

Interpreting great power rights in international society: Debating China's right to a sphere of influence

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Abstract

The special rights and responsibilities of the great powers have traditionally been treated as a key component – even a primary institution – of international society in the English School literature. Recent interpretivist work has focused on the meanings of special responsibilities in contemporary international society with far less scholarly attention being given to the corollary of this – special rights. This article uses an interpretivist approach to attempt to uncover what recent debates over China's right or otherwise to a sphere of influence in East Asia tells us about understandings of great power rights in contemporary international society. The argument advanced is that if Beijing's right to a sphere of influence is successfully rejected by the rest of international society without repudiating its status as a great power more broadly, China will indeed be a great power without historical precedent.

Keywords

China, English School, great powers, interpretivism, rising powers, spheres of influence

Introduction

This article takes the English School understanding of great power status and combines this with an interpretive approach to exploring change in one central aspect of this over time – understandings of the special rights associated with great power status. In order to do this, the article focuses on one aspect of great power rights identified in the work of a number of scholars associated with the English School of International Relations (IR): that of spheres of influence (Bull, 1977: 219–229, 1980; Buranelli, 2018; Buzan and Cui, 2016: 196; Clark, 1989: 194–201; Hast, 2014; Kaczmarek, 2015; Keal, 1983). In particular, the article seeks to examine continuity and change in understandings of great

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power rights with regard to the establishment and maintenance of spheres of influence (and their recognition by other great powers) in the context of debates over China's rise to great power status. In doing so, it pursues the argument that much of the contemporary work on China's rise is not well attuned to the important role-played by spheres of influence in the historical interpretation of great power status. The radical nature of attempts to deny a rising China a sphere of influence in its immediate geographic region is therefore worthy of a greater degree of both strategic and ethical debate. In doing so, the analysis below suggests that there is a question as to whether a state can be a great power without having a sphere of influence – at least in their immediate geographic neighbourhood. While the discussion that follows is limited to the discourse of analysts and practitioners discussing China's rise in material power and social status, this question applies to any and all rising or re-emerging powers in international society today.

In recent years, there has been a particular focus on the notion of 'special responsibilities' and the relationship between the adoption of such responsibilities and international legitimacy (Aslam, 2013; Bukovansky et al., 2012; Clark and Reus-Smit, 2013; Gaskarth, 2017; Loke, 2013, 2016; Morris, 2013). In addition, and specifically in the context of China's much discussed rise to great power status, there has been considerable attention given to the issue of great power responsibilities in the contemporary context in the policy-focused literature and in the rhetoric of practitioners, especially in the West (Glaser and Funaiolo, 2017; Huang, 2013; Johnson et al., 2016). Less focus has been given to the other side of the coin of the traditional English School understanding of the unique social status of the great powers – that of special rights (Heimann, 2015: 190).

Just as a great power's responsibilities are conceived of and conferred by others, so too are their special rights. As Christian Reus-Smit (2007) has put it, 'Rights are socially ordained, and an actor has a right to act, rule, or govern only if it is socially sanctioned' (2007: 159). This gives the English School notion of great power status being constituted by inter-subjective understandings of rights and responsibilities a social contingency that, at least in principle, ought to be fertile ground for interpretive approaches. Moreover, one of the central 'calling cards' of the English School as an approach to IR scholarship is not only a commitment to social contingency but also an inductive emphasis on historical contingency in analysing the meaning given to social norms and institutions over time. This opens the analytical space for tracking change in the constitution of the primary institutions of international society over time.

While some have characterised English School scholarship as clustering around an analytical wing on the one hand and a normative wing on the other hand (Buzan, 2004; Dunne, 2005), it is possible to subdivide the former category further. Within the literature focused on analysing the development and evolution of the institutions of international society, it is useful to distinguish between structural and interpretivist approaches (see Navari, 2020 in this issue). As is discussed further below, from the very earliest incarnations of what is now referred to as English School scholarship, both structural and interpretive approaches to understanding international order through the lens of social institutions (now generally referred to as primary institutions) were present.¹ However, a general commitment to interpretivism underlies the majority of English School work that attempts to explain social behaviour by 'interpreting the meanings that behaviour has for actors and those with whom they interact' (Hall, 2015: 35).

The prioritisation of inductive reasoning and the language of everyday discourse over formal and deductive approaches and stipulated definitions has always been a mainstay of English School scholarship (see Jackson, 2000: 95). This sits easily with Mark Bevir and Rod Rhodes' (2004) description of the interpretivist position that 'to understand actions, practices and institutions, we need to grasp the relevant meanings, beliefs and preferences of the people involved' (2004: 130; see also Yanow, 2006).

The article first explores the role of spheres of influence in international history and their specific understanding in English School accounts of great power status. It then explores the historically contingent nature of inter-subjective understandings of spheres of influence and the great power role over time. After establishing the changing nature of conceptions of great power status including the historic right associated with spheres of influence, the article turns to recent analysis of China's rise to great power status. This discussion then identifies a number of developments, tensions and even contradictions that an interpretive approach to debates about China's rise highlights in relation to the issue of a Chinese sphere of influence in East Asia. This element of the analysis is therefore focussed on the interpretation of the practice of establishing and maintaining spheres of influence in contemporary scholarship.

The English School, great power rights, and spheres of influence

Scholarship on the nature of hierarchy in world politics routinely depicts the production of the social (rather than simply the material) differentiation between states as deriving from bargains struck over rights and responsibilities (Zarakol, 2017). In relation to the functional character of the hierarchy produced between, for example, great and non-great powers, this is a situation in which 'subordinates give up rights to freedom in exchange for the provision of a social order that is valued by the subordinate' (Zarakol, 2017: 5). This social contract-like tacit arrangement explains why special rights are conceded to great powers by the non-great powers. The acceptance – no matter how reluctantly – of spheres of influence by non-great powers, including those that fall within that sphere, requires a concomitant acceptance by the great powers of special responsibilities in order for this bargain to be worthwhile to all parties.

Despite receiving far less attention in recent English School literature, the language of special rights has been prominent in scholarship on the social role of the great powers for decades. For Bull (1980), to say that a state is a great power is by definition to say that it 'regards itself, and is regarded by other members of the society of states, as having special rights and duties' (1980: 437). The notion of special rights being the inevitable *quid pro quo* for the acceptance of special responsibilities on the part of the great powers is central to the literature on great power management as a primary institution of international society as well as the literature on pluralist understandings of international order. For the former, Shunji Cui and Barry Buzan (2016: 182) argue that the distinction between great and non-great powers rests on the recognition by the latter of the former's 'managerial rights and responsibilities for international order'. In relation to the latter, Andrew Hurrell (2007: 52) highlights the pluralist interpretation of spheres of influence as a political (rather than legal) norm in international society. A specifically interpretivist

approach to spheres of influence should alert us to the fact that, as it is used in practice, the concept of a sphere of influence does not enjoy a uniformly adhered to definition.² However, for our purposes here, Paul Keal's (1983) definition will suffice. He defines a sphere of influence as 'a determinate region within which a single external power exerts a predominant influence, which limits the independence or freedom of action of political entities within it'³ (Keal, 1983: 15).

In much English School scholarship on the great powers there is a tension between whether it is really possible to neatly separate rights and responsibilities. Even when it comes to what might be thought of as the most obvious of great power rights, that of the establishment and maintenance of spheres of influence, this distinction has always been somewhat problematic. The relationship between great power management and spheres of influence for example has been portrayed by Richard Little (2007) as requiring a willingness on the part of the great power to establish such spheres 'when the opportunity arises for international society to expand' (2007: 456). Bull (1977: 219–225) explicitly addressed this issue in *The Anarchical Society* choosing to discuss the meanings given to 'spheres of influence, interest or responsibility'. Bull (1977) clearly distinguished here between recognising the fact of another power's preponderant influence in a given area and the responsibility to manage great power crises through the mutual recognition of each other's right to maintain such spheres (1977: 220–221). The interpretive approach to international history that Bull and others employed in their analysis of great power relations leads English School scholars to focus not just on the material realities of great power dominance. Instead, it highlights the ways in which the shared understanding of a great power's special right to exert such influence alongside that power's acceptance of special responsibilities, constitutes the very role of what a great power is.

It is important to note that spheres of influence are not necessarily international societies in themselves. The recognition by others, especially the other great powers, of the legitimate right to exert a greater influence within a given geographic area is one of the clues that point to the existence of international society. Within the sphere, simple material preponderance may not require any further social legitimation for that great power to exercise its influence. Therefore, relations within the sphere need not be thought of as societal in that sense. But great powers respecting one another's spheres of influence requires the acceptance of reciprocal rights. Refraining from interfering in another's sphere of influence has become a marker of responsible great power behaviour. Maximilian Terhalle (2015) has echoed this view when characterising the respect of an adversary's sphere of influence as an example of 'informal special responsibilities' (2015: 122). This is not a normative claim in favour of hierarchy but instead is a way of accounting for the importance of

a new kind of *elite* in international society, who as Great Powers had the ability, and successfully asserted the right, to intervene in the affairs of those who, as sovereigns, at the same time belonged to an inferior group of lesser powers. (Keene, 2013: 1090)

In part, this is due to the close association of the concept of spheres of influence with the post-1815 conception of great powers in which the explicit and formal acceptance of responsibilities became a key marker of great power status. While the peace settlement of

Utrecht in 1713 might be thought of as one of the earliest articulations of some of the key characteristics of what we would later come to call the practice of ‘great power management’, it is in the Concert system in Europe in the nineteenth century that we see the great powers blurring the lines between rights and responsibilities in the maintenance of spheres of influence. In fact, both Bull and Keal state that the terminology of spheres of influence only became widespread in the second-half of the nineteenth century (Bull, 1977: 219; Keal, 1983: 16; see also, La Roche, 2019). Historically, this link between judgements about the causal effect of the concert arrangement of the nineteenth century on great power peace and the concept of spheres of influence was not only confined to scholarship. During the Second World War, when scholars such as E.H. Carr (and even Lewis Namier who had famously rejected Chamberlin’s policy of appeasing Nazi Germany in the lead-up to the war) wrote about the importance of spheres of influence for the stability of the post-war order in editorials in *The Times*, they drew on the European Concert for inspiration (Foster, 1981: 451). The wartime and immediate post-war editorial line in *The Times* as it related to the future role of the Soviet Union in Europe had a clear preference for a recognised Soviet sphere in Eastern Europe. This editorial line included the explicit argument that a Soviet influence in Eastern Europe would need to be protected from being ‘eclipsed by that of Germany’ (*The Times*, 1945: 5).

Part of the difficulty of getting to grips with the concept of great power rights in the English School literature is the slippage between the language of ‘rights’, ‘privileges’ and ‘freedoms’. The latter of course does not necessarily require social acquiescence of any sort. Brute power can be enough to give the great powers a greater degree of freedom than the other members of international society without the non-great powers explicitly recognising or sanctioning this. This is captured by, for example, Hurrell’s (2005) depiction of US power in the mid-2000s as being ‘so great that it does not need to make concessions or to self-bind in order to prevent even major developing countries from shifting to more oppositional policies’ (2005: 46). However, the English School position on great power rights on the one hand and privileges on the other hand is a little harder to disentangle. For example, Evelyn Goh (2013) describes the social contract-like arrangement between the great and non-great powers as ‘a reciprocal agreement between them and the smaller states – great powers are conceded special rights in return for performing special duties that uphold international society’ (2013: 8). Here the language of ‘special rights’ as the corollary of ‘special responsibilities’ is explicit. Yet, when illustrating these rights more specifically, Goh (2013) instead writes that ‘the privileges accorded great powers include a more significant role in negotiating regional order’ (2013: 11). A similar slippage between the terminology of rights and privileges is evident in Buzan and Schouenborg (2018: 124), Bukovansky et al. (2012: 49) and Simpson (2004: 68). Bull (1971) even described the special rights of the great powers as an entitlement, arguing that the great powers are those viewed as being ‘entitled to have a voice in the resolution of issues that are not its immediate concern’ (1971: 143). Interestingly, Steven Ward (2017) has recently described the English School interpretation of the role of the great powers in international society as being associated with a ‘bundle of rights and privileges’ (2017: 189). This bundling of the two concepts has muddied the water given that a right is not the same thing as a privilege. It is instead by making the linkage with special responsibilities that the English School interpretation of the great power role turns a

discussion of acknowledging power disparities and the privileges for which they allow into a discussion of rights. If the great powers have the responsibility to recognise and respect each other's spheres of influence, then this requires some degree of, at least tacit, acceptance of a right to establish and maintain those spheres in the first place.

If we are to jettison the prospect of spheres of influence having been claimed and, at least tacitly and reluctantly, granted as being a right for great powers, then there is little left by way of an English school explanation of the issue. Some form of thin rights and responsibilities being associated simply with the facts of uneven power capabilities in world politics is entirely consistent with a realist reading of great power behaviour. It is in this way of thinking about the great powers that the notion of special rights becomes so thin as to simply be special privileges. For Michael Mastanduno (2011: 144–145), '[P]reponderant power creates international obligations' but at the same time also 'affords a dominant state the ability to enjoy special privileges'. Such special privileges include, 'special treatment that exempts them from rules that apply to ordinary states' (Mastanduno, 2011: 145). Mastanduno points to US exceptionalism and the preference for unilateral policymaking of the post-Cold War era that a unipolar distribution of power facilitated, and even encouraged, as clear empirical evidence for the link between system structure and great power behaviour. Yet the argument in favour of attributing the source of great power responsibility to the distribution of power alone is an un-persuasive one.⁴ It is only by looking at the lack of overt resistance to this exceptionalism and the degree to which this implies the tacit conferral of rights – coupled with the connection to responsibilities accepted and even conferred by the non-great powers – in history that the English school offers a unique vantage point. In other words, this requires more than just analysis of the actions of materially preponderant states in history. The interpretive underpinnings of the English School approach to great power politics require an understanding of the meanings attached to those actions and their acceptance by the non-great powers.

One of the great benefits of using an English School frame to interpret the meaning given to the role of the great powers in history is that it is particularly attuned to contestation. The inter-subjective understandings that ultimately define the rights and responsibilities of political actors in general, and those conferred with a specific social status in particular, are the bread and butter of English School analysis. If, as one account puts it, '[S]ocial roles are, in many respects, simply agglomerations of responsibilities (and rights)' (Bukovansky et al., 2012: 62), then the negotiation of these roles in history naturally becomes the primary focus of an interpretive approach to understanding the evolution of international society. Central to providing at least some degree of analytical precision in an interpretive approach to the history of great power politics is the ability to distinguish between the concept of great power status and the historical practice of great power management. Identifying change and evolution in the latter is the path to demonstrating the historically contingent nature of the former. Contestation, negotiation and change in both social expectations, and practices, of great power management are a few important themes in the English School literature on the topic (Clark, 1989: 196–197; Müller, 2019).

The right to a sphere of influence being claimed by a power but denied by others can be a key manifestation of contestation over the conferral of great power status (Bull,

1977: 225). A number of scholars have pointed to the 1956 Suez Crisis as being largely driven by competing visions of the unique rights that could be claimed by Britain and France (McCourt, 2014: 58–108; Zala, 2017b: 9). David McCourt (2014) has analysed the way in which the two states ‘co-constructed the traditional *great power* role over Suez’ (2014: 68, emphasis in the original). McCourt traces how in public statements by proponents of the use of force during the crisis, the claim was repeatedly made that it was by virtue of being great powers that Britain and France had the right to use force to defend their economic and security interests. Importantly, proponents also linked the use of force to a responsibility to uphold the norms of international society. This included British Prime Minister Anthony Eden in his attempts to convince US President, Eisenhower, of the legitimacy of the British decision to act against Egypt (McCourt, 2014: 68–69). Many commentators and world leaders (particularly throughout the developing world) decried both the secret collusion of British, French and Israeli governments as well as the use of force without formal multilateral sanction. However, it was the refusal to recognise a British or French sphere of influence in the Middle East by both Washington and Moscow that put paid to the idea of Britain and France as great powers with equal standing to what had become known as the ‘superpowers’.⁵ An interpretive approach leads McCourt (2014: 67–71) to identify the role that Britain and France attempted to portray themselves as holding in international society at this time as ‘residual great powers’. Here he sees two states wedded to the traditional notion of great power rights due to having had these rights legitimated by both fellow great powers and non-great powers alike since at least the early-nineteenth century (see Steiner, 1977; Zala, 2017a).

What is particularly important in this episode is not that the claim by a state (or in this instance states) to the right to a sphere of influence was rejected by others, but instead that it was rejected by the Soviets and Americans who went on to claim this right for themselves at the time and for decades afterwards. A focus on the changing ways that these rights were interpreted alerts us to the fact that in a post-1945 world, explicit norms of sovereign equality and non-intervention enshrined in the UN Charter meant that spheres of influence shifted from being overtly claimed to tacitly recognised. Great power rights and specifically spheres of influence were not then a thing of the past in 1956, far from it. They were in fact a key aspect of the post-1945 order due to what Gerry Simpson (2004: 196) refers to as the ‘legalised hegemony’ within the UN Charter-mandated system of sovereign equality. While the Soviets and Americans recognised each other’s spheres of influence through what Keal (1983: 60–61) has characterised as a ‘tacit understanding’ rather than agreement, it nevertheless became an important part of the ‘rules of the game’ of the Cold War (Keal, 1983: 2). Of course, the recognition of spheres of influence, even during the Cold War in which the existence of nuclear arsenals on each side raised the cost of non-recognition of the other’s sphere, were still sites of contestation. The acceptance of the other side’s right as a peer to maintain a sphere of influence was never publicly proclaimed nor done without reluctance. Tacit understandings about the limits of a great power’s rights are never easily reached. Marc Trachtenberg (2005) has highlighted the nature of Soviet concerns over the negotiation and mutual recognition of spheres of influence in Europe and the way in which reciprocity did not come easily to Soviet leaders:

The question of whether the Soviet Union was willing to treat the whole of Western Europe as a U.S. or Western sphere of influence is open to debate, but it does seem abundantly clear that Soviet leaders believed the West would have to treat Eastern Europe as an area in which Soviet interests were predominant. That concern lay at the heart of Soviet policy regarding the Marshall Plan. (2005: 138)

While the boundaries of their respective spheres of influences may have ‘solidified’ over time, the contestation over them remained intense for the entirety of the Cold War (Lake, 2018: 255). The English School work that focused on the interpretation of the great (or more accurately super) power role during the Cold War was particularly attuned to this contestation over spheres of influence.

Bull (1977) himself pointed to the Cuban Missile Crisis as demonstrating this in stark terms (1977: 223–224). Importantly though, the avoidance of dangerous nuclear crises through the mutual recognition of each other’s spheres of influence was not a foregone conclusion. It was not that the structure had naturally ‘shaped and shoved’ the Soviets and Americans into respecting each other’s spheres of influence through the structural logic of mutually assured destruction. Instead, the episode played out as it did because of a lack of clarity about the limits of the two superpower’s spheres and their right to infringe upon the sphere of the other. In other words, it was the peaceful resolution of the crisis through public and private bargaining and negotiation that clarified this mutual understanding (Bell, 2003: 53–55). This goes for both the understanding between Moscow and Washington as well as the expectation on the part of the non-great powers about the mutual recognition and respect of spheres of influence as a matter of war avoidance. Keal (1983: 92–93) has argued that the issue of the reciprocal recognition of spheres of influence between the Soviets and the Americans had been problematic since the Second World War. However, Keal argued that from 1944, the United States effectively gave de-facto, if reluctant, recognition to a Soviet Sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. While there were those inside, and influential on, post-war US administrations that argued that ‘American predominance in the western hemisphere was no reason for the Soviet Union to claim predominance in eastern Europe’ (Keal, 1983: 96), the Cuban crisis served to demonstrate to both sides the potential costs of non-recognition on a mutual basis. Bull recognised that as international society evolved, common understandings about the institution of the great powers, including which special rights and responsibilities they should or should not have conferred upon them, was central to the negotiation of international order. His concern about Washington and Moscow’s drift towards acting as ‘great irresponsibles’ and bringing about a disorderly international system rested on a particular understanding of the distinction between recognising ‘the fact of each other’s predominant influence in certain parts of the world’ without a recognition of the other’s ‘right to predominant influence’ (Bull, 1971: 149). It is because this right had been associated with the social role of the great powers in history; and that great power rights and responsibilities were becoming increasingly contestable, that he worried about the role of the great powers in providing a degree of order in international life (Bull, 1980).

Central to the interpretive rather than structural approach to primary institutions in the English School literature is a focus on the historical contingency of inter-subjective

understandings of social roles and practices (Bain, 2009). In this view, for example, the balance of power is more than a mechanistic and automatic phenomenon produced by the 'logic of anarchy', but is instead a purposive model of state interaction aspired to by individual decision makers (Little, 2007). This means that any single primary institution is liable to evolve over time, both in terms of the meanings that actors attribute to them as well as their relative prominence in the production of order as compared with other institutions (Butterfield, 1966: 139–141; Hudson, 1966: 205).⁶ Tracking evolution and change in the nature and function of primary institutions is central to the work of both Holsti (2004) and Buzan (2004; see also Schouenborg, 2014: 85–87). Some institutions have been identified as having been important historically but can no longer be said to be so, such as inequality of people and its associated practices or derivatives such as colonialism and dynasticism (Buzan, 2004: 184) or even the institution of empire and the concept of legitimate imperial rule (Reus-Smit, 2013: 156–157). Not only do the meanings of practices and traditions change over time, but they can also re-emerge taking different forms. For example, a number of authors have pointed to the re-emergence of a 'standard of civilisation'-type logic in contemporary practices of development and human rights promotion (Bain, 2003: 155–163; Buzan, 2017: 240–241). This opens up the institution of great power management to have, at least in principle, evolved over time and for individual practices associated with this institution (such as spheres of influence) to be conferred with different meanings including different standards of legitimacy than was the case in the past.⁷

China's 'rise', spheres of influence and the interpretation of great power rights in contemporary international society

The current debates over the nature of China's rise in international society, its challenge to US power both in Asia and globally, and the response of the United States, all to some degree hinge on understandings of great power rights and responsibilities. Given its close association with great power status in history, it would be quite natural for the prospect of a distinct Chinese sphere of influence to be associated with both official and scholarly discourse on the topic. As one account puts it, 'scholars and practitioners alike have argued increasingly that China has not demonstrated sufficiently that it will play by so-called international rules' (Johnston, 2003: 5). Often there is little consideration of the fact that historically those rules – in the English School sense of the informal 'rules of the game' – have also included the granting of exclusive rights to the great powers. If China seems reluctant to be a great power that accepts special responsibilities that come without special rights attached (whether implicitly or otherwise), this tells us little about the nature of China's rise other than that it is a rising power with a long historical precedent. Instead, it tells us something about the way that the primary institution of the great powers in international society is being reinterpreted, at least on the part of some.

In the contemporary setting, three themes emerge from this discourse on China's rising status in international society: an acceptance of China's 'natural' right to a sphere of influence as it rises to great power status; a rejection of China's right to such a sphere (usually framed within a general rejection of spheres of influence); and a final focus on the responsibility of the United States and China to recognise each

other's spheres for the sake of maintaining order. The rejection of a Chinese right to a sphere of influence (which includes recent official statements from Beijing) represents the greatest challenge to the traditional role of spheres of influence in international society. It is therefore, the most dramatic evolution in the interpretation of the special rights and responsibilities of the great powers. In contrast, both the explicit acceptance of this right and the policy prescriptions based on a responsibility to recognise another power's sphere align more with the traditional English School literature discussed earlier. They also demonstrate the residual (tacit) acceptance of spheres of influence even in contemporary understandings of great power rights among some influential commentators.

The acceptance of a Chinese right to a sphere of influence

As early in the debate about China's rise as 1997, Zbigniew Brzezinski (1997) argued that

A de facto sphere of Chinese regional influence is likely to be part of Eurasia's future. Such a sphere of influence should not be confused with a zone of exclusive political domination, like the Soviet Union had in Eastern Europe. It is more likely to be an area in which weaker states pay special deference to the interests, views, and anticipated reactions of the regionally dominant power. In brief, a Chinese sphere of influence can be defined as one in which the first question in the various capitals is, 'What is Beijing's view on this?' (1997: 60)

Brzezinski (1997) painted a Chinese sphere of influence as being both an inevitability and compatible with US interests in a 'stable, pluralistic Eurasia' (1997: 60). There is no sense of either the practice of great powers establishing local spheres of influence having lost legitimacy or of the authoritarian nature of the Chinese Communist Party's rule in China as making it ineligible for such rights in the modern era. Brzezinski's vision of a Chinese sphere of influence was based purely on an assessment of China's growing economic prowess automatically translating into political and diplomatic influence. It also focused more on the deference of the non-great powers than on the recognition of this sphere as a legitimate right by other great powers.

Prominent figures in the discourse about China's rise have pointed to the legacy of the Chinese tribute system of centuries past to argue for an almost natural tendency for Beijing to seek a sphere of influence in it near abroad (Allison, 2017: 111; Kissinger, 2011: 529). Others, broadly following the contractual reading of spheres of influence as rights recognised in return for the adoption of special responsibilities outlined earlier, argue that China simply seeks such a sphere because that is what great powers have historically done (Roy, 2013: 161–164).

Much recent analysis of China's role in the territorial disputes in the South China Sea have painted Beijing's strategy in terms of an attempt to establish a sphere of influence in Southeast Asia. This includes analyses that interpret Chinese actions as being a key aspect of its status competition with the United States (Hayton, 2014) – in other words, China is defying Washington's wishes and in so doing is establishing this geographic region as one in which it has the kind of 'free hand' associated with spheres of influence in the past (Bull, 1977: 221). In this interpretation, a free hand in the South China Sea is

the end itself rather than a means to something else. The status ‘win’ in this regard is simply to defy Washington and in so doing demonstrate its status as a great power peer. Others instead view Chinese actions as being aimed more at countering Washington’s ability to project military power and collect intelligence easily (especially in the naval domain) close to China’s borders (Allison, 2017: 126–128).

Of course, there is a link between the two given the starting point for any increase in China’s military presence in Southeast Asia, dominated as it is at present by the United States. For example, Graham Allison (2017: 128) argues that the militarisation of disputed islands in the South China Sea will ‘make it easier for China to track (and harass) US ships conducting surveillance’. But for Allison, the effects for Chinese status and influence are much wider: ‘As it slowly muscles the United States out of these waters, China is also absorbing the nations of Southeast Asia into its economic orbit and pulling in Japan and Australia as well’ (p. 128). This reading of the South China Sea dispute places it outside the bounds of a dispute over whether China has the right to establish a sphere of influence in Asia and whether or not this sphere should be recognised by the United States. Instead, this literature depicts US-Sino tensions over the future shape of the order in Asia as being the inevitable outcome of the shift in the relative distribution of power in Beijing’s favour. Yet, this should not be mistaken for an argument in favour of US recognition of this sphere, purely based on a responsibility to peacefully manage its relations with China (discussed below).

The rejection of a Chinese right to a sphere of influence

While explicit advocacy of a special right to a sphere of influence all but disappeared from the language of diplomacy some time ago, as we have already noted, centuries of statecraft had made the practice of the great powers maintaining such spheres commonplace. Yet, since the end of the bipolar confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union of the Cold War period, calls to reject the concept of spheres of influence have become prominent. Ironically, decision makers from both major political parties in the United States, the only state capable of maintaining spheres of influence in recent years, have publicly called for an end to the practice. For example, in 2008, the then Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice (2008) described the practice as ‘archaic’ and spoke of a world ‘in which great power is defined not by spheres of influence or zero-sum competition . . .’. The following year, then Vice President Joe Biden (2009) was unequivocal: ‘We will not recognize any nation having a sphere of influence’. Chinese diplomats and leaders have used similar language to publicly denounce the practice of maintaining spheres of influence and rejecting the notion that great powers have a special right to these spheres. This includes statements that the concept is ‘out-of-date in the 21st century’ (Cui, 2016) and that China ‘does not want to be the predominant power in the Asia Pacific, or build spheres of influence and military alliance’ (Liu, 2016; see also Information Office of the State Council, 2011). President Xi Jinping has even specifically singled out China’s ‘Belt and Road’ infrastructure and investment initiative in attempts to reassure global critics that this ‘is a pursuit not to establish China’s own sphere of influence, but to support common development of all countries’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People’s Republic of China, 2016).

These public rejections of both the right in principle, and any current Chinese ambition, for a sphere of influence, however, sit uneasily with Beijing's assertion of what it sees as its territorial rights over contested territories in both the East and South China Seas. Scholars such as Steven Ward (2017: 189) also point to Beijing's attempts to acquire a degree of status parity with Washington through concepts such as Xi's 'new type of great power relations' and the assertion of China's right to have its notoriously ambiguous 'core interests' respected (Zeng, 2016; Zeng et al., 2015).

This leads to a complicated picture in which Chinese leaders repeatedly deny any interest in a sphere of influence all the while actively seeking – and claiming a right to – equal status with what they see as a peer competitor (the United States) that maintains spheres of influence around the world. Ward (2017) describes this status seeking as 'somewhat ambiguous, but seems to be a particular understanding of membership in a "legitimate" great power club in which members – including the United States – have equal standing' (2017: 189). Protestations and platitudes from Beijing aside, Ward (2017: 189) is clear that '[R]espect as an equal and recognition as a great power seem to refer to two related rights: an acknowledged geographical sphere of influence and a set of interests that other states agree not to threaten'.

A further complicating factor in uncovering the evolution of ideas about spheres of influence and legitimate great power rights when it comes to the debate over China's rise is the lack of clarity over whether Beijing already has a sphere of influence in Asia or is looking to establish one as its power rises. Jennifer Lind (2017: 79) has framed the struggle for power and influence between Washington and Beijing in Asia today as being over not whether China has the right to a future sphere of influence, but instead over whether the United States will recognise and respect its existing one. For example, she names Vietnam as having historically fallen within China's sphere of influence, a status now under threat due to the deepening economic and security ties between Washington and Hanoi.

Lind (2017) argues that the response of the US foreign policy elite to charges of undermining China's existing sphere of influence is to dismiss the concept itself as 'outdated, Cold War-era thinking' (2017: 79). If correct, this is a historically inaccurate notion given the long history of the concept of spheres of influence and its link to great power status discussed earlier that far pre-dates the Cold War. It does nevertheless highlight that when it comes to China's growing material power and the extent to which Washington is prepared to recognise a concomitant social status in traditional great power terms, the recognition of a right to a sphere of influence is far from certain. This too is also reflected in some commentary and scholarship on Chinese foreign policy and US-Sino relations. For example, Rosemary Foot (2018) has described what she views as a retrograde vision of US-Sino relations as articulated in Beijing's request for peer status to be recognised in the following terms:

Global governance becomes, then, great powers managing relations between themselves – think NPT and other arms control arrangements between the Soviets and Americans in the 1960s and 1970s; or the spheres of influence approach evident in the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, at least in relation to its first two baskets. (2018: 7)

Interestingly, Lind (2017) argues that in its non-recognition of China's sphere, Washington's goal is 'to replace the old-fashioned competition for spheres of influence

with a single liberal sphere led by the United States' (2017: 79). In other words, the rejection is not of spheres of influence *per se* but of China's legitimate right to such a sphere. For John Ikenberry (2008), the only way to avoid the world being 'broken into competing U.S. and Chinese spheres' (2008: 35) is for the United States to make the Western-dominated order 'so expansive and so institutionalized that China has no choice but to become a full-fledged member of it' (2008: 37).

What may be obscured by the rhetoric around the rejection of China's right to a sphere of influence is the specificity of the problem that a Chinese sphere poses for the United States. The interpretive approach to great power rights outlined earlier highlights the fact that the current debate is playing out against the backdrop of almost 70 years of the US 'hub and spokes' alliance system in Asia. Because, like other great powers before it, China seeks a sphere of influence in its immediate neighbourhood, this by definition means that Washington's recognition of this right would require a significant change in its alliance policy (Ward, 2017: 194). It is one thing to, even begrudgingly, recognise another's sphere of influence in an area in which you have no formal allies as the George H.W. Bush administration effectively did *vis-à-vis* Russia and Eastern Europe in 1989–1990 (Sarotte, 2014). It would be something altogether different in practice for the United States to recognise a Chinese sphere of influence in a region that includes two of its closest allies (South Korea and Japan), both of which have hosted US military personnel for decades. This dilemma for the United States is reflected in the 2017 National Security Strategy which specifically identified the Chinese and Russian goals of establishing a sphere of influence in their own geographic regions, by way of 'displacing' the United States role there, as being 'antithetical to U.S. values and interests' (White House, 2017: 25).

Responsibility and the mutual recognition of spheres of influence

One of the themes that emerges from current debates about China's rise is an association of ideas about China's right to a sphere of influence and particular proposals for the peaceful management of a power transition in Asia. In particular, discussions of various diplomatic avenues for managing China's rise point to some degree of recognition of China's special rights. Here, the focus is reminiscent of the English School literature discussed earlier that calls for the mutual recognition of spheres of influence by the great powers themselves as a means to maintain a degree of order in international society.

Proponents of a concert of powers in Asia such as Hugh White (2013: 147) argue that spheres of influence 'remain an important feature of the international order' and that concert arrangements can assist the powers to come to at least a tacit agreement on what each other's spheres of influence are. This somewhat complicates the picture as it is unclear whether China's right to a sphere of influence – and other rights by virtue of being treated as a great power more broadly – are specifically or only loosely linked to China's acceptance of special responsibilities. In other words, is there an acceptance of the role of spheres of influence in great power management simply in order to encourage great powers to avoid direct confrontation (especially in the nuclear age)? Or instead, are they viewed more expansively as a kind of carrot to induce materially preponderant states to step up to some agreed upon set of responsibilities to the rest of international society?

Others focusing more on bilateral US-Sino relations are able to draw a more direct, and importantly, more recent analogy with the US-Soviet relationship of the Cold War. Liselotte Odgaard (2013: 234) has linked Chinese aspirations for 'peaceful coexistence' with the United States as being far from an 'innovative concept of international order that first needs to be established' and instead draws directly on the Cold War notions of a minimalist approach to great power management based on mutual recognition of spheres of influence. Such treatments of the US-Sino relationship are only tangentially related to a conception of a special right to a sphere of influence on the part of the great powers and instead are driven by a normative commitment to great power management as an enduring institution, even in contemporary international society. It, therefore, makes more sense to interpret this as an expectation that great powers have a special responsibility to recognise the spheres of influence of their peers.

In offering advice to US policy makers in his influential book on US-Sino relations, *Destined for War*, Allison counsels that Washington should abandon its current hostility to the recognition of a Chinese spheres of influence. He explicitly addresses the costs of doing so (by way of leaving non-great powers to fend for themselves within this sphere) as well as the costs of not doing so in the nuclear age. For Allison (2017), a hard-headed appraisal of US vital interests in Southeast Asia 'does not require defending every claim made by the Philippines or Vietnam in the South China Sea. It does not even require defending the Philippines. But it does require avoiding nuclear war with China' (2017: 235).

Conclusion

This discussion of the evolution of understandings of great power rights and the contemporary debate about China's rise in the context of the right to a sphere of influence has highlighted a number of issues.

First, there is a need for clarity on the historical nature of, the distinction between spheres of influence and spheres of autonomy (Barnett, 2017: 71). Much of what is discussed around China's rise in Asia specifically, as opposed to a global context (Shambaugh, 2013) conflates Beijing's perceived right to a sphere of autonomy in its own immediate geographic 'backyard' with the right to a sphere of influence. Whether spheres of influence in the modern setting then are seen as areas in which great powers enjoy the privilege of having a 'free hand' by virtue of their status or whether instead they are simply areas in which rivals agree not to take actions that directly threaten their security goes to the heart of debates about Chinese intentions (Jakobson, 2017). Whether Beijing's unilateralism and revisionist strategy in the South China Sea in recent years is understood by the other members of international society as being primarily motivated by defensive concerns or not will determine the nature of this debate. In terms of the likelihood of mutual recognition on the part of the United States of Beijing's right to a sphere, the message from US decision makers appears fairly clear. As Vice President, Mike Pence (2018) put it, from Washington's perspective, the problem is that 'China wants nothing less than to push the United States of America from the Western Pacific'. While ensuring that a rival power is not able to easily project military force into one's own immediate neighbourhood has historically been treated as a legitimate activity for a great

power, the Vice President of the most powerful state in the world appears to believe that this is no longer the case. This raises the question – not just for China but for other rising powers too – of whether a great power requires a sphere of influence in order to have that status conferred upon them by others in contemporary international society.

Second, from the brief discussion earlier, emerges the question of whether the modern conception of great power rights is specifically bound up with a multilateral vision of the sources of international order. The idea that the mutual recognition of spheres of influence would be an integral part of some kind of return to concert diplomacy involves a specific (and debatable) reading of the history of the Concert of Europe as well as an assumption about the applicability of the analogy across space and time. This does not mean that we cannot learn lessons from the era of the European concert arrangement for the management of great power relations in the twenty-first century. But it does mean that when we do so, we must be cognisant of the ways in which the social role of the great powers has evolved over time. The interpretive, historicist emphasis of the English School approach to the whole category of the great powers is actually tailor-made for such a task.

Finally, there is the issue of the continued legitimacy or otherwise of spheres of influence in general. This raises the larger question of whether it is viewed as legitimate in contemporary international society to associate any special rights at all with great power status. The discussion above leads to the preliminary conclusion that in general, there appears to still be a reasonably widespread sense that some form of great power rights are still acceptable. However, the lack of willingness to discuss this openly in regard to China's rise – especially on the part of practitioners – does not close the door on an all-out rejection of the concept. This leaves open the question of whether this rejection would extend to other established powers (such as the United States) as well as other rising/re-emerging powers (Russia, India, etc.).

If the whole notion of great power rights is rejected, then a new approach to special responsibilities will be required. The special responsibilities of the great powers will need to be reconceived in a way that allows them to be decoupled from special rights. Of course, for the great powers to actually accept this in any practical sense, much work would need to be done to translate normative arguments about responsibilities based purely on material capabilities into real-world policy decisions. This would have a flow-on effect on other international institutions such as sovereignty and international law. Limiting spheres of influence (without doing away with the institution of great power management), in theory would both allow, and probably require, an elevated role for the meaningful recognition of sovereign equality beyond formal legal commitments. A world without great power spheres of influence would be a world in which all sovereigns would be equally capable of attracting support in resisting great power influence – even if those powers were their immediate neighbours. This would require a more radical renegotiation of the role of the great powers in international society than most of the authors and practitioners, who seek to deny China a sphere of influence discussed earlier, appear willing to contemplate thus far.

As the English School understanding of the social role of the great powers highlights, since at least the early nineteenth century great power responsibilities have instead been specifically tied to the conferral of concomitant rights. As China's rise continues it is

therefore natural to expect that, unless the other members of international society do not wish China to accept any special responsibilities, then at some point, serious discussion about what kinds of special rights can and should be conceded to China will be inevitable. An interpretivist approach to the history of the negotiation of these rights in international society over the previous two centuries suggests that some kind of Chinese sphere of influence, at least in its own immediate neighbourhood, is likely to be a right that Beijing will increasingly claim. It also reminds us that this claim, and its acceptance or otherwise by China's fellow members of international society, will itself be an important part of the negotiation of a new distribution of power, status and legitimacy in the years ahead. As Iain Ferguson and Susanna Hast (2018) have recently pointed out, the story of spheres of influence in the evolution of international society 'is one of continuities and disruptions. They transform political power and are transformative of power in unexpected ways' (2018: 280). The history of the conferral of great power rights and responsibilities is such that if Beijing's right to a sphere of influence is successfully rejected by the rest of international society without repudiating its status as a great power more broadly, China will indeed be a great power without historical precedent.

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Notes

1. Primary institutions refer to the recurrent social practices, norms and shared understandings relating to legitimate statecraft in international society. These institutions then constitute the fundamental elements of a given international order. Bull (1977) famously identified five: diplomacy, international law, the balance of power, war and the role of great powers but others have subsequently made the case for additional institutions such as sovereignty, the market and even environmental stewardship. These are distinct from secondary institutions such as specific agreements, laws, organisations and regimes. See Buzan (2004: 161–204).
2. For an extended discussion of this claim, see Hast, 2014.
3. The one aspect of this definition that is somewhat problematic is the word 'external'. There is no reason why the single power need be external to the region in the geographic sense. This is discussed further in the conclusion in regard to the difference between a sphere of influence (for which a power could, but need not necessarily, be geographically external) and a sphere of autonomy (which specifically refers to a power's own immediate geographic area).
4. In making this claim, Mastanduno (2011: 144) references both Bull and Waltz to support the argument that great powers have 'system maintenance responsibilities' with no sense that the former looks to a social logic to explain a phenomenon that the latter requires only a logic of anarchy combined with the distribution of material capabilities to explain.
5. On the shift from the terminology from great powers to superpowers in the late 1940s and early 1950s and the effect on the conferral of social status as it related to Britain (see Zala, 2017b: 7–8).
6. It should be noted that this view is not necessarily present in all English School scholarship. A decidedly more structural sense of the balance of power is evident in Martin Wight's (1966) assertion that 'So long as the absence of international government means that Powers are primarily preoccupied with their survival, so long will they seek to maintain some kind of balance between them' (1966: 174).

7. Importantly for this line of argument, Bukovansky et al. (2012) identify the historical evolution of the concept of special responsibilities as being intimately connected to the evolution of understandings of special rights (2012: 26–34).

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