative associations? Is there any tradition of justifying spheres of influence in international theory? Moreover is it useful to rely on the old political imagination of spheres of influence when discussing Russia's relations with the post-Soviet states? These are the research questions that I will examine in the following pages.

I believe it is time to begin elaborating the theories on spheres of influence again, and to become critical about the language we use to judge or approve of international influence. It is time to renew our political imagination on spheres of influence. The concept of sphere of influence belongs to the jargon of IR and to political parlance. Because of the strong pejorative connotation of the concept, the choice to use or not to use it is political. A sphere of influence signifies some form of influence beyond state borders, not just *any* influence. It means a particular form of influence, or even a particular form of *international order*. Some states are described as having or striving for a sphere of influence, but not all. Since not all international influence is referred to as emanating from a sphere-of-influence policy, there must be a clearly delimited space which is occupied by a sphere of influence. There must also be a reason for viewing some foreign policies as pursuing a sphere of influence and denying others that connotation.

Research must have its anchor in the realities of life; otherwise it is useless. There are three reasons why I consider a study on spheres of influence to be important and necessary. First, the concept deserves to be reassessed due to its persistence in political language. Second, the history of spheres of influence informs international theory by revealing knowledge which is not currently associated with the concept. Sphere of influence as a concept should be contested: its uses should be critically examined and its meanings theoretically explored. Third, *sphere of influence* has meanings beyond its pejorative senses; I will present these in order to sever the seemingly unavoidable link between (the pejorative pall of) *sphere of influence* and Russia. The aim is not to relieve Russia of its responsibility in its foreign policies, but to reflect on the value of using the notion of a sphere of influence as a means to judge and categorise Russian foreign policy.

In the spirit of Joseph Rotblat (2007), signatory to the Russell-Einstein Manifesto against nuclear weapons in 1955, I have tried to connect this research to the problems I have discovered in contemporary international relations. This explains the focus on the three interconnected themes of the concept of sphere of influence, its pejorative uses, and Russia. The purpose of this study is to address the questions and concerns related to the concept of sphere of influence in the past and within the contemporary political imagination. In order to open up new paths for understanding spheres of influence in the present, I detail a tradition of thought about spheres of influence – a history of ideas.

There is nothing more valuable than life. Life is supported and maintained in peace. Determination, optimism and idealism for the sake of peace is my driving force. It is thanks to friends, teachers, colleagues and family who have inspired me to pursue a courageous research agenda which is based on my own life philosophy. I am greatly indebted to University Lecturer Mika Luoma-aho (University of Lapland) and Professor Pami Aalto (University of Tampere) guiding me and showing me the way forward. I offer my sincerest gratitude to Professor (emeritus) Vilho Harle, Professor Christopher Browning (Warwick University) and Sinikukka Saari (The Finnish Institute for International Affairs) for valuable comments on the manuscript. Richard Foley and Helen Lambert did an amazing job with proofreading.

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Susanna Hast
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