Zones of Interest:
The Fault Lines of Contemporary Great Power Conflict

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Abstract

Each of the contemporary great powers—the United States, Russia, China, the United Kingdom, and France—has a history of demarcating particular regions of the world as belonging to their own sphere of influence. During the Cold War, proponents of the realist approach to international relations argued that the United States and the Soviet Union could preserve global peace by maintaining separate spheres of influence, regions where they would sustain order and fulfill their national interest without interference from the other superpower. While the great powers used to enjoy unbridled primacy within their spheres of influence, changes in the structures of international governance—namely the end of the imperial and Cold War eras—have led to a sharp reduction in the degree to which the great powers have been able to dominate other states within these spheres. In this paper, I argue that while geopolitics remains of paramount importance to the great powers, their traditional preoccupation with spheres of influence has been replaced with their prioritization of "zones of interest". I perform a qualitative analysis of the zones of interest of the five great powers, defined as spatial areas which have variable geographical boundaries, but are distinctly characterized by their military, economic, and/or cultural importance to the great powers. My paper suggests that the possibility of contemporary conflict between the great powers increases whenever two conditions are met: the great powers' zones of interest overlap, and the great powers pursue zero-sum objectives within these zones.

Introduction

The war between Russia and Georgia in August 2008 brought attention back to an ancient concept in international relations, the notion of 'spheres of influence' (SOI). The armed conflict began with clashes between Georgian military forces and South Ossetian separatists. Georgia responded with a military invasion of South Ossetia, which provoked Russia to invade Georgia. Although the status of the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia had been a needle in Russian-Georgian relations for years, tensions reached a boiling point when Georgia recently applied for membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). It was argued that Russia was incensed because they perceived the potential NATO membership of Georgia as an attempt by the United States to project its influence into the Caucauses, a region which has traditionally fallen under the Russian SOI.[1]

Each great power has a history of demarcating its own SOI, a region where the great power may freely exercise its preponderant power in order to achieve its interests without interference from external powers. In this paper, I argue that the notion of SOI is anachronistic for describing great power geopolitics in the contemporary era. I offer an alternative concept, zones of interest (ZOI), as a more accurate description. The paper is structured as follows. First, the concept of SOI is defined and criticized for its shortcomings. I follow this with an analysis of how the SOI of the five contemporary great powers—the United States, Russia, China, the United Kingdom, and France—have evolved over time. The concept of ZOI is explained next. Finally, I make a preliminary attempt at identifying the current security ZOI of the great powers.

Spheres of Influence: An Archaic Concept

One of the earliest explorations of the concept of SOI was conducted by Geddes W. Rutherford (1926). Rutherford expressed that SOI are characterized by the informality of their arrangements, in sharp contrast to protectorates which have been established through formal agreements between the great powers. Despite the absence of legal authorization, the existence of a SOI is generally recognized by the national governments of the great power states.

John P. Vloyantes provided a comprehensive definition of an SOI:

> A sphere of influence is an area into which is projected the power and influence of a country primarily for political, military-strategic, or economic purposes, but sometimes cultural purposes may be added. States within the area are usually nominally independent, but the degree of influence may be so great as to leave little independence; or it may be so indirect and restrained as to permit considerable independence. A sphere may be more or less exclusive, depending upon the degree of independence states within it enjoy.
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> A sphere of influence can also result from a special position of leadership, initiative, and direction by a great power in association with independent

[1] A poll of Russian citizens indicated that many of them actually blamed the U.S. for causing the Georgia-Russia War (*Fareed Zakaria GPS* 2008).

> countries, arising out of mutually acceptable relationships which have been established (Vloyantes 1975, 3).

Vloyantes distinguished between two types of SOI, a 'hard sphere' and a 'soft sphere'. A hard SOI is established by a self-interested hegemon (in global or regional terms) in order to dominate and exploit subordinate states within the sphere. Rival powers are discouraged from meddling in such a sphere due to threats of violent retaliation from the hegemon. But the hegemon encounters no such resistance to its own interventionism within the sphere, and periodically threatens or uses force against the subordinate states in an attempt to keep them in line with the hegemon's objectives. The colonial empires established by the great powers are perfect examples of hard SOI, as was the Warsaw Treaty Organization set up by the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

In contrast, a soft SOI features some limitations on the possible actions of the hegemon. The subordinate states have real rather than nominal sovereignty, which means that they have the freedom to adopt their own political and economic policies without fear of hegemonic interference. While the hegemon is respectful of the sovereignty of the subordinate states, it is still concerned that events within the sphere unfold in a fashion that is complementary to the hegemon's interests. Thus, rather than using coercion, the hegemon relies on soft power resources—such as the capacity to persuade through the use of information, communications, and multilateral institutions—to persuade subordinate states to follow its lead (Nye 1990; Sikkink 2002). Examples of a soft SOI include NATO and the Organization of American States (OAS).

Realists have emphasized that a balance of power, based on separate SOI, is an effective mechanism for maintaining peace between states. Ronald Steel (1971-72; 1972) and Pierre Hassner (1972) debated the wisdom of an SOI policy for the United States. Frustrated with the failures of American global interventionism, Steel suggested that "a true balance of power must be based on spheres of influence, which grant to the great powers certain rights in areas they deem essential to their own security" (Steel 1971-72: 111). Accordingly, the great powers of the world should recognize the right of each of them to establish their own SOI, and must refrain from interfering in the SOI of other powers. Hassner (1972) disagreed vehemently with Steel on the desirability of demarcating great power SOI:

> Spheres of influence are no cure for an illness which affects the nature of influence itself. On the contrary, some of the most obvious and important features of this process of modernization which challenges the exercise of power go directly against the attempt to partition the world on a geographical basis: the evolution of communications, economic interdependence, the contagion of transnational social trends make nonsense of the attempt to impose geographical limits to influence through diplomatic agreement (Hassner 1972: 143).

Hassner emphasized that the forces of globalization and modernization which have been sweeping the world have made concepts like SOI obsolete. In the modern world, a hegemon can no longer expect to continuously achieve its interests through the military domination of subordinate states. The reality of enhanced interdependence and

the necessity for transnational cooperation to solve global problems have given weaker states more leverage vis-à-vis the great powers.

In the following section, the paper will discuss the evolution of the traditional SOI for each of the five contemporary great powers—the United States, Russia, China, the United Kingdom, and France.[2]

The Traditional SOI of the Contemporary Great Powers

The United States

In 1823, President James Monroe proclaimed the Monroe Doctrine, where the Americas were declared off-limits to any future European colonization.[3] The U.S. was relatively weak militarily at that time, however, and was unable to enforce the Monroe Doctrine. Great Britain had considerable commercial and strategic interests in the Western Hemisphere, thus, the Americans made a tacit agreement with the British, whereby Britain would enforce the Monroe Doctrine, while the U.S. would ignore an increase in British colonialism in the Americas.

After the American Civil War, the U.S. carried out an impressive naval build-up. By 1893, the U.S. navy was the seventh largest in the world (Papp, Johnson, and Endicott 2005). Americans began to assume responsibility for enforcing the Monroe Doctrine on their own. In 1895, Washington warned Britain that it had violated the Monroe Doctrine by landing troops in Nicaragua, and by engaging in a territorial dispute with Venezuela over the boundaries of British Guiana. U.S. Secretary of State Richard Olney issued the Olney Memorandum, which declared that all states in the Americas were allies of the U.S., and that the U.S. was the undisputed sovereign power in the Western Hemisphere.[4]

In 1903, Britain and Germany attacked Venezuela with gunboats over unpaid debts. The following year, President Theodore Roosevelt issued the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, which assigned the U.S. the role of regional policeman in the Western Hemisphere, with the responsibility of ensuring that order, civilization, and obligations are maintained in the Americas. The three major declarations issued by the U.S. government—the Monroe Doctrine, the Olney Memorandum, and the Roosevelt Corollary—demarcated the Americas as belonging to the U.S. sphere of influence. They ushered in an era of frequent U.S. interventionism within this SOI in pursuit of American interests, much to the chagrin of the Latin American and Caribbean populations.[5]

The American SOI became global in scope following the Second World War. Confrontations with the Soviet Union over the future of Iran and Turkey, coupled with a bloody communist insurgency in Greece, compelled the U.S. to announce the Truman Doctrine in 1947, which committed the U.S. to supporting free peoples who are resisting subjugation by armed minorities or external actors (Nye 2005). The Cold War had officially begun. The Truman administration adopted a global policy of containment of

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[2] These five great powers were selected because they hold permanent seats on the United Nations Security Council, the preeminent institution dealing with global security.

[3] My discussion of the history of U.S. foreign policy draws from Papp, Johnson, and Endicott (2005).

[4] Britain responded that the Monroe Doctrine did not apply to their dispute with Venezuela, which resulted in the Venezuelan Crisis between Britain and the U.S. Since neither side wanted war, they established a commission to settle the crisis, which ruled in Venezuela's favor in 1899.

[5] For a detailed discussion of the history of American interventionism in Latin America, see Smith (1996).

the Soviet Union (Kegley and Raymond 2002). The Americans balanced against Soviet power and influence by extending and solidifying their own SOI. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was established in 1949 to provide collective security for its members against an attack from the Soviet Union and its Eastern European allies. Political and military relations with Latin America were strengthened with the adoption of the Rio Pact for collective defense in 1947, and the creation of the Organization of American States (OAS) in 1948. Under the Truman Doctrine, the American SOI was not confined to the Americas and Western Europe, but grew to include Australia and New Zealand (under the 1952 ANZUS treaty), Japan, South Korea, South Vietnam, Taiwan, and dozens of client states in the developing world. After the Cold War ended in 1989, the U.S. was left with the legacy of two security SOI: a regional SOI in Latin America and a global SOI held together by Washington's various alliance obligations.

Russia

The ambitions of Imperial Russia were contained by both the physical geography of the Eurasian continent and the balancing strategies of the flanking powers.[6] Despite the numerous obstacles faced by Russia, it managed to acquire a massive continental empire during the period from 1721 until 1917. At its height, the Russian Empire controlled Finland, the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), Belarus, Moldova, most of the Ukraine, the Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia), Central Asia, a large portion of Poland, some former Ottoman territories, and the Russian American colony of Alaska. In 1907, Russia and Britain signed an agreement which partitioned Persia into separate Russian and British SOI. That same year, Russia and Japan signed a secret convention to partition Manchuria between the two powers. Another convention with Japan in 1912 extended the Russian SOI southward to the Great Wall in Inner Mongolia.

The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 transformed Tsarist Russia into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.). The Russian Republic became the core of a vast and multinational Soviet Union. In 1940, one of the final acts of the League of Nations was to expel the Soviet Union after it annexed the independent countries (and former imperial possessions) of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The demise of Austria-Hungary after the First World War and Nazi Germany following the Second World War removed two perennial checks on Russian ambitions in Europe. While liberating Eastern Europe from Nazi control, the U.S.S.R. proceeded to incorporate parts of Finland, Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Romania into the Soviet Union (Kegley and Raymond 2002).

The eight countries trapped behind the Iron Curtain—East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and Albania—would subsequently fall into the Soviet SOI for the next four decades of the Cold War. Soviet power and influence were projected throughout its SOI via multilateral mechanisms such as the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON, established in 1949) and the Warsaw Treaty Organization (WTO, created in 1955). For the first time in its history, the Russian/Soviet SOI would stretch globally rather than be confined to Eurasia, as the Soviet Union provided military and economic aid to socialist states in the developing

[6] In this section, I draw from LeDonne's (1997) excellent analysis of the geopolitics of Tsarist Russia.

world, including Cuba, Nicaragua, Algeria, Angola, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Somalia, Tanzania, Afghanistan, North Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

With the end of the Cold War in 1989, and the disintegration of the Soviet Union two years later, the Russian SOI was transformed considerably. While the COMECON and the WTO were dispatched to the graveyard of history, Moscow erected the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in 1991. Consisting of ten former Soviet republics which had gained their independence, the CIS would become a tool for Russia to maintain its influential hold on its neighbors in the post-Cold War era. As of 2009, Russia and six other former Soviet republics were also cooperating in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), established in 1994.

China

According to Ross Terrill, "historically, China—not known as such until modern times—was a fluid entity, now ruling foreign peoples, on occasion ruled by foreign peoples" (Terrill 2003: 3). The People's Republic of China (PRC) lies in sharp contrast with the other great powers of the modern era, in that the PRC regime pretends to speak on behalf of a unified China, yet governs a genuinely diverse population in the same imperial manner as the ancient emperors did.[7] The attitude of the PRC displays considerable continuity with historical Chinese ideology. June Teufel Dreyer remarks that "the traditional Chinese worldview saw China as the Middle Kingdom—the center of the world and the hub of civilization (Dreyer 2000, 303).

Over the millennia, the boundaries of Imperial China expanded and contracted depending on the strength of the dynasty in power. Chinese territory grew significantly under the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), to eventually include Tibet, Xinjiang, Taiwan, Mongolia, and part of Eastern Russia. China would experience not only territorial conquests, however, but also the humiliation of being carved up into concessions by foreign powers following defeat to Britain in the Opium Wars of 1839-42 and 1856-60. Sovereignty over portions of Chinese territory was ceded to European states, including Hong Kong to Britain and Macao to Portugal.

China experienced a prolonged period of state-building after the fall of the last emperor. A series of Northern Expeditions between 1926 and 1928 succeeded in unifying most of China by force under the Kuomintang (KMT) government of Chiang Kai-shek. They consolidated the rule of the majority Han Chinese over the country, though warlords continued to hold power in peripheral regions. In the late 1920s, China was plunged into decades of internal turmoil with the eruption of a lengthy civil war between the KMT and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), punctuated by a bloody war against the Japanese occupation spearheaded by a united front of the KMT and the CCP. Peace would not be restored in mainland China until the victorious CCP announced the founding of the PRC in 1949, while the KMT fled to the island of Taiwan and established the Republic of China (ROC).

The PRC gradually grew into its role as a great power. Initially guided by the U.S.S.R., China broke away from Soviet influence in 1960, in the belief that Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev had betrayed the fundamentals of Leninism (Dreyer 2000). But Chinese ambition to become the new preeminent leader of the communist world was

[7] This review of Chinese history is based on the works of Dreyer (2000) and Terrill (2003).

dashed when most socialist states drifted towards the Soviet Union after the Sino-Soviet split. Nevertheless, China has never been a country to rely on permanent alliances (Terrill 2003). Chinese foreign policy would prove to be as pragmatic as it was ideological. Beijing not only assisted socialist friends like North Korea and Albania, but with a balance of power logic cultivated relations with rightist regimes which were staunchly anti-Soviet, such as Pakistan, Chile, and Iran. The rapprochement with the United States in the early 1970s was a deliberate strategy to put pressure on the Soviet Union. As Terrill remarked, "the United States, ever since the late Qing Dynasty, has been close to China only when a common enemy loomed (Terrill 2003: 264).

The PRC tends to intervene in an imperial manner within its SOI, consisting of the neighboring regions of Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia (Terrill 2003). Chinese military prowess was displayed, to the great surprise of Americans, when the PRC came to the aid of North Korea during the Korean War (Stoessinger 2008). China fought a short and successful war with India over a section of Kashmir in 1962 (Dreyer 2000). Both Tibet and Xinjiang (formerly the independent country of East Turkestan) were invaded and incorporated into the PRC as autonomous regions. Border skirmishes with the U.S.S.R. occurred in the late 1960s, and the PRC attacked Vietnam in 1978 following the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, a client state of China. Hostility with the ROC has not waned, and the PRC has both used military force (the bombardment of the Taiwanese islands of Quemoy and Matsu) and threats of armed force (military exercises in the Taiwan Straits) in an effort to compel the ROC to not seek formal independence from China. While the PRC's 'One China' policy has experienced some success with the return of Hong Kong and Macao to Chinese sovereignty, it is highly unlikely that the PRC will be able to restore Chinese control over the former territorial possessions of Taiwan and Mongolia.

The PRC has recently been cooperating with Russia and the Central Asian republics on security issues. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was established in 2001, with the objective of providing collective security to China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. In October 2007, the SCO and the CSTO signed an agreement to broaden their cooperation on regional security.

The United Kingdom

The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is the modern-day heir to the most impressive imperial history that the world has ever known.[8] During the reign of King James I (1603-25), England's first permanent overseas colony, Jamestown, was founded in Virginia in 1607, and subsequent colonies were established in New England and the West Indies.[9] The fall of the French colony of Quebec in 1759 signaled the start of English hegemony over North America, which proved to be short-lived when the Thirteen Colonies successfully won their independence in 1783 and the United States was born. This marked the end of the 'First British Empire'.

[8] My discussion of the history of the British Empire draws from Lloyd (1984), James (1994), and "British Empire" (2008).

[9] I use the name England for the period prior to 1707, when the Acts of Union merged England and Scotland into Great Britain. I refer to the United Kingdom for the period following the integration of Ireland in 1801.

The ‘Second British Empire’ would be based more on free trade rather than direct control of territory. Britain deployed its preponderant naval power globally to promote British values and maintain order. Britain outlawed the slave trade in 1807 and succeeded in halting the international slave trade by the 1850s. The British navy was tasked with enforcing the Monroe Doctrine in the Americas until the American navy grew powerful enough to fulfill this role in the 1890s. Although London prioritized trade relations, the British did engage in some direct colonial rule as well. Through the activities of the British East India Company, the Indian subcontinent was conquered and the colonies of Hong Kong and Singapore were founded. Settlements were established in Australia and New Zealand. Ireland was integrated into the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland in 1801.

But British hegemony experienced challenges in the late 1800s. Massive industrialization in other states, coupled with the ‘Long Depression’ of 1873-96, encouraged these rising powers to seek out new colonial possessions to exploit rather than engage in free trade. The U.K. was forced to return to an emphasis on global colonial acquisition. London focused mainly on the African continent during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially the geopolitically strategic territories of Egypt, Sudan, and South Africa. Following the First World War, League of Nations mandates gave the U.K. control over former German and Ottoman possessions, including Palestine, Iraq, the Cameroon, Tanganyika, South-West Africa (indirectly through South Africa), and New Guinea (indirectly via Australia).

The British Empire began a transformation during the interwar period. The Balfour Declaration of 1926 granted Dominion states—including Canada, Newfoundland, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa—equal status with Britain for the first time. By 1931, the Dominions had received the right to make domestic and foreign policy without British interference. A few states became independent, including Ireland (1921), Egypt (1922), and Iraq (1932), but London continued to exert its influence on them for some time thereafter.[10]

After the Second World War, a thirty-year period of decolonization led to the rapid dismantlement of the British Empire. Most of these newly-independent states joined the British Commonwealth of Nations, an intergovernmental organization with fifty-three members. Through the institution of the Commonwealth, the U.K. has been able to exert political and cultural influence on member states. Even though they are independent states, sixteen of the Commonwealth countries have the Queen of England as their official head of state. British security policy has become heavily influenced by the U.K.’s membership in NATO and the European Union (EU).

France

At the height of its power in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the size of the French colonial empire was surpassed by only the British Empire. The first French colonial empire originated with the founding of Port Royal (1605) and Quebec (1608) as fur-trading colonies in New France. More colonies were established throughout the

[10] Ireland did not become a republic and withdraw from the British Commonwealth until 1948. Egypt remained bound by treaty to Britain until 1936 and under partial British occupation until 1956. A British Protectorate was established over Iraq from 1922 until independence in 1932.

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, mostly on the Caribbean islands, but also in Louisiana, Senegal, Reunion, Mauritius, and the Seychelles. The French even attempted to get a foothold into India via colonial settlements and the trading activities of the French East India Company, but were driven out by the British by the late 1700s (Carton 2007).

Unfortunately for the French, the monarchy's relative disinterest in populating New France and the constant state of war in Europe throughout the eighteenth century combined to destroy the first colonial empire. By 1763, the British had conquered New France and most of the French colonies in the Caribbean. At the end of the Napoleonic Wars (1803-15), Britain returned some of these colonies, including Guadeloupe, Martinique, French Guiana, and Reunion. France began its second effort at building a colonial empire with the invasion of Algeria in 1830, completing its conquest of the territory in 1847. France was active in Mexico from 1861 until 1867, attempting to establish a protectorate, but was ultimately pressured out by the U.S., who invoked the Monroe Doctrine. French colonialism was far more successful in Southeast Asia. Between 1860 and 1904, France established Indochina, consisting of the colony of Cochinchine in Southern Vietnam, and the four protectorates of Annam (Central Vietnam), Tonkin (North Vietnam), Cambodia, and Laos (Chandler 2007). France also consolidated gradually its influence in the South Pacific region, beginning with the establishment of a protectorate over the Marquesas Islands in 1842 and ending with the creation of French Polynesia in 1957 (Milia-Marie-Luce 2007).

A dedicated French effort at colonizing Africa began in the 1850s in Senegal (Klein 2007). At the Berlin Conference of 1884-85, France and the other European powers carved up Central Africa into their various SOI for the purposes of colonialism, trade, and resource exploitation. By 1914, France controlled Algeria, Tunisia, French Morocco, French West Africa, French Equatorial Africa, Madagascar, and French Somaliland. With the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire following the First World War, France received a mandate from the League of Nations to govern Lebanon and Syria (McDougall 2007).

After the Second World War, Paris attempted to consolidate its post-war SOI. The French Constitution of 1946 outlined a French Union, consisting of metropolitan France, the overseas departments of Algeria, Martinique, Guadeloupe, French Guiana, and Reunion, and overseas territories which included the colonies in Africa, Madagascar, and the Pacific. The French Union would also incorporate the associated states and protectorates of Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Morocco, and Tunisia, as well as associated states which were under the United Nations mandate (inherited from the disbanded League of Nations), namely the Cameroon and Togo (Hanrieder and Auton 1980).

But the rapid decolonization and bloody resistance to French hegemony caught Paris off-guard. Most of the independence movements in the French-controlled parts of Sub-Saharan Africa were relatively peaceful. But France experienced three violent conflicts which would ultimately lead to the fall of the Fourth Republic in 1958. The first was the war in Indochina (1946-54). The French defeat to the Vietminh at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 would signal the end of French influence in the region (Hanrieder and Auton 1980). An even bigger blow to the French psyche was the war in Algeria (1954-62), which resulted in the loss of an overseas department (considered an integral part of France itself) to full independence. Finally, in 1956, the French lost control over the Suez

Canal permanently after their participation, together with the U.K. and Israel, in a deceptive scheme to invade Egypt and seize the canal following Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's nationalization of the canal (Stoessinger 2008).

The architect of the Fifth Republic, General Charles de Gaulle, initiated a new mechanism for the maintenance of the French SOI in Africa. Launched in December 1958, the French Community was designed to permit the political autonomy of its African members, but gave Paris the authority to influence Community policy on several critical matters, including foreign and defense policy, strategic raw materials policy, currency, and common economic and financial policy (Hanrieder and Auton 1980). Although fourteen African states joined initially, resentment over French dominance and attempts to infringe on the African states' sovereignty doomed the French Community to a quick demise. As of 2009, the traditional French SOI has been reduced to cultural participation in *La Francophonie*. Like the U.K., French security policy currently centers on the E.U. and NATO, although France withdrew from NATO's military command in 1966 (Pease 2008).

Zones of Interest: An Alternative Conceptualization

John A. Agnew described the dramatic degree to which the world has changed since the Cold War ended:

> There is now a need to understand a vast and differentiated world that no longer can be reduced to a set of overriding categories (such as East versus West, communist versus capitalist, and so on) that drove conventional perspectives on world affairs for so long…Not only have old certainties about international boundaries, spheres of influence, the purposes of alliances (such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization), and the pecking order of world powers come into question, but also many of the established premises of those who have long dominated the study of international politics and the world economy in the United States have become moot. These premises include the settled identities of states; the division of the world into such grand regions as the First, Second, and Third Worlds; the primacy of states over other geographical units (such as cities or trading blocs) in economic transactions; and the supposed declining significance of religious, ethnic, and other "nonmodern" affiliations (Agnew 2000: 91).

The concept of the SOI has lost its relevance in the post-Cold War period and should be discarded completely. The reason is because SOI are based on power relations which are no longer existent. To return to Vloyantes' (1975) classification of spheres of influence, there are very few 'hard' SOI in the world nowadays. The massive decolonization that occurred after the Second World War liberated most of the planet's populations from servitude to colonial masters. The dissolution of the WTO and the disintegration of the U.S.S.R. freed around two dozen countries from the oppressive control of Russia. Perhaps it could be argued that the PRC still maintains a hard SOI, in that it has integrated the formerly independent states of Tibet and East Turkestan (now Xinjiang) into China proper. But the PRC has not been able to rein in its renegade island province of Taiwan, no matter how severe threats from Beijing have been.

The notion of 'soft' SOI may, at first, appear to be a more applicable description of most contemporary great power relations with subordinate states. The five great powers have each used soft power, in the form of bilateral diplomacy, provision of aid, and multilateral cooperation through international institutions, as a tool for forging and maintaining soft SOI. The U.S. continues to promote its ideological objectives of free trade and liberal democracy in the Americas through institutions such as the OAS and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), as well as the negotiations on a Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). Together with its fellow former Soviet republics, Russia has crafted the CIS and the CSTO. China has teamed up with Russia and the Central Asian states to create the SCO. The U.K. maintains political and cultural ties to its former colonies via the Commonwealth of Nations. France promotes French culture and language in its former colonial possessions through the institution of *La Francophonie*.

But as Pierre Hassner (1972) argued, the forces of globalization have tended to subvert traditional power relations within these SOI. Through the adoption of modern information, communications, and transportation technologies, less powerful states can circumvent the pressures of the regional hegemon and seek out trade and military relationships with external powers. The regional hegemon has become emasculated, as its preponderant power resources have become insufficient for preserving the hegemon's dominance within its SOI.

This point becomes evident when one looks at the record of non-compliance of subordinate states with the dictates and objectives of the regional hegemon. Despite the application of military force and economic sanctions, the U.S. was unable to prevent Cuba and Nicaragua from switching their allegiance to the Soviet Union during the Cold War, or to bring them back into the fold. The American objective of creating a FTAA by 2005 was derailed by the resistance of leftist governments in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Brazil, and elsewhere. Russian threats were not capable of deterring Eastern European states from joining NATO (and may in fact have hastened their membership). The carrots and sticks offered by Beijing have not compelled Taiwan to unite with the PRC and form a united China. Rather, Taiwan has cultivated a special relationship with the U.S. to balance against the PRC. The influence of both the UK and France over their ex-colonies has waned dramatically as well.

Instead of analyzing the current state of great power politics through the lenses of the geographically-restricted and power-based notion of SOI, I propose a more accurate and relevant concept: zones of interest (ZOI). An interest-based conceptualization should be appealing to realists, who claim that states always pursue their own national interest when formulating foreign policy (Morgenthau 1948). In contrast to realism, however, I argue that international relations are not about the pursuit of power, but the fulfillment of interests. I define ZOI as spatial areas which have variable geographical boundaries, but are distinctly characterized by their military, economic, and/or cultural importance to the great powers. A ZOI may be differentiated from a SOI in three ways.

First, a ZOI does not have fixed geographical boundaries, in contrast to a SOI, which is a geographical region where a great power has traditionally played the role of a hegemon versus subordinate states. The ZOI may expand or contract considerably over time, in line with changes in the national interest of the great power. Sometimes a ZOI

may encompass an entire region (e.g., Latin America), other times it may include a few states within the region and not others (e.g., Mexico and Nicaragua, but not Guatemala), or be limited to a specific region within a state (e.g., Chiapas).

Second, a ZOI may be flexible as to the issues it encompasses. The SOI as defined by the great powers included all aspects of the relationships—security, economic, political, and cultural—between the hegemon and the subordinate states. A ZOI could be all inclusive (e.g., American interest in Canada) or narrow (e.g., Chinese interest in the Sudanese petroleum industry).

Third, a ZOI is not the monopoly of a single great power. The whole rationale behind a SOI is that it is based on the relationship between a hegemon and subordinate states; all external powers are excluded from exercising any influence within the region. But there is no exclusivity within a ZOI. Multiple great powers may have the same ZOI, or their ZOI may overlap to some extent.

The concept of ZOI provides a solid explanation as to why great powers engage in conflict, and some predictive capability as to where future conflicts may erupt. The possibility of contemporary conflict between the great powers increases whenever two conditions are met. First, the great powers' zones of interest overlap. That is, at least two great powers have an interest in a particular region. Second, the great powers pursue zero-sum objectives within these ZOI. Rather than perceiving an opportunity to cooperate to achieve mutual objectives, the great powers view a gain for the rival power as a loss for themselves. The quarrel between Russia and the United States over the possibility of NATO membership for Georgia illustrates this well.

The Security Zones of Interest of the Great Powers

In this section, I would like to offer some speculative observations on the security ZOI of the great powers as of May 2009, and the potential for these states to engage in conflict. The following lists present regions which the great powers are prioritizing in their security policies. The lists mention the regions in order from West to East, but not the degree to which any particular region is prioritized over other regions. A region is included in a ZOI even if the great power only has security concerns about one country within the region. Overlapping ZOI are noted in parentheses.

The United States' Security ZOI:
- North America (overlaps with the U.K. and France).
- Arctic (overlaps with Russia).
- Latin America (overlaps with France in South America).
- Caribbean (overlaps with the U.K. and France).
- Europe (overlaps with the U.K. and France, and with Russia in Eastern Europe).
- Middle East (overlaps with Russia, China, the U.K., and France).
- Somali piracy (overlaps with Russia, China, the U.K., and France).
- Central Asia (overlaps with Russia, China, the U.K., and France).
- South Asia (overlaps with Russia, China, the U.K., and France).
- East Asia (overlaps with Russia, China, the UK, and France).
- Southeast Asia (overlaps with China).
- Pacific Ocean (overlaps with France).

Russia's Security ZOI:
- Arctic (overlaps with the U.S.).
- Eastern Europe (overlaps with the U.S., the U.K., and France).
- Middle East (overlaps with the U.S., China, the U.K., and France).
- Somali piracy (overlaps with the U.S., China, the U.K., and France).
- Central Asia (overlaps with the U.S., China, the U.K., and France).
- South Asia (overlaps with the U.S., China, the U.K., and France).
- East Asia (overlaps with the U.S., China, the UK, and France).

China's Security ZOI:
- Middle East (overlaps with the U.S., Russia, the U.K., and France).
- Somali piracy (overlaps with the U.S., Russia, the U.K., and France).
- Central Asia (overlaps with the U.S., Russia, the U.K., and France).
- South Asia (overlaps with the U.S., Russia, the U.K., and France).
- East Asia (overlaps with the U.S., Russia, the UK, and France).
- Southeast Asia (overlaps with the U.S.).

The United Kingdom's Security ZOI:
- North America (overlaps with the U.S. and France).
- Caribbean (overlaps with the U.S. and France).
- Europe (overlaps with the U.S. and France, and with Russia in Eastern Europe).
- Middle East (overlaps with the U.S., Russia, China, and France).
- Somali piracy (overlaps with the U.S., Russia, China, and France).
- Central Asia (overlaps with the U.S., Russia, China, and France).
- South Asia (overlaps with the U.S., Russia, China, and France).
- East Asia (overlaps with the U.S., Russia, China, and France).

France's Security ZOI:
- North America (overlaps with the U.S. and the U.K.).
- Latin America (overlaps with the U.S. in South America).
- Caribbean (overlaps with the U.S. and the U.K.).
- Europe (overlaps with the U.S. and the U.K., and with Russia in Eastern Europe).
- North Africa.
- West Africa.
- Middle East (overlaps with the U.S., Russia, China, and the U.K.).
- Somali piracy (overlaps with the U.S., Russia, China, and the U.K.).
- Reunion.
- Central Asia (overlaps with the U.S., Russia, China, and the U.K.).
- South Asia (overlaps with the U.S., Russia, China, and the U.K.).
- East Asia (overlaps with the U.S., Russia, China, and the U.K.).
- Pacific Ocean (overlaps with the U.S.).

From this list, it becomes evident that there are several regions of the world which are highly prioritized on the security agendas of all five great powers. Central Asia is one of them. The war in Afghanistan against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban has direct

consequences for each of the great powers, as the U.S., the U.K., and France have been directly involved in the fighting, while Russia and China remain concerned about the activities of Islamic fundamentalists within their borders in places like Chechnya and Xinjiang. The Middle East has always been a high priority. The great powers remain preoccupied with combating international terrorism, particularly the existence of terrorist organizations throughout the Middle East who endanger the security of not only civilians, but also friendly regimes and vital energy supplies in the region. The activities of extremist groups who use war-torn Iraq as a base of operations are a concern. Figuring out what to do about the Iranian nuclear program has become a conundrum for the great powers.

The themes of Islamic extremism and nuclear weapons combine to make South Asia a foreign policy priority for all of the great powers. The stability of the Pakistani regime against Taliban insurgents, and the security of its nuclear weapons, have been called into question. The issue of the North Korean nuclear weapons program means that each of the great powers has a vested interest in East Asia. The recent upsurge in Somali piracy in the Gulf of Aden has become a danger to shipping for all states, hence it is not surprising that the great powers have begun deploying warships in the region, even though they tend to ignore the domestic situation within Somalia itself.

The possibility of armed conflict erupting between the great powers is highest within these overlapping ZOI. But even if multiple powers are interested in a region, it is not a sufficient condition for great power conflict. The catalyst for such a conflict lies in the nature of great power interests. Are the objectives of the great powers complementary or competitive? If they are complementary, then perhaps we should expect to see a cooperative endeavor between the great powers to resolve their security issues. The transnational problems of nuclear proliferation, international terrorism, and piracy pose security risks for each of the great powers and are only resolvable through international collaboration. Hence, these are not issues which are likely to breed armed conflict between the great powers, even though conflict may arise between a great power and a subordinate state within these regions with regards to these issues.

If the great powers decide to engage in competitive power politics within these regions, however, the probability of armed conflict between them increases significantly. The case of the renegade North Korean regime and its nuclear program provides the perfect illustration. The U.S. and China currently realize that they have a mutual interest in denuclearizing North Korea, and they are cooperating in putting diplomatic pressure on Pyongyang via the six-party talks (the other participants being Russia, South Korea, and Japan). But if China begins to perceive U.S. pressures as an attempt to weaken the North Korean state, thereby making it susceptible to American influence, Beijing may rally to the defense of its old ally. The existing tensions on the Korean peninsula would escalate significantly, increasing the risks that China and the U.S. could stumble into armed conflict against each other, as they did during the Korean War.

There are some regions where the great powers may be currently pursuing competing interests, however, and the zero-sum nature of their relations is a breeding ground for tension and possibly armed hostilities. The expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe, as well as the planned deployment of ballistic missile interceptors in Poland and the construction of a radar facility in the Czech Republic as components for a U.S. missile shield, has produced a security dilemma for Russia, who has retaliated with

increased hostility to the West in recent years. In addition, the competition for sovereignty over territory and vast resources in the Arctic region between the U.S. and Russia has the potential to escalate tensions. These regions are fault lines for armed conflict.

Some regions of the world are unlikely to spur conflict between the great powers. Most of these regions lie solely within the security ZOI of a single power, such as the French ZOI in North Africa and West Africa. Other regions fall within the ZOI of two or more allied powers, who are far more likely to resolve any disputes through diplomacy rather than show of force. As a collective security alliance, the members of NATO (including the U.S., the U.K., and France) have a mutual interest in the security of the combined territory of the alliance, which includes Western and Eastern Europe, North America, and several islands in the Caribbean. The islands of the Pacific Ocean also fall into the ZOI of two friendly powers, the U.S. (including Australia, American Samoa, Guam, the Midway Islands, and the Northern Mariana Islands) and France (French Polynesia).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the age-old concept of spheres of influence has lost its relevance in an era where hard power resources are not capable of maintaining order the way they used to. I presented a novel way of conceptualizing great power relations through the notion of zones of interest. Rather than respect traditional SOI, the great powers choose to prioritize any region of the world which they perceive as important for their security. Moreover, these security ZOI change over time as the security agendas of the great powers are modified. Further study of the ZOI of the great powers will provide some degree of knowledge as to where the fault lines of great power conflict lie. To end on a positive note, the prospects of security cooperation within a shared ZOI are enhanced whenever the great powers perceive that they have mutual interests in collaborating, rather than viewing their security objectives in zero-sum terms.

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