

By Invitation

Back to the future – spheres of influence in Europe and Asia

An old concept takes on new life, and not just between the US and China



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For *The Straits Times*

While playing host to the Prime Minister of Vanuatu in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing last year, President Xi Jinping said China was not seeking a “sphere of influence” in the region. “Countries, no matter big or small, strong or weak, rich or poor, are equal members of the international community,” he declared, adding that “China is opposed to great power chauvinism”.

But why is Mr Xi talking about so-called “spheres of influence”, a notion that is widely seen as so 19th century?

In the world of geopolitics, as in the world of fashion, what’s passe can and does make a return to centre stage. Mr Xi’s remarks on the occasion of Prime Minister Charlot Salwai’s visit have to be seen in that light. He was merely responding to the growing international perception that China was trying to nudge other powers out of the Pacific Islands and emerge as the dominant power.

That criticism of China’s ambition is not limited to the Pacific Islands. It involves much of Asia and its waters where Beijing is seen as trying to weaken US alliances and establish itself as the regional hegemon. While Beijing denies these claims, some take a longer view. They point out that Asia, at least East Asia, has indeed been part of China’s sphere of influence throughout history.

CHINA AND EAST ASIA

The traditional tributary state system that China had constructed was broken only when European colonialism arrived in Asia. Those taking a historical perspective also suggest we might be simply returning to that “natural state” in East Asia as a consequence of China’s re-emergence in the 21st century as one of the world’s largest economic and military powers.

Some argue that conceding an Asian sphere of influence to Beijing is inevitable and probably a sensible way to structure a stable balance of power system between a rising China and an America that is in relative decline. They also point to the fact that the logic of geography has effects of its own. China is in the region and America is a distant

power that needs to project its military into the region across a vast ocean.

The realist perspective would certainly instruct us to discount Mr Xi’s rhetoric on “all countries being equal”. The “sovereign equality” of states is indeed an important principle of modern international relations. But at the operational level, especially in the security domain, what matters is the nature of the power differentiation among nations. Inequality of power is a reality that most countries try and cope with in different ways.

The idea that spheres of influence are an inheritance from the past is a relatively recent proposition. It gained prominence at the end of the 20th century, when the US-Soviet Cold War came to an end. As a new wave of economic globalisation enveloped the world, it was assumed that ideology is dead, history has come to an end and geography does not matter.

The absence of great power rivalry led to visions of shared economic growth, global governance and the construction of a liberal international order led perpetually by the US. That illusion, however, did not last long. What we saw after the Berlin Wall came down in 1989 and the Soviet Union collapse in 1991, was a rather brief unipolar moment.

In less than two decades, we now have a return of major power rivalry among the US, China, Russia, Japan and India. Ideological contestation, economic competition and military tension have all made a comeback. So have theories of balance of power, geopolitics and spheres of influence.

DIFFERENT FORMS OVER THE YEARS

Contrary to the globalist imagination or the faith in perennial American hegemony, spheres of influence had never disappeared from international practice. They have long been an important part of managing the complexity of great power relations. After all, the Vatican had drawn a line and given lands to the east of it to Portugal and the west to Spain to limit the conflict between them as they ventured forth in their voyages of discovery in the 15th century.

As the international system emerged in Europe during the 17th century, major powers sought to exercise a measure of dominance over their neighbourhood and prevent other powers from establishing a threatening presence in the periphery. Other powers directly challenged this sphere of influence only at the risk of war.

Indiscriminate exercise of hegemony, however, often



compelled smaller neighbours to mobilise other great powers against the neighbouring giant. Given the delicate nature of the system of spheres of influence, they frequently broke down into conflicts across Europe.

As the major powers began to acquire empires beyond Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries, the principle of spheres of influence came in handy to regulate the competition among themselves in distant lands. The understanding among Britain, France and the Netherlands in the 19th century, for example, had a great bearing on the political disposition in South-east Asia until the middle of the 20th century, when imperial Japan rode into the region to throw out the European powers and construct a sphere of influence for itself.

The European powers and Japan also carved out respective spheres of influence within China until the then rising power, the US, called for equal access in the name of an “Open

Door” policy to all outside powers at the end of the 19th century.

There was a problem though. While the US was accommodated, China was not consulted. The humiliation of imperial China at the hands of foreign powers inevitably intensified Chinese nationalism that triumphed in the early 20th century.

World War II in the middle of the 20th century did not eliminate the spheres of influence. In fact it led to their institutionalisation in Europe that was divided into two spheres, the eastern one dominated by the Soviet Union and the western one by the US. The two opposing alliances – the Warsaw Pact and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) – led to the intense militarisation of the dividing line between the two spheres in central Europe.

The possession of nuclear weapons by both sides and the threat of mutual destruction ensured a tenuous peace in Europe. Despite frequent revolts against the Soviet domination in the east, the US

and the West chose to respect the Russian sphere of influence. It was only with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 that the division of Europe ended. The 20th century saw some spheres of influence endure and others break down. The US sphere of influence in Latin America, proclaimed by president James Monroe in 1823, successfully reduced the European role in the region in the 19th century, withstood the pressures from the Soviet Union to defy it in Cuba in the 20th, and defeated the repeated rebellion within the region against US hegemony.

At the time of independence, India inherited a sphere of influence in the subcontinent and the Indian Ocean from the British Raj that had dominated the region from the early 19th century.

MIDDLE POWERS AT IT TOO

But an India that was partitioned on religious lines and turned economically inwards found it hard to sustain the legacy. A rising India today is trying to reclaim some of that influence in the Indian Ocean, but it confronts a newly powerful China that is rapidly gaining ground.

India is not the only one among the middle powers that is trying to reconstitute spheres of influence. Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt are trying to do the same in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa. The fear of American retrenchment has created an urgency for the regional powers in the Middle East to expand their networks of influence. Australia is fending off the growing Chinese influence in the Pacific Islands with an ambitious “Pacific Step-up” programme of its own.

But it is in Europe and East Asia where the prospects for the spheres of influence are coming into sharp focus. In Europe, spheres of influence are at the heart of the contestation between the West and Russia. The West accuses Russia of trying to reconstitute the Soviet space by annexing territory as in Crimea or undermining the regimes on its frontiers.

Moscow, in turn, accuses Nato and the European Union of expanding towards Russia’s borders, thereby threatening Russian security. Some realists argue that cutting Moscow some slack in its own neighbourhood is a critical precondition for the much-needed normalisation of bilateral relations between the West and Russia.

Many smaller countries on Russia’s periphery, however, continue to seek security cooperation with Nato and economic partnership with the EU to deter potential security threats from Moscow and reduce their economic dependence on Russia.

Pragmatists in the West insist that it is dangerous to offer unsustainable security guarantees

to Russia’s smaller neighbours, such as Ukraine. The solution, they argue, is to find political accommodation with Russia that works for the major powers as well as the smaller nations in Europe. The realists also proffer a similar arrangement in Asia where they suggest that the US can’t afford to embark on a containment of China.

SINO-U.S. CONTEST

Beijing’s growing comprehensive national power means it will have an increasingly decisive role in shaping the security and economic architecture in Asia. The logic of geography means America’s ability to project and sustain military power close to China’s territorial space – as it does now – will only erode. The US, however, is not going gently into the night and has pushed back on multiple fronts.

The American response is not limited to the military strategic domain. Nor is it confined to territorial space. The prospects for economic decoupling and digital divorce – on 5G for example – reinforce the notion of spheres of influence. It also sees China’s Belt and Road Initiative as a thinly disguised attempt at constructing an economic sphere of influence in Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific.

To be sure, there are forces in both China and the US that want to seek uncontested primacy in Asia. There are others in the two countries who believe unilateral dominance in Asia is not really feasible and that it would be sensible for both countries to arrive at some political accommodation.

The trick is in finding a mutually acceptable accommodation that could take multiple forms, including a condominium (joint management) or separate spheres of influence.

Few nations in Asia believe a prolonged Sino-US confrontation is in their interest. They would certainly welcome any reasonable accommodation between Washington and Beijing. But they will also be wary of any understanding between the US and China at their expense.

CENTRAL PROBLEM OF A CARVE-UP

That brings us to the central problem of spheres of influence. It needs not only an understanding between the major powers that are carving them out, but also those which fall within their ambit.

Asia is full of large and populous states and entities such as Japan, Vietnam, Indonesia, Asean and India that will not meekly accept to be part of one or another sphere of influence. They have agency of their own and will refuse to accept the discipline demanded by the spheres of influence agreed upon by the US and China.

Russia in Europe and China in Asia, then, will have to temper their regional dominance with sensitivity to the interests and concerns of their neighbours. At the same time, the smaller states must avoid provoking the dominant regional power by threatening its security.

Spheres of influence have a chance of working when major powers are wise and the regional actors prudent. If not, they quickly degenerate into great power rivalry, competing alliances and all-round insecurity.

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