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On February 24, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered Russian troops to invade eastern Ukraine to carry out a “special military operation.” This latest war in Russia’s neighborhood recalls its annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its conflict with Georgia in 2008. Many believe that Russia is seeking to establish a sphere of influence in its backyard, with a view toward restoring some of the old influence of various elements of the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire.

Since the outbreak of the war, Chinese officials have maintained a delicate balance between recognizing Ukraine’s territorial integrity as a sovereign nation and acknowledging Russia’s security concerns. This tightrope-walking strategy has generated much criticism in the Western world. Do Chinese officials and Chinese scholars support the concept of spheres of influence? Does a certain level of Chinese sympathy and understanding for Russia mean that China supports Russia’s efforts to create spheres of influence around it? As China’s power increases, will China seek spheres of influence in its own neighborhood?

This paper lays out preliminary answers to these questions, first by examining the associations of the term “sphere of influence” in Chinese political rhetoric and how this view affects China’s visions of both Asian and global security. Next, I discuss the concept of a “security concern,” a phrase which many Chinese analysts tend to use, and how they view a case like the war in Ukraine through this lens. The essential takeaway here is the wisdom of self-restraint. It is natural that a powerful country might have security concerns

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and want more influence in certain regions, particularly neighboring ones. On the one hand, it would be better if other countries take these special “concerns” into account; on the other hand, that powerful country should never make the mistake of viewing its demand or concerns as an exclusive right.

**China’s Debate on Spheres**

The concept of a sphere of influence is closely related to geography as well as a certain level of exclusiveness, and refers to a major power’s monopoly of rights and interests within a given geographic area. This concept has long been a “taboo term” in the Chinese foreign and security policy community due to its close relationship to concepts such as colonialism and imperialism, as well as its association with the Cold War. In the Chinese imagination, “spheres of influence” are inextricably linked to the country’s “one-hundred-year humiliation.” This is a key point at which the Chinese definition of the term “sphere of influence” (势力范围, shì lì fàn wéi) differs from that of non-Chinese scholars.

Beginning in the second half of the 19th century, European colonial powers carved out their spheres of influence in China. Britain established a sphere of influence of sorts in the Yangtze River area and in Tibet; as did Russia in Manchuria, Mongolia and Xinjiang; Germany in Shandong; Japan in Manchuria and Fujian; and France in southwestern China. These spheres of influence were essentially exclusive among Western countries. For instance, when France requested concessions in Canton, it required that the government of the Qing Dynasty not lease any concessions to other Western countries in the Southeast provinces. Russia and Japan even fought a war from 1904 to 1905 over maintaining an exclusive sphere of influence in Manchuria. For its part, through its open-door policy, the United States demanded to share equal benefits with the other colonial powers. It might look as if in doing so, the US broke the exclusiveness of Western powers’ spheres of influence in China. But from the Chinese perspective, the open-door policy actually created an exclusive sphere of influence shared by all the Western countries, since Chinese were actually excluded from the right to mine and build railroads in their own country. The memory of this humiliating history has always led Chinese political leaders, scholars, and the general public to reject and abhor the concept of spheres of influence.
The late Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping stated that “spheres of influence,” “bloc politics,” “treaty organizations,” and “extended families” were not viable concepts. According to this view, the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence” are “very clear, clean and unambiguous” and “the most tried and true” and should be the norm in international relations.¹ Xi Jinping issued a similar and even more explicit policy statement in 2018: “China will not claim hegemony, expand, or seek spheres of influence.”²

This is not merely a grandiose policy statement; as far as China’s actual actions are concerned, spheres of influence have never been relevant to China. Even during the long ancient history of the Chinese Empire, which maintained an extensive tribute system in Asia, the relationship between the central empire and its vassal states was never exclusive, and many vassal states paid tribute to different countries at the same time. For example, the Ryukyu Kingdom paid tribute to both China and Japan. The relationship between the central dynasty and the vassals was therefore less about power and interest, and more about hierarchy in etiquette, respect, and international trade.

The periphery of a major power is often considered to be the sphere of influence of that power. It is often said that the Western Hemisphere is the sphere of influence of the United States, the former Soviet space is the sphere of influence of Russia, and South Asia and the Indian Ocean are the sphere of influence of India. In fact, none of these countries now have exclusive influence in these regions. One is more inclined to say that these countries have overwhelming influence in these regions. In contemporary international relations, powerful countries can hardly expect to enjoy a 100 percent monopoly of power in neighboring regions. Of more relevance today, spheres seem to indicate when powerful countries feel “sensitive” and try to block the increase of other countries’ influence in those areas. For instance, when China tries to push its “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) in South America, Central Asia and South Asia, it feels that the US, Russia and India have all been overly sensitive and raised undue objections in their responses to the initiative. Facing this circumstance, Chinese analysts tend to use the phrase “sphere of influence” to characterize this opposition, although the term’s contemporary meaning is now quite different from its usage in the Chinese historical context more than a century ago.

By this logic, along with the rise of China, many in the West suspect that China will form spheres of influence in its own neighborhood. This is an important element of the “China threat” theory. Now that China has been a major power for 20 or 30 years, it is difficult for even the harshest critics of China to point to a region where China has an exclusive or even dominant sphere of influence. North Korea has a very special relationship with China, but experts will acknowledge that Beijing cannot control Pyongyang’s behavior or decisions, and that North Korea is keen to form normal relations with the United States.
and the West. Pakistan is China’s “all-weather partner,” but it is also an ally of the United States in counterterrorism efforts.

In fact, China’s neighborhood is subject to influence from several very powerful countries including the United States, Japan, Russia and India. Even if China had the desire to seek a sphere of influence, it clearly does not have the capacity to do so. The US has five allies and even more partners in the region, all of which have been strengthening and modernizing since the end of the Cold War. Russia, meanwhile, has a strong and longstanding influence in Central Asia countries. The latest example of its influence was its intervention in Kazakhstan in early January 2022. More importantly, the small and medium-sized countries around China certainly want to maintain a balance between China and other major powers in order to maximize their own interests. As Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong stated in May, “most countries [in Asia] would prefer not to be forced to choose between the US and China.”

President Xi Jinping’s speech at the Fourth Conference on Interaction and Confidence-building Measures in Asia (CICA) on May 21, 2014 was seen by many Western scholars as “an Asian version of the Monroe Doctrine.” However, if we read his full speech fairly and carefully, and considering that it was an Asian security conference attended by more than 30 Asian countries, it is difficult to argue that the Chinese leader expressed such an exclusive view of security. “In the final analysis,” Xi said, “it is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia and uphold the security of Asia. The people of Asia have the capability and wisdom to achieve peace and stability in the region through enhanced cooperation.” Probably rooted in its historic experience of fighting against colonialism and imperialism, the belief that security issues can only be solved by local people rather than by foreign intervention is deeply ingrained and widely accepted in China, including in conceptions of the formation of China itself after 1949. Immediately following the above remarks, Xi stated that, “Asia is open to the world … while enhancing their own cooperation with each other, countries in Asia must also firmly commit themselves to cooperation with countries in other parts of the world, other regions and international organizations,” a quote that was neglected either intentionally or unintentionally in foreign media coverage of the speech. For a Chinese analyst, the argument that Asia’s security problems cannot ultimately be solved by the Asian people carries with it remnants of colonialism, as this argument seems to imply
that Asian countries are children who need to invite the “adult” Western powers in to solve their problems.

As discussed earlier, not only has China not established a sphere of influence in its neighborhood, but the United States actually has five bilateral allies in the Northeast and Southeast Asian regions surrounding China. The United States often claims that China is intent on excluding it from the region, but the fact is that the military presence of the United States and its allies in East Asia has not only persisted but has strengthened since the end of the Cold War. At the same time, while few countries explicitly claim areas of influence, China has always needed to pay special attention to the feelings of the United States, Russia and India as it advances economic cooperation initiatives like the BRI across multiple continents.

The latest example of this tension is the issue of China’s security cooperation with the Solomon Islands. The Solomon Islands, a small South Pacific Island country, has long engaged in security cooperation with its neighboring power, Australia. In August 2017, Australia and the Solomon Islands signed a new treaty which allowed Australian defense and associated civilian personnel, as well as police, to be deployed to the Solomon Islands if the need should arise and both countries consented. Subsequently, the Solomon Islands reportedly expressed interest in a similar cooperative agreement with China, with whom it set up diplomatic relations in 2019. If the claimed MOU circulating on social media is true, China and the Solomon Islands will engage in security cooperation such that the “Solomon Islands may, according to its own needs, request China to send police, armed police, military personnel and other law enforcement and armed forces to Solomon Island to assist in maintaining social order, protecting people’s lives and property, providing humanitarian assistance, carrying out disaster response, or providing assistance on other tasks agreed upon by the parties.”

If this rumor is true, the South Pacific island nation’s level of security cooperation with China does not exceed the level of cooperation it has with Australia. The MOU also makes no mention of China establishing military bases on the islands. But when the MOU was “leaked” on social media, both the United States and Australia reacted sharply. Officials from the US White House and State Department visited the Solomon Islands, while the Australian Prime Minister announced that China would cross the “red line” if it established a military base in the Solomon Islands. Never mind that the alleged military bases are (as yet) nonexistent and purely speculative, why would China cross the Australian “red line” if it reached a deal with the Solomon Islands, an independent sovereign nation just as Australia is? Many Chinese are puzzled and believe this reaction is just an extension of the West’s desire to maintain its predominant influence in the region, despite the right of sovereign nations to determine their own
influences. After all, if Ukraine has the right to choose its own security arrangements, why not the Solomon Islands? If Australia’s considerations on this issue should be respected, shouldn’t Russia’s opposition to NATO’s expansion since the 1990s be given the same respect?

Meanwhile, there is no indication from research among Chinese academia that the concept of the sphere of influence has become more popular or of greater concern in recent years. China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) is the largest literature search platform and Chinese academic database in China. As of May 1, 2022, a search of the CNKI database for Chinese academic papers on the topic of “sphere of influences” (势力范围) published from 1959 to 2022 yielded 1194 papers. These papers cover a wide range of disciplines, including 373 papers on “Chinese politics and world politics,” 181 papers on “world history,” and 116 papers on “modern Chinese history.” In terms of disciplinary context, the two disciplines that use the concept of “sphere of influence” the most in Chinese academia are history and political science. Interestingly, if we select only papers in the disciplines of “Chinese Politics and World Politics” and “World History” that include the term “sphere of influence,” we find that the other most frequent related terms are “Russia,” “open door,” “Stalin,” “geopolitics,” “Yalta system,” “post-Cold War,” and so on. From these related terms, we can infer that the concept of “sphere of influence” is most often used in Chinese academia in the context of the Cold War and the Soviet Union/Russia.

Under the discipline “Chinese Politics and World Politics,” a search of Chinese academic papers containing the subject term “sphere of influence” by year of publication reveals that the most published papers were in 1999 (24), 1995 (21), 1994 (21), and 1997 (18). From 1994 to 1997, the relevant papers focused mainly on the debate and cooperation between Russia and the West on the issue of NATO’s eastward expansion. The 1999 increase in the discussion was in the context of NATO’s military strikes against the former Yugoslavia when the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade was destroyed by NATO and three Chinese journalists who had taken refuge there were killed. So, most of the discussion in the last thirty years had been residual discussions from the end of the Cold War.

The number of relevant papers rose again in 2015 (13), 2016 (16), and 2019 (14)—an increase, but a very limited one. This small increase in the raw number of references after 2015 is even less meaningful considering that the number of
Chinese scholars and academic journals focusing on world politics is much larger in the post-21st century than it was in the 1990s. There is no clear explanation for this limited increase in these three years; the topics of these papers are very diversified. Surprisingly, none of them are about Crimea, a topic that conceivably could have incurred greater attention to spheres of influence. As of May 2022, only two academic papers have been published on the topic of “spheres of influence” this year, also reflecting this lack of any clear upward trend and the Chinese sense that contemporary events are not being driven by spheres of influence. Overall, then, the mid-to-late 1990s was the period during which “spheres of influence” were most discussed among Chinese academia.

**The Key to Spheres: Sensible and Reasonable, as well as Lawful**

On February 26, Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi expressed China’s five-point position on the Ukraine issue, the first of which is that “China maintains that the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries should be respected and protected and the purposes and principles of the UN Charter abided by in real earnest. This position of China is consistent and clear-cut, and applies equally to the Ukraine issue.” The second point is that “the legitimate security concerns of all countries should be respected [and that] given NATO’s five consecutive rounds of eastward expansion, Russia’s reasonable security demands ought to be taken seriously and properly addressed.”

The concept of “security demands” or a “security concern” may sound as if it is somehow related to spheres of influence. After all, security concerns often arise from geographic adjacency as well as from historical links. A state naturally tends to have more security concerns in its own neighborhood, and this is where security concerns overlap with the concept of a sphere of influence.
China has security concerns in its neighborhood, as do India and Russia in theirs. Many of these concerns are also shaped by history. For example, the United States is not an East Asian country, but has significant security concerns in East Asia, which China understands and respects. Geography and history are often intertwined, and Russia’s concerns in its geographic neighborhood are certainly closely tied to the history of empire in Russia and the Soviet Union. But security concerns are not necessarily exclusive, which is their most fundamental difference from spheres of influence. A country like Russia has legitimate security concerns in Ukraine, but it does not have the legitimacy to require Ukraine to allay them entirely. Of course, Ukraine has its own set of security concerns too, as do other European countries and the United States in Ukraine itself.

How is it possible to balance the security concerns of multiple countries? Compliance with international law is a fundamental way to address and preserve the security concerns of all states and is the bottom line for the functioning of the modern nation-state system. As an independent sovereign state, Ukraine’s territorial sovereign integrity is its greatest security concern and should be respected, and this is rarely questioned, either in or outside of China. While many argue that China is supporting Russia in this war, what they consciously or unconsciously overlook is that in China’s five-point statement of principles, “the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries should be respected and protected” is the first point, and it clearly states that this principle applies equally to Ukraine. Purely from the perspective of international law, it is clear that Russia has invaded the territory of Ukraine in complete violation of it. China, as a country that has been invaded repeatedly in its modern history and as a country that has not yet been unified, certainly values sovereignty and territorial integrity, which is, after all, its biggest security concern as well.

But the Ukrainian issue is much more complicated than that. This is the reason why Chinese often say that the Ukrainian issue has a special and complex “historical warp and weft” (历史经纬, or li shi jing wei). When analyzing and observing international affairs, we cannot cut an event out of the continuous river of history, nor can we cut a state’s behavior out of the complex process of international interaction. While it is clear that Russia violated international law in its invasion of Ukraine, Chinese government officials and scholars generally agree that we should also view this incident in the context of the series of struggles between Russia and the West surrounding NATO’s expansion over the past 30 years since the end of the Cold War; in the context of the
complex process of interaction between Russia and Ukraine as well as Russia and the West; and in the context of how Russia has evolved from a country that tried to embrace the West in the early 1990s to one that is hostile to it today. NATO has expanded to the east and added fourteen new members since the end of the Cold War, all the new additions being Central and Eastern European countries that were members of the former Soviet bloc during the Cold War. Georgia and Ukraine, two countries that were part of the former republic of the Soviet Union, are also aspirant countries to the organization. Agree with its actions or not, Russia believes that its influence in the region has waned, and therefore has major security concerns as NATO keeps getting closer to its doorstep. These processes are believed to be the root cause which led to Russia’s decision to invade Ukraine.

While Chinese culture emphasizes lawfulness of an action or policy, it also often emphasizes the need to be sensible and reasonable. Being sensible (he qing, 合情), reasonable (he li, 合理), and lawful (he fa, 合法) are the three levels of consideration that Chinese culture often uses when judging an action or policy. While lawfulness is the most important consideration in the political sphere, being sensible and reasonable are also criteria that strategists and decisionmakers need to consider. These are of course not legally codified terms, but they are crucial concepts carried down from traditional Chinese culture. Many Chinese tend to believe that being lawful without being sensible and reasonable is impersonal and cold, and that lawfulness is unsustainable without the presence of the other two levels.

The prevailing view within China is that security is always relative. A state cannot achieve real security of its own unless all the other parties involved feel secure. As the study of the concept of security dilemmas in international relations reveals, sooner or later the insecurity of other interested parties will create or exacerbate the insecurity of one’s own country. A fundamental solution to the problem of Ukraine, as well as to the security problems in Russia’s bordering region with Europe, requires addressing the security concerns of all parties involved. Chinese observers generally agree that it is understandable that a disintegrated giant feels insecure and lost as it watches its former rival inch step-by-step toward its borders. Ukraine and the Central and Eastern European countries that have joined NATO since 1997 have their own security concerns too, driven by historical and current fears of Russia. As sovereign states, their alliance choices are certainly lawful. But whether those choices and NATO’s choices are sensible and reasonable is something we need to reflect on and discuss now. It’s no easy feat, but a smart foreign policy requires communication and mutual
understanding between Russia and its neighbors. Russia’s invasion violated international law, but if the relevant parties had shown more restraint in the past decade, would we have a different world now? Moreover, what if the western countries, particularly the United States, had adopted more strategic restraint after winning the Cold War? Self-restraint after triumph is always a prized characteristic of a great strategist.

Beijing has repeatedly emphasized its “understanding of Russia’s reasonable security concerns” because China has seen similar developments in its own neighborhood. The US alliance system in the West Pacific has modernized since the 1990s, with increasing deployments of naval and air forces, and the formation of new alliances or partnership mechanisms such as the US-British-Australian alliance (AUKUS) and the US-Japan-India-Australia QUAD mechanism. To be fair, in the face of China’s rise, the United States and other relevant countries have their security concerns and are therefore entitled to make such decisions, and most of these decisions are consistent with international law; but are their approaches entirely sensible and reasonable? This is a question worth discussing, particularly with an eye toward future global and regional stability. Is it really possible to “defeat” a country like Russia and China, or should we try to find a way to coexist?

China “understands” Russia’s security concerns precisely because China and Russia are empathetic in facing a similar, increasingly boxed-in, security environment. It is important to emphasize here that China’s understanding of Russia’s security concerns does not translate to an understanding of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, much less support of its actions (as Western media often speculates).

**International Law, Within Reason**

International law is certainly important, especially today, at a moment when the international order is facing a paradigm shift. But international politics has never been able to operate solely on the basis of international law. Policymakers in all countries need to guard against two tendencies.

The first is the arrogance of power. In international politics, many disputes arise in which the relatively powerful party always emphasizes that its actions are in accordance with international law, and that it has the right to do whatever it’s doing, while the relatively weak party emphasizes that the actions of the other party are not sensible or reasonable. From China or Russia’s perspective, this is the case with NATO’s expansion to the east or the modernization of the US alliance system in East Asia. On the surface, being lawful appears to be much more important than being sensible, but in reality, it is dangerously arrogant of those in power to simply emphasize international law without taking into account the
other side’s perception. As mentioned earlier, switch the scene to a South Pacific island nation, and the once powerful party immediately changes its tune, as Australia and the US did in switching their roles from their usually “offensive” stance to a “defensive” stance in criticizing the choice made by the Solomon Islands and China as damaging regional stability, even though their proposed actions are entirely in accordance with international law.

The second tendency is complacency on the part of policymakers and strategists. Sadly, many policymakers believe that they know where to draw the line in order to maximize their own interests without angering the other side. In fact, people often overestimate their own judgment because drawing an appropriate line at which to stop is inherently difficult. We need more strategic thinkers like Dr. Henry Kissinger, who while initially an ardent advocate of NATO’s eastward expansion in the 1990s, in 2007 began to explicitly oppose the inclusion of Ukraine in NATO. The veteran diplomat and strategist observed the changing dynamics and shifted his position, arguing that Russia and the West should reach a compromise on Ukraine. Indeed, international politics boils down to just that: the art of compromise.

In that vein, Putin’s decision on Ukraine surprised many experts in the world. At the tactical level, it is difficult for outsiders to understand which straw finally broke the camel’s back and spurred Putin to make the wrong decision. Arguably the most important concern now is to stop this tragic conflict as soon as possible and prevent the further spread of atrocities. On the other hand, at a strategic level, Russia is not the only country which needs to reflect. How to solve the security problems of all sides in a sensible, reasonable and lawful way is much more complicated than choosing a side to support in a war.

The foregoing discussion about “spheres of influence” and “security concerns” is actually a discussion about strategic self-restraint and empathy. This is particularly meaningful in the context of today’s great power politics. For any one country, it’s important to remember that there is no entitled area or sphere of influence in which it can pursue exclusive power or rights. At the same time, it would be wise for other nations to forego backing that country into a corner. Each nation-state has its security concerns, concerns that must be acknowledged as validly held. Blaming the former country for violating international law and imposing economic sanctions are legitimate courses of action, but these actions cannot prevent a tragic war from happening.
Notes

2. Xi Jinping, Lun Gou Juan Ren Lei Ming Yun Gong Tong Ti (On Building a Human Community of Shared Future), (Beijing: Central Literature Press, 2018), 257.