

The Disharmony of the Spheres

The U.S. will endanger itself if it accedes to Russian and Chinese efforts to change the international system to their liking

By Hal Brands and Charles Edel

TAKING THE STAGE at Westminster College in March 1946, Winston Churchill told his audience he “felt bound to portray the shadow which...falls upon the world.” The former British prime minister famously declared that “from Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent.” He went on to explain that “Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest, and Sofia all...lie in what I must call the Soviet sphere.” Though the Westminster address is best remembered for the phrase “iron curtain,” the way it called attention to an emerging Soviet sphere of influence is far more relevant to today’s world.

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A “sphere of influence” is traditionally understood as a geographical zone within which the most powerful actor can impose its will. And nearly three decades after the close of the superpower struggle that Churchill’s speech heralded, spheres of influence are back. At both ends of the Eurasian landmass, the authoritarian regimes in China and Russia are carving out areas of privileged influence—geographic buffer zones in which they exercise diplomatic, economic, and military primacy. China and Russia are seeking to coerce and overawe their neighbors. They are endeavoring to weaken the international rules and norms—and the influence of opposing powers—that stand athwart their ambitions in their respective “near abroads.” Chinese island-building and maritime expansionism in the South China Sea and Russian aggression in Ukraine and intimidation of the Baltic states are part and parcel of the quasi-imperial projects these revisionist regional powers are now pursuing.

Historically speaking, a world made up of rival spheres is more the norm than the exception. Yet such a world is in sharp tension with many of the key

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tenets of the American foreign-policy tradition—and with the international order that the United States has labored to construct and maintain since the end of World War II.

To be sure, Washington carved out its own spheres of influence in the Western Hemisphere beginning in the 19th century, and America's myriad alliance blocs in key overseas regions are effectively spheres by another name. And today, some international-relations observers have welcomed the return of what the foreign-policy analyst Michael Lind has recently called “bloccpolitik,” hoping that it might lead to a more peaceful age of multilateral equilibrium.

But for more than two centuries, American leaders have generally opposed the idea of a world divided into rival spheres of influence and have worked hard to deny other powers their own. And a reversion to a world dominated by great powers and their spheres of influence would thus undo some of the strongest traditions in American foreign policy and take the international system back to a darker, more dangerous era.

IN AN EXTREME FORM, a sphere of influence can take the shape of direct imperial or colonial control. Yet there are also versions in which a leading power forgoes direct military or administrative domination of its neighbors but nonetheless exerts geopolitical, economic, and ideological influence. Whatever their form, spheres of influence reflect two dominant imperatives of great-power politics in an anarchic world: the need for security vis-à-vis rival powers and the desire to shape a nation's immediate environment to its benefit. Indeed, great powers have throughout history pursued spheres of influence to provide a buffer against the encroachment of other hostile actors and to foster the conditions conducive to their own security and well-being.

The Persian Empire, Athens and Sparta, and Rome all carved out domains of dominance. The Chinese tribute system—which combined geopolitical control with the spread of Chinese norms and ideas—profoundly shaped the trajectory of East Asia for hundreds of years. The 19th and 20th centuries saw the British Empire, Japan's East Asian Co-Prosperty Sphere, and the Soviet bloc.

America, too, has played the spheres-of-in-

fluence game. From the early-19th century onward, American officials strove for preeminence in the Western Hemisphere—first by running other European powers off much of the North American continent and then by pushing them out of Latin America. With the Monroe Doctrine, first enunciated in 1823, America staked its claim to geopolitical primacy from Canada to the Southern Cone. Over the succeeding generations, Washington worked to achieve military dominance in that area, to tie the countries of the Western Hemisphere to America geopolitically and economically, and even to help pick the rulers of countries from Mexico to Brazil.

If this wasn't a sphere of influence, nothing was. In 1895, Secretary of State Richard Olney declared that “the United States is practically sovereign on this continent and its fiat is law upon the subjects to which it confines its interposition.” After World War II, moreover, a globally predominant United States steadily expanded its influence into Europe through NATO, into East Asia through various military alliances, and into the Middle East through a web of defense, diplomatic, and political arrangements. The story of global politics over the past 200 years has, in large part, been the story of expanding U.S. influence.

Nonetheless, there has always been something ambivalent—critics would say hypocritical—about American views of this matter. For as energetic as Washington has been in constructing its geopolitical domain, a “spheres-of-influence world” is in perpetual tension with four strong intellectual traditions in U.S. strategy. These are hegemony, liberty, openness, and exceptionalism.

First, *hegemony*. The myth of America as an innocent isolationist country during its first 170 years is powerful and enduring; it's also wrong. From the outset, American statesmen understood that the country's favorable geography, expanding population, and enviable resource endowments gave it the potential to rival, and ultimately overtake, the European states that dominated world politics. America might be a fledgling republic, George Washington said, but it would one day attain “the strength of a giant.” From the revolution onward, American officials worried, with good reason, that France, Spain, and the United Kingdom would use their North American territories to strangle

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or contain the young republic. Much of early American diplomacy was therefore geared toward depriving the European powers of their North American possessions, using measures from coercive diplomacy to outright wars of conquest. “The world shall have to be familiarized with the idea of considering our proper dominion to be the continent of North America,” wrote John Quincy Adams in 1819. The only regional sphere of influence that Americans would accept as legitimate was their own.

By the late-19th century, the same considerations were pushing Americans to target spheres of influence further abroad. As the industrial revolution progressed, it became clear that geography alone might not protect the nation. Aggressive powers could now generate sufficient military strength to dominate large swaths of Europe or East Asia and then harness the accumulated resources to threaten the United States. Moreover, as America itself became an increasingly mighty country that sought to project its influence overseas, its leaders naturally objected to its rivals’ efforts to establish their own preserves from which Washington would be excluded. If much of America’s 19th-century diplomacy was dedicated to denying other powers spheres of influence in the Western Hemisphere, much of the country’s 20th-century diplomacy was an effort to break up or deny rival spheres of influence in Europe and East Asia.

From the Open Door policy, which sought to prevent imperial powers from carving up China, to U.S. intervention in the world wars, to the confrontation with the Soviet Empire in the Cold War, the United States repeatedly acted on the belief that it could be neither as secure nor influential as it desired in a world divided up and dominated by rival nations. The American geopolitical tradition, in other words, has long contained a built-in hostility to other countries’ spheres of influence.

The American ideological tradition shares this sense of preeminence, as reflected in the second key tenet: *liberty*. America’s founding generation did not see the revolution merely as the birth of a future superpower; they saw it as a catalyst for spreading political liberty far and wide. Thomas Paine proclaimed in 1775 that Americans could “begin the world anew”; John Quincy Adams predicted, several decades later,

that America’s liberal ideology was “destined to cover the surface of the globe.” Here, too, the new nation was not cursed with excessive modesty—and here, too, the existence of rival spheres of influence threatened this ambition.

Rival spheres of influence—particularly within the Western Hemisphere—imperiled the survival of liberty at home. If the United States were merely one great power among many on the North American continent, the founding generation worried, it would be forced to maintain a large standing military establishment and erect a sort of 18th-century “garrison state.” Living in perpetual conflict and vigilance, in turn, would corrode the very freedoms for which the revolution had been fought. “No nation,” wrote James Madison, “can preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare.” Just as Madison argued, in *Federalist* No. 10, that “extending the sphere”—expanding the republic—was a way of safeguarding republicanism at home, expanding America’s geopolitical domain was essential to providing the external security that a liberal polity required to survive.

Rival spheres of influence also constrained the prospects for liberty abroad. Although the question of whether the United States should actively support democratic revolutions overseas has been a source of unending controversy, virtually all American strategists have agreed that the country would be more secure and influential in a world where democracy was widespread. Given this mindset, Americans could hardly be desirous of foreign powers—particularly authoritarian powers—establishing formidable spheres of influence that would allow them to dominate the international system or suppress liberal ideals. The Monroe Doctrine was a response to the geopolitical dangers inherent in renewed imperial control of South America; it was also a response to the ideological danger posed by European nations that would “extend the political system to any portion” of the Western Hemisphere. Similar concerns have been at the heart of American opposition to the British Empire and the Soviet bloc.

Economic *openness*, the third core dynamic of American policy, has long served as a commercial counterpart to America’s ideological proselytism. Influenced as much by Adam Smith as by Alexander

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Hamilton, early American statecraft promoted free trade, neutral rights, and open markets, both to safeguard liberty and enrich a growing nation. This mission has depended on access to the world's seas and markets. When that access was circumscribed—by the British in 1812 and by the Germans in 1917—Americans went to war to preserve it. It is unsurprising, then, that Americans also looked askance at efforts by other powers to establish areas that might be walled off from U.S. trade and investment—and from the spread of America's capitalist ideology.

A brief list of robust policy endeavors underscores the persistent U.S. hostility to an economically closed, spheres-of-influence world: the Model Treaty of 1776, designed to promote free and reciprocal trade; John Hay's Open Door policy of 1899, designed to prevent any outside power from dominating trade with China; Woodrow Wilson's advocacy in his "14 Points" speech of 1918 for the removal "of all economic barriers and the establishment of an equality of trade conditions among all nations"; and the focus of the 1941 Atlantic Charter on reducing trade restrictions while promoting international economic cooperation (assuming the allies would emerge triumphant from World War II).

Fourth and finally, there's *exceptionalism*. Americans have long believed that their nation was created not simply to replicate the practices of the Old World, but to revolutionize how states and peoples interact with one another. The United States, in this view, was not merely another great power out for its own self-interest. It was a country that, by virtue of its republican ideals, stood for the advancement of universal rights, and one that rejected the back-alley methods of monarchical diplomacy in favor of a more principled statecraft. When Abraham Lincoln said America represented "the last best hope of earth," or when Woodrow Wilson scorned secret agreements in favor of "open covenants arrived at openly," they demonstrated this exceptionalist strain in American thinking. There is some hypocrisy here, of course, for the United States has often acted in precisely the self-interested, cut-throat manner its statesmen deplored. Nonetheless, American exceptionalism has had a pronounced effect on American conduct.

Compare how Washington led its Western Euro-

pean allies during the Cold War—the extent to which NATO rested on the authentic consent of its members, the way the United States consistently sought to empower rather than dominate its partners—with how Moscow managed its empire in Eastern Europe. In the same way, Americans have often recoiled from arrangements that reeked of the old diplomacy. Franklin Roosevelt might have tolerated a Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe after World War II, for instance, but he knew he could not admit this publicly. Likewise, the Helsinki Accords of 1975, which required Washington to acknowledge the diplomatic legitimacy of the Soviet sphere, proved controversial inside the United States because they seemed to represent just the sort of cynical, old-school geopolitics that American exceptionalism abhors.

To be clear, U.S. hostility to a spheres-of-influence world has always been leavened with a dose of pragmatism; American leaders have pursued that hostility only so far as power and prudence allowed. The Monroe Doctrine warned European powers to stay out of the Americas, but the quid pro quo was that a young and relatively weak United States would accept, for a time, a sphere of monarchical dominance within Europe. Even during the Cold War, U.S. policymakers generally accepted that Washington could not break up the Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe without risking nuclear war.

But these were concessions to expediency. As America gained greater global power, it more actively resisted the acquisition or preservation of spheres by others. From gradually pushing the Old World out of the New, to helping vanquish the German and Japanese Empires by force of arms, to assisting the liquidation of the British Empire after World War II, to containing and ultimately defeating the Soviet bloc, the United States was present at the destruction of spheres of influence possessed by adversaries and allies alike.

The acme of this project came in the quarter-century that followed the Cold War. With the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union itself, it was possible to envision a world in which what Thomas Jefferson called America's "empire of liberty" could attain global dimensions, and traditional spheres of influence would be consigned to history. The goal, as George W. Bush's 2002 *National Security Strategy*

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proclaimed, was to “create a balance of power that favors human freedom.” This meant an international environment in which the United States and its values were dominant and there was no balance of power whatsoever.

Under presidents from George H.W. Bush to Barack Obama, this project entailed working to spread democracy and economic liberalism farther than ever before. It involved pushing American influence and U.S.-led institutions into regions—such as Eastern Europe—that were previously dominated by other powers. It meant maintaining the military primacy necessary to stop regional powers from establishing new spheres of influence, as Washington did by rolling back Saddam Hussein’s conquest of Kuwait in 1990 and by deterring China from coercing Taiwan in 1995–96. Not least, this American project involved seeking to integrate potential rivals—foremost Russia and China—into the post-Cold War order, in hopes of depriving them of even the desire to challenge it. This multifaceted effort reflected the optimism of the post-Cold War era, as well as the influence of tendencies with deep roots in the American past. Yet try as Washington might to permanently leave behind a spheres-of-influence world, that prospect is once again upon us.

BEGIN WITH China’s actions in the Asia-Pacific region. The sources of Chinese conduct are diverse, ranging from domestic insecurity to the country’s confidence as a rising power to its sense of historical destiny as “the Middle Kingdom.” All these influences animate China’s bid to establish regional mastery. China is working, first, to create a power vacuum by driving the United States out of the Western Pacific, and second, to fill that vacuum with its own influence. A Chinese admiral made this ambition clear when he remarked—supposedly in jest—to an American counterpart that, in the future, the two powers should simply split the Pacific with Hawaii as the dividing line. Yang Jiechi, then China’s foreign minister, echoed this sentiment in a moment of frustration by lecturing the nations of Southeast Asia. “China is a big country,” he said, “and other countries are small countries, and that’s just a fact.”

Policy has followed rhetoric. To undercut America’s position, Beijing has harassed American ships

and planes operating in international waters and airspace. The Chinese have warned U.S. allies they may be caught in the crossfire of a Sino-American war unless Washington accommodates China or the allies cut loose from the United States. China has simultaneously worked to undermine the credibility of U.S. alliance guarantees by using strategies designed to shift the regional status quo in ways even the mighty U.S. Navy finds difficult to counter. Through a mixture of economic aid and diplomatic coercion, Beijing has also successfully divided international bodies, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, through which the United States has sought to rally opposition to Chinese assertiveness. And in the background, China has been steadily building, over the course of more than two decades, formidable military tools designed to keep the United States out of the region and give Beijing a free hand in dealing with its weaker neighbors. As America’s sun sets in the Asia-Pacific, Chinese leaders calculate, the shadow China casts over the region will only grow longer.

To that end, China has claimed, dubiously, nearly all of the South China Sea as its own and constructed artificial islands as staging points for the projection of military power. Military and paramilitary forces have teased, confronted, and violated the sovereignty of countries from Vietnam to the Philippines; China is likewise intensifying the pressure on Japan in the East China Sea. Economically, Beijing uses its muscle to reward those who comply with China’s policies and punish those not willing to bow to its demands. It is simultaneously advancing geoeconomic projects, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and Regional Comprehensive Economic Project (RCEP) that are designed to bring the region into its orbit.

Strikingly, China has also moved away from its long-professed principle of noninterference in other countries’ domestic politics by extending the reach of Chinese propaganda organs and using investment and even bribery to co-opt regional elites. Payoffs to Australian politicians are as critical to China’s regional project as development of “carrier-killer” missiles. Finally, far from subscribing to liberal concepts of democracy and human rights, Beijing emphasizes its rejection of these values and its desire to create

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“Asia for Asians.” In sum, China is pursuing a classic spheres-of-influence project. By blending intimidation with inducement, Beijing aims to sunder its neighbors’ bonds with America and force them to accept a Sino-centric order—a new Chinese tribute system for the 21st century.

AT THE OTHER END of Eurasia, Russia is playing geopolitical hardball of a different sort. The idea that Moscow should dominate its “near abroad” is as natural to many Russians as American regional primacy is to Americans. The loss of the Kremlin’s traditional buffer zone was, therefore, one of the most painful legacies of the Cold War’s end. And so it is hardly surprising that, as Russia has regained a degree of strength in recent years, it has sought to reassert its supremacy.

It has done so, in fact, through more overtly aggressive means than those employed by China. Moscow has twice seized opportunities to humiliate and dismember former Soviet republics that committed the sin of tilting toward the West or throwing out pro-Russian leaders, first in Georgia in 2008 and then in Ukraine in 2014. It has regularly reminded its neighbors that they live on Russia’s doorstep, through coercive activities such as conducting cyberattacks on Estonia in 2007 and holding aggressive military exercises on the frontiers of the Baltic states. In the same vein, the Kremlin has essentially claimed a veto over the geopolitical alignments of neighbors from the Caucasus to Scandinavia, whether by creating frozen conflicts on their territory or threatening to target them militarily—perhaps with nuclear weapons—should they join NATO.

Military muscle is not Moscow’s only tool. Russia has simultaneously used energy exports to keep the states on its periphery economically dependent, and it has exported corruption and illiberalism to non-aligned states in the former Warsaw Pact area to prevent further encroachment of liberal values. Not least, the Kremlin has worked to undermine NATO and the European Union through political subversion and intervention in Western electoral processes. And while Russia’s activities are most concentrated in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, it’s also projecting its influence farther afield. Russian forces intervened suc-

cessfully in Syria in 2015 to prop up Bashar al-Assad, preserve access to warm-water ports on the Mediterranean, and demonstrate the improved accuracy and lethality of Russian arms. Moscow continues to make inroads in the Middle East, often in cooperation with another American adversary: Iran.

To be sure, the projects that China and Russia are pursuing today are vastly different from each other, but the core logic is indisputably the same. Authoritarian powers are re-staking their claim to privileged influence in key geostrategic areas.

SO WHAT DOES THIS mean for American interests? Some observers have argued that the United States should make a virtue of necessity and accept the return of such arrangements. By this logic, spheres of influence create buffer zones between contending great powers; they diffuse responsibility for enforcing order in key areas. Indeed, for those who think that U.S. policy has left the country exhausted and overextended, a return to a world in which America no longer has the burden of being the dominant power in every region may seem attractive. The great sin of American policy after the Cold War, many realist scholars argue, was the failure to recognize that even a weakened Russia would demand privileged influence along its frontiers and thus be unalterably opposed to NATO expansion. Similarly, they lament the failure to understand that China would not forever tolerate U.S. dominance along its own periphery. It is not surprising, then, to hear analysts such as Australia’s Hugh White or America’s John Mearsheimer argue that the United States should learn to “share power” with China in the Pacific, or that it must yield ground in Eastern Europe in order to avoid war with Russia.

Such claims are not meritless; there are instances in which spheres of influence led to a degree of stability. The division of Europe into rival blocs fostered an ugly sort of stasis during the Cold War; closer to home, America’s dominance in the Western Hemisphere has long muted geopolitical competition in our own neighborhood. For all the problems associated with European empires, they often partially succeeded in limiting scourges such as communal violence.

And yet the allure of a spheres-of-influence world is largely an illusion, for such a world would

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threaten U.S. interests, traditions, and values in several ways.

First, basic human rights and democratic values would be less respected. China and Russia are not liberal democracies; they are illiberal autocracies that see the spread of democratic values as profoundly corrosive to their own authority and security. Just as the United States has long sought to create a world congenial to its own ideological predilections, Beijing and Moscow would certainly do likewise within their spheres of dominance.

They would, presumably, bring their influence to bear in support of friendly authoritarian regimes. And they would surely undermine democratic governments seen to pose a threat of ideological contagion or insubordination to Russian or Chinese prerogatives. Russia has taken steps to prevent the emergence of a Western-facing democracy in Ukraine and to undermine liberal democracies in Europe and elsewhere; China is snuffing out political freedoms in Hong Kong. Such actions offer a preview of what we will see when these countries are indisputably dominant along their peripheries. Further aggressions, in turn, would not simply be offensive to America's ideological sensibilities. For given that the spread of democracy has been central to the absence of major interstate war in recent decades, and that the spread of American values has made the U.S. more secure and influential, a less democratic world will also be a more dangerous world.

Second, a spheres-of-influence world would be less open to American commerce and investment. After all, the United States itself saw geoeconomic dominance in Latin America as the necessary counterpart to geopolitical dominance. Why would China take a less self-interested approach? China already reaps the advantages of an open global economy even as it embraces protectionism and mercantilism. In a Chinese-dominated East Asia, all economic roads will surely lead to Beijing, as Chinese officials will be able to use their leverage to ensure that trade and investment flows are oriented toward China and geopolitical competitors like the United States are left on the outside. Beijing's current geoeconomic projects—namely, RCEP and the Belt and Road Initiative—offer insight into a regional economic future in which flows

of commerce and investment are subject to heavy Chinese influence.

Third, as spheres of influence reemerge, the United States will be less able to shape critical geopolitical events in crucial regions. The reason Washington has long taken an interest in events in faraway places is that East Asia, Europe, and the Middle East are the areas from which major security challenges have emerged in the past. Since World War II, America's forward military presence has been intended to suppress incipient threats and instability; that presence has gone hand in glove with energetic diplomacy that amplifies America's voice and protects U.S. interests. In a spheres-of-influence world, Washington would no longer enjoy the ability to act with decisive effect in these regions; it would find itself reacting to global events rather than molding them.

This leads to a final, and crucial, issue. America would be more likely to find its core security interests challenged because world orders based on rival spheres of influence have rarely been as peaceful and settled as one might imagine.

To see this, just work backward from the present. During the Cold War, a bipolar balance did help avert actual war between Moscow and Washington. But even in Europe—where the spheres of influence were best defined—there were continual tensions and crises as Moscow tested the Western bloc. And outside Europe, violence and proxy wars were common as the superpowers competed to extend their reach into the Third World. In the 1930s, the emergence of German and Japanese spheres of influence led to the most catastrophic war in global history. The empires of the 19th century—spheres of influence in their own right—continually jostled one another, leading to wars and near-wars over the course of decades; the Peace of Amiens between England and Napoleonic France lasted a mere 14 months. And looking back to the ancient world, there were not one, but three Punic Wars fought between Rome and Carthage as two expanding empires came into conflict. A world defined by spheres of influence is often a world characterized by tensions, wars, and competition.

The reasons for this are simple. As the political scientist William Wohlforth observed, unipolar systems—such as the U.S.-dominated post-Cold War

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order—are anchored by a hegemonic power that can act decisively to maintain the peace. In a unipolar system, Wohlforth writes, there are few incentives for revisionist powers to incur the “focused enmity” of the leading state. Truly multipolar systems, by contrast, have often been volatile. When the major powers are more evenly matched, there is a greater temptation to aggression by those who seek to change the existing order of things. And seek to change things they undoubtedly will.

The idea that spheres of influence are stabilizing holds only if one assumes that the major powers are motivated only by insecurity and that concessions to the revisionists will therefore lead to peace. Churchill described this as the idea that if one “feeds the crocodile enough, the crocodile will eat him last.”

Unfortunately, today’s rising or resurgent powers are also motivated—as is America—by honor, ambition, and the timeless desire to make their international habitats reflect their own interests and ideals. It is a risky gamble indeed, then, to think that ceding Russia or China an uncontested sphere of influence would turn a revisionist authoritarian regime into a satisfied power. The result, as Robert Kagan has noted, might be to embolden those actors all the more, by giving them freer rein to bring their near-abroads under control, greater latitude and resources to pursue their ambitions, and enhanced confidence that the U.S.-led order is fracturing at its foundations. For China, dominance over the first island chain might simply intensify desires to achieve primacy in the second island chain and beyond; for Russia, renewed mastery in the former Soviet space could lead to desires to bring parts of the former Warsaw Pact to heel, as well. To observe how China is developing ever longer-range anti-access/area denial capabilities, or how Russia has been projecting military power ever farther afield, is to see this process in action.

THE REEMERGENCE OF a spheres-of-influence world would thus undercut one of the great historical achievements of U.S. foreign policy: the creation of a system in which America is the dominant power in each major geopolitical region and can act decisively to shape events and protect its interests. It would foster an environment in which

democratic values are less prominent, authoritarian models are ascendant, and mercantilism advances as economic openness recedes. And rather than leading to multipolar stability, this change could simply encourage greater revisionism on the part of powers whose appetite grows with the eating. This would lead the world away from the relative stability of the post-Cold War era and back into the darker environment it seemed to have relegated to history a quarter-century ago. The phrase “spheres of influence” may sound vaguely theoretical and benign, but its real-world effects are likely to be tangible and pernicious.

Fortunately, the return of a spheres-of-influence world is not yet inevitable. Even as some nations will accept incorporation into a Chinese or Russian sphere of influence as the price of avoiding conflict, or maintaining access to critical markets and resources, others will resist because they see their own well-being as dependent on the preservation of the world order that Washington has long worked to create. The Philippines and Cambodia seem increasingly to fall into the former group; Poland and Japan, among many others, make up the latter. The willingness of even this latter group to take actions that risk incurring Beijing and Moscow’s wrath, however, will be constantly calibrated against an assessment of America’s own ability to continue leading the resistance to a spheres-of-influence world. Averting that outcome is becoming steadily harder, as the relative power and ambition of America’s authoritarian rivals rise and U.S. leadership seems to falter.

Harder, but not impossible. The United States and its allies still command a significant preponderance of global wealth and power. And the political, economic, and military weaknesses of its challengers are legion. It is far from fated, then, that the Western Pacific and Eastern Europe will slip into China’s and Russia’s respective orbits. With sufficient creativity and determination, Washington and its partners might still be able to resist the return of a dangerous global system. Doing so will require difficult policy work in the military, economic, and diplomatic realms. But ideas precede policy, and so simply rediscovering the venerable tradition of American hostility to spheres of influence—and no less, the powerful logic on which that tradition is based—would be a good start. 