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*Miguel Ángel Melián Negrín**

The return to the spheres of influence



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Abstract:

The concept of spheres of influence has reemerged as a key category for understanding the reconfiguration of the international order in a context marked by great power rivalry. Far from being a vestige of the Cold War, spheres of influence reflect the realist logic of an anarchic system in which powers seek to secure their immediate surroundings and project power. The erosion of multilateralism, the rise of revisionist powers such as China, and the loss of Western leadership have reignited regional dynamics of competition that once again delineate zones of influence for major powers.

While Europe experiences a strategic decline, the Indo-Pacific is emerging as the new epicenter of global power, with the United States and China vying for influence through alliances, investments, and diplomatic pressure. These new spheres are no longer based solely on military control, and their management poses a fundamental challenge to preventing open conflict and rethinking the rules of the international system, which is shifting away from liberal cooperation toward sustained strategic competition.

Keywords:

Realism - Spheres of influence - Power - Indo-Pacific - Geopolitics

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Why talk about spheres of influence today?

In a time of growing geopolitical complexity, the concept of the sphere of influence has made a strong comeback in the vocabulary of analysts, diplomats, and strategists. After decades in which it seemed to have faded under the logic of multilateralism, globalization, and the expansion of liberal normative frameworks, we are now witnessing a reconfiguration of global power that revives traditional dynamics of competition among major powers. The actions of actors such as Russia in Eastern Europe or China in the Indo-Pacific and Africa reveal a clear intent to redefine zones of influence through a strategic logic that echoes the balance-of-power dynamics of the Cold War, albeit with new tools and objectives.

From a realist perspective, spheres of influence are a natural manifestation of the international system, characterized by the struggle for power and the need to preserve equilibrium. For scholars like Hans Morgenthau, great powers tend to establish spheres of influence not only as a security measure, but also as a mechanism to project prestige, safeguard vital interests, and reduce strategic uncertainty. In this regard, today's world marked by the erosion of U.S. leadership, the rise of revisionist powers, and the ineffectiveness of certain multilateral frameworks provides fertile ground for the resurgence of this logic.

From this point, neorealism interprets spheres of influence as a byproduct of the anarchic international order. Its leading proponent, John Mearsheimer, argues that in the absence of a global arbiter, powers seek to attain regional hegemony and, to that end, aim to secure their immediate surroundings by preventing other powers from penetrating them. From this perspective, China's expansion in the Indo-Pacific, Russia's reaffirmation in the post-Soviet space, and the growing U.S. presence in key regions all reflect a systemic dynamic of competition, in which each power seeks to consolidate its position and constrain that of its rivals.

Discussing spheres of influence today is therefore not a nostalgic exercise, but rather an analytical necessity for understanding how international relations are being reshaped in a competitive context. The abandonment of cooperative logic in favor of bloc politics, proxy wars, pressure on peripheral states, and the instrumental use of economic and technological power are all clear signs of this return. Reengaging with the concept of

spheres of influence thus allows for a more accurate reading of great power behavior and helps anticipate future scenarios of conflict or containment.

The *concept of sphere of influence*: theoretical evolution

When the term sphere of influence is used, it undoubtedly refers to a space for the configuration of power and state projection on multiple levels. At its core, the term designates a region or zone where a major power—defined by its substantial soft and hard power capacities deployed simultaneously—focuses its efforts to exert dominant influence. In this sense, through the deployment of various capabilities, states that maintain their own spheres of influence direct their actions toward excluding interference from other powers. This gives rise to a set of control and exclusion practices within a hierarchical international structure.

Historically, spheres of influence have been a recurring phenomenon in international relations from the 19th century through the end of the Cold War—a period encompassing everything from colonial partitioning to proxy confrontations in Central America during the latter half of the 20th century. Nevertheless, spheres of influence reached their peak during the Cold War, when the division of the world into two geographic and ideological blocs under the leadership of superpowers was widely accepted. This effectively created a relational framework in which states operated under the collective mindset of “you’re either with me or against me.”

It was not until the 1955 Bandung Conference that a group of African and Asian countries sought an alternative to this imposed alignment, leading to the creation of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), spearheaded by Nehru, Sukarno, and Nasser. This reaction exposed the willingness of certain countries to reject the prevailing doctrines of influence[1] and instead form an independent bloc focused on maximizing national interests without committing to either side. Initiatives like this marked the beginning of the discrediting of spheres of influence—a process that, together with the post-colonial phase across many global regions, eventually associated the concept with values rooted in outdated imperialist doctrines[2].

[1] Just as the Monroe Doctrine once did in the Western Hemisphere, or the Brezhnev Doctrine in Eastern Europe.

[2] Several scholars attribute a strong negative connotation to the term, linking it to imperialist practices ranging from

This theoretical assimilation entailed associating spheres of influence with an antiquated order that generated conflict. As early as the 1920s, the term was already being described as a "dangerous anachronism"[3], particularly in Western rhetoric, where it was used primarily as a tool to contain the Soviet Union in the East. Once it no longer served geopolitical and strategic purposes for European development, the West abandoned this logic. Regarding the strictly theoretical evolution of the concept, realist frameworks tend to interpret spheres of influence as a natural outcome of power distribution in an anarchic international order.

Returning to Morgenthau —who, though he never formally used the term— argued that the establishment of zones of dominance by great powers was a natural step toward securing their vital interests. Such analogies help us understand how great powers orient their actions toward hegemony by dividing areas of interest in ways that enhance their security against competitors. In practice, this means that powers like Russia, China, India, or the United States consider the intrusion of rivals into what they perceive as their own strategic neighbourhood to be unacceptable[4].

Spheres of influence can also be understood as factual arrangements in which dominant powers exert control over the foreign policy of neighbouring states, while their competitors agree —formally or informally— to certain limitations on direct involvement in those territories. However, such arrangements do not imply moral acceptance of the concept itself. There are ongoing attempts to undermine existing influence in favor of one's own, often resulting in heightened tensions that may escalate into conflicts between major powers.

Thus, spheres of influence reflect, in a descriptive sense, the practical limits of a state's power and influence—limits that may even be negotiated to reduce the risk of confrontation. For this reason, and as a recent and illustrative example of this phenomenon, it is essential to analyze the dynamics embedded in this concept as applied

colonialism to suzerainty.

[3] Analyst Mira Milosevich-Juaristi addresses this issue in her article *The Roots of Russia's Current Strategic Culture*, published by the Elcano Royal Institute. Available online at: https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/las-raices-de-la-actual-cultura-estrategica-de-rusia/#_ftn6

[4] A recent example is found in the reflections of Professor John Mearsheimer on the current Ukraine–Russia conflict. He argues that the West's continuous expansion toward the vicinity of Russia's borders -long defined as its vital security sphere- has contributed to the present crisis. The author presents his view in the following article: https://www.mearsheimer.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Why-the-Ukraine-Crisis-Is.pdf#:~:text=But%20this%20account%20is%20wrong%3A,neighbor%20turned%20into%20a%20Western

to a clarifying case: Europe. A traditional theater of balance-of-power politics and division of influence, Europe remains so to this day.

Europe: from classical theatre to historical decline

Since the 16th century, the European continent has been the classical geopolitical stage on which the global balance of power was decided[5]. However, in recent times, it has undergone a historical decline in its international geopolitical influence. From the Peace of Westphalia (1648) until the mid-20th century, Europe's great powers competed, marking a turning point in history, to establish spheres of influence both within and beyond[6] the continent. Through colonial and imperialist ventures, they sought to consolidate external power, while at home, constant cycles of alliances, conflicts, and the redistribution of European territories among royal houses reflected a persistent internal struggle for dominance[7].

Even the fact that both World Wars –often referred to as Europe's *"civil wars"*[8]– and the Cold War took place largely on European soil supports the idea that Europe served as the principal theater of contemporary power balancing. First, as the epicentre of imperial confrontation between 1914 and 1945, and later, as the front line between two global spheres of influence from 1947[9] to the collapse of the USSR in 1991. However, by 1945, it was already evident that war-ravaged and strategically weakened Europe was relinquishing leadership to external powers that have since projected their interests onto the continent. This was formalized by the postwar division of Europe at Yalta, in which the victorious powers adopted a bipolar logic as the organizing principle—marking the beginning of Europe's decline, which culminated in the loss of its colonial holdings and,

[5] However, it is important to emphasize that the world's leading power until the 18th century was China, whose decline began with its forced opening to trade with Great Britain, giving rise to what became known as the "Century of Humiliation" in the 19th century.
[6] For instance, by dividing up their holdings in Africa or Asia, where the dominance of Britain, Spain, France, Portugal, and the Netherlands came to represent control over a large portion of the globe.
[7] One example is the Concert of Europe of 1815, which allowed the European powers to divide up the continent following Napoleon's final defeat—affecting territories in what are now Spain, France, Italy, Austria, among others.
[8] This is how it is described by former director of the Elcano Royal Institute, Emilio Lamo de Espinosa, in an interview with the media outlet La Nueva Crónica. The full interview is available at the following link: https://www.lanuevacronica.com/opinion/lamo-de-espinosa-y-el-declive-de-occidente_110907_102.html
[9] Europe was thus divided by the so-called "Iron Curtain," a term coined by Winston Churchill.

consequently, its relative international power.

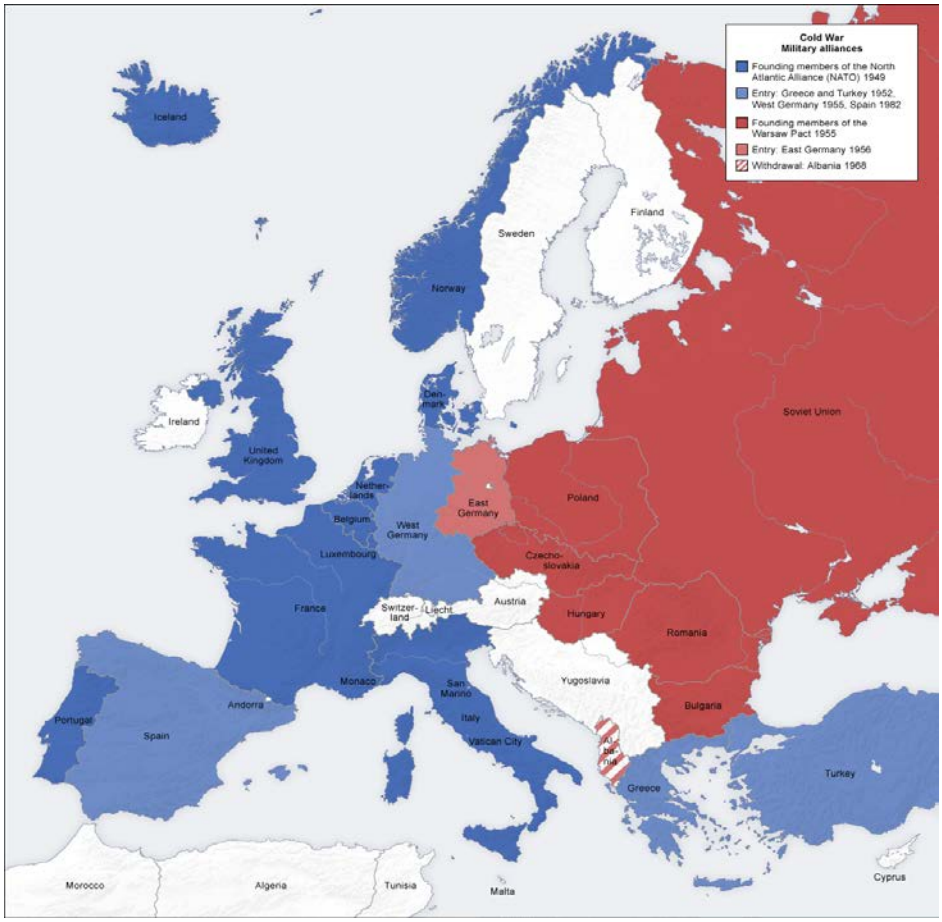


Figure 1. Division of Europe into two antagonistic Blocs After World War II. **Source:** PressBooks.

In the early 1990s, the disintegration of the USSR and the emergence of new states gave rise to the growing prominence of what is now the world's most ambitious supranational organization: the European Union. While the EU gained prominence as an economic and regulatory actor, the prevailing narrative has been that of a Europe that settled comfortably under the U.S. security umbrella. Lacking strategic autonomy, it has been unable to respond effectively to key security challenges such as the conflict in Ukraine or threats originating in North Africa. As a result, Europe[10] is often portrayed as a diplomatic and regulatory entity whose tools are ill-equipped to provide solutions in a system still

[10] This reflects the mistaken assumption that Europe is synonymous with the European Union, overlooking the rest of the countries that form the continent.

governed by state interests and coercive instruments[11].

This view suggests that despite the prosperity and development achieved across the continent, Europe's lack of military power and internal cohesion renders it increasingly peripheral in a global environment marked by complexity and competition. Such assessments were already common in the 1990s, when analysts predicted that with the disappearance of a common threat –the Soviet Union– Europe would fragment and lose strategic relevance[12]. The absence of geopolitical vision, an entrenched legalist obsession, and a persistent reluctance –especially among some EU countries– to project military power beyond the framework provided by NATO have pushed Europe from its former role as a global power projection hub to a more passive position.

Additional indicators reinforce this trend, for example: a sharply declining demographic outlook, a shrinking share of global GDP relative to rising powers like China and India and decreasing relative military spending[13] all of which weaken the EU's ability to compete independently and expose its growing dependence on the United States. This vision reflects a Europe that continues to perceive itself through a global hierarchy shaped eight decades ago, one increasingly misaligned with current economic and demographic realities. This displacement becomes even more evident when viewed against the rise of so-called "emerging"[14] powers such as India and China.

At the heart of this shift lies a growing strategic weakness. For example, Central and Eastern European countries are increasingly seeking U.S. protection in response to a perceived vulnerability that Europe itself has been unable to adequately address. The continent is thus compelled to "rejoin the course of History"[15], assuming greater

[11] In the article *Is Europe in Decline? A Machiavellian Perspective* by Miguel Otero, it is emphasized that the European Union is unable to respond effectively to security challenges in the East. As an example, the author suggests that if Russia were to send its tanks into Poland, the EU would lack the necessary capacity to confront such a threat. The article is available online at: https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/archive/opinion/el-declive-de-europa-una-vision-maquiavelica/

[12] A particularly significant example is found in J. Mearsheimer's *Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War*, available online at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/2538981

[13] This scenario is precisely what recent measures by the European Commission aim to address, with plans to allocate €800 billion to strengthening the European defense industry.

[14] When analyzing certain cases from a historical perspective—such as that of China—it becomes evident that the term "emerging" does not accurately define the Asian country. Until the 19th century, China was the world's leading power in economic, commercial, and even technological terms, highlighting that it is not merely emerging, but rather attempting to reclaim its former role in the international system.

[15] This interpretation is supported by Emiliano Alessandri and Domènec Ruiz Devesa. The article is available online at: https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/la-mejor-opcion-para-europa-es-hacerse-cargo-de-su-propia-seguridad-y-defensa/

responsibility for its own security and resilience.

This does not mean that the EU has lost all its power. In contrast to its relative decline in hard power, Europe remains a heavyweight in trade, regulatory affairs, and normative influence. It continues to lead on global standards in areas such as commerce, environmental policy, and social rights, representing a form of non-conventional power. However, these forms of influence are most effective in an open, multilateral international environment, conditions that have steadily eroded over recent decades in favor of hard power competition[16]. Consequently, such tools become less effective in a world increasingly shaped by rival spheres of influence.

And although maps may still place Europe at the center of the world, the reality is that global attention is shifting elsewhere. A new geopolitical cycle is unfolding, in which the Atlantic is losing its status as the global reference point, leaving a vacuum increasingly filled by the Indo-Pacific. This region now accounts for 60% of global GDP, 65% of the world's population, and hosts several active or latent conflict zones that overshadow Europe's geopolitical relevance. Behind lie centuries of history, while ahead lies a new era in which even the European Union is compelled to forge a strategic vision of its own.

[16] Former spanish ambassador Jorge Dezcallar made a similar point in a recent interview on Europe's current decline. His remarks are available online at: https://fusernews.com/exembajador-espanol-europa-esta-en-decadencia-y-perdera-su-nivel-de-vida/#:~:text=afirm%C3%B3

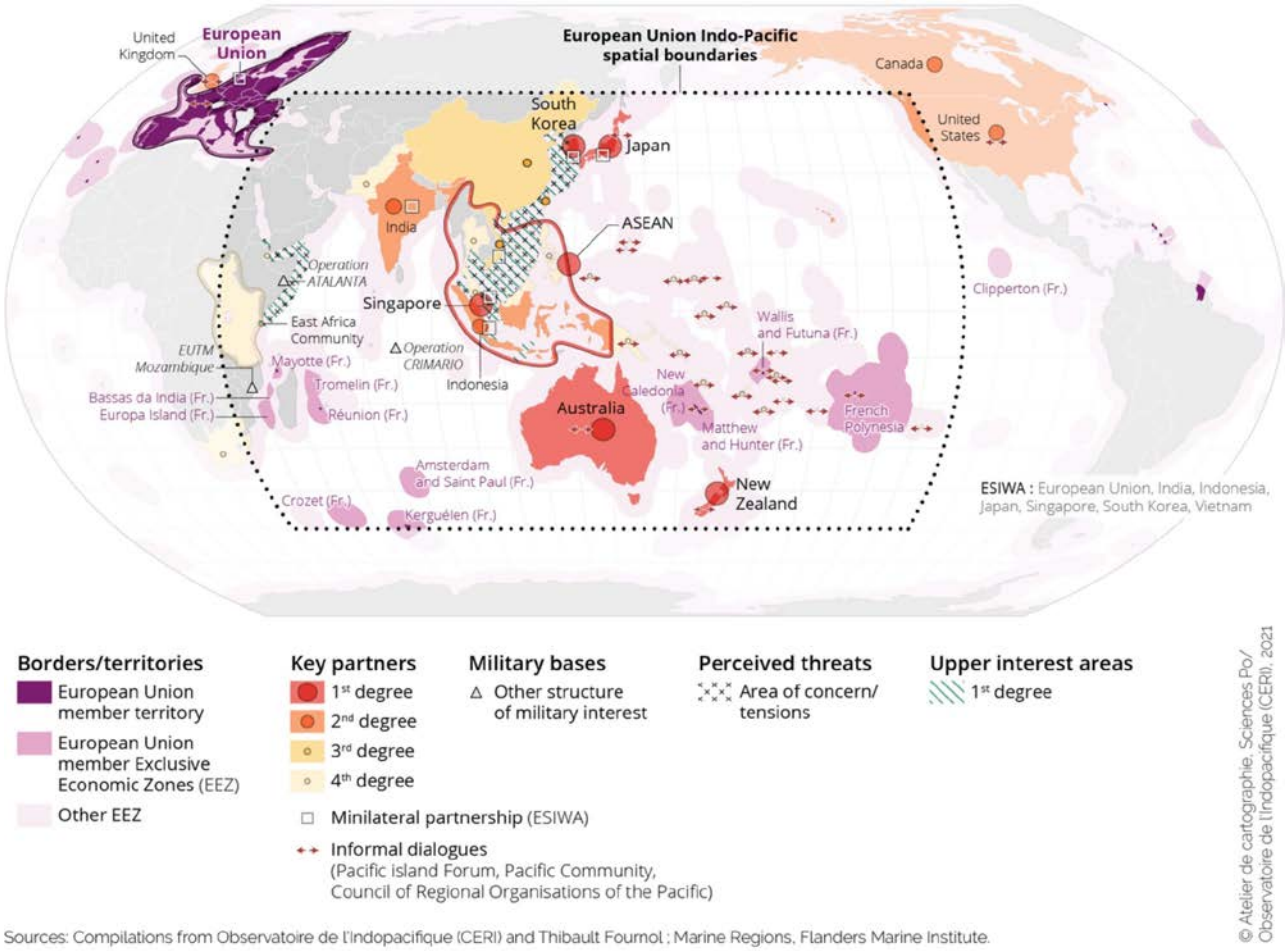


Figure 2. The Indo-Pacific from the European perspective. **Source**: Indo-Pacific Observatory.

The Indo-Pacific: the other side of the coin

The term *Indo-Pacific* has recently emerged in geopolitical vocabulary to designate a vast region stretching from the eastern coasts of Africa to the Western Pacific[17]. Far from being a mere geographic construct, the Indo-Pacific reflects a strategic logic aimed at redefining the global power map. This region brings together some of the most dynamic economies and geopolitically influential states of the 21st century -such as India and China- alongside emerging powers, depending on the context, including Pakistan, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, and Vietnam.

[17] Professor of International Relations Juan Luis López explores the concept in his article The Indo-Pacific as the New Global Geopolitical Axis. Available online at: https://www.unav.edu/documents/16800098/0/Articulo_Juan%2BLuis%2BL%C3%B3pez.pdf?

Each of these actors, with varying capacities for regional and global projection, contributes to a space of dense and complex interactions marked by alliances, historical rivalries, territorial tensions, and hegemonic ambitions. Beyond its demographic and economic weight, the Indo-Pacific is home to some of the world's most sensitive active or latent conflicts: from the recurring clashes between India and Pakistan, to the ongoing crisis surrounding Taiwan, and the dispute over control of the South China Sea, a critical hub for the main maritime routes of global trade. These dynamics make the region a decisive arena where the balance of power for the current century is being shaped.

In this context, the strategic centrality of the Indo-Pacific regarding spheres of influence lies precisely in its shift from a peripheral zone to the core of interests for the main actors of the international system. From a realist perspective, the economic and military rise of China –combined with India's growth and the global projection of second-tier powers like Japan, Australia, and South Korea– has shifted the world's power center from the Atlantic to the Asia-Pacific axis. As a response, the United States has undertaken a strategic pivot in its geopolitical vision[18], significantly strengthening its presence in the region by building a network of alliances and defense agreements[19] aimed at containing China's expansion and safeguarding its own influence.



Figure 3. Key partnerships in the Indo-Pacific. **Source**: The Economist.

[18] This framework began to take shape in 2011 and has been developed across successive U.S. administrations to the present day, defining a global strategy with the Indo-Pacific as the central axis for its security, hegemony, and defense. These types of strategic conceptualizations are crystallized in documents such as the *U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy*, available online at: https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf

[19] Examples include AUKUS, the Quad, and other strategic partnership agreements, such as those with Vietnam or the Philippines.

Under the Biden administration, the U.S. has deepened cooperation with key Southeast Asian countries such as India, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia, not only in military terms, but also through investment mechanisms, technology transfer, trade, and institutional capacity-building[20]. These ties, beyond their bilateral value, represent a modern expression of a sphere of influence, as they seek to consolidate a regional environment favorable to U.S. strategic interests, deter China's military projection, and preserve a liberal order aligned with the American vision.

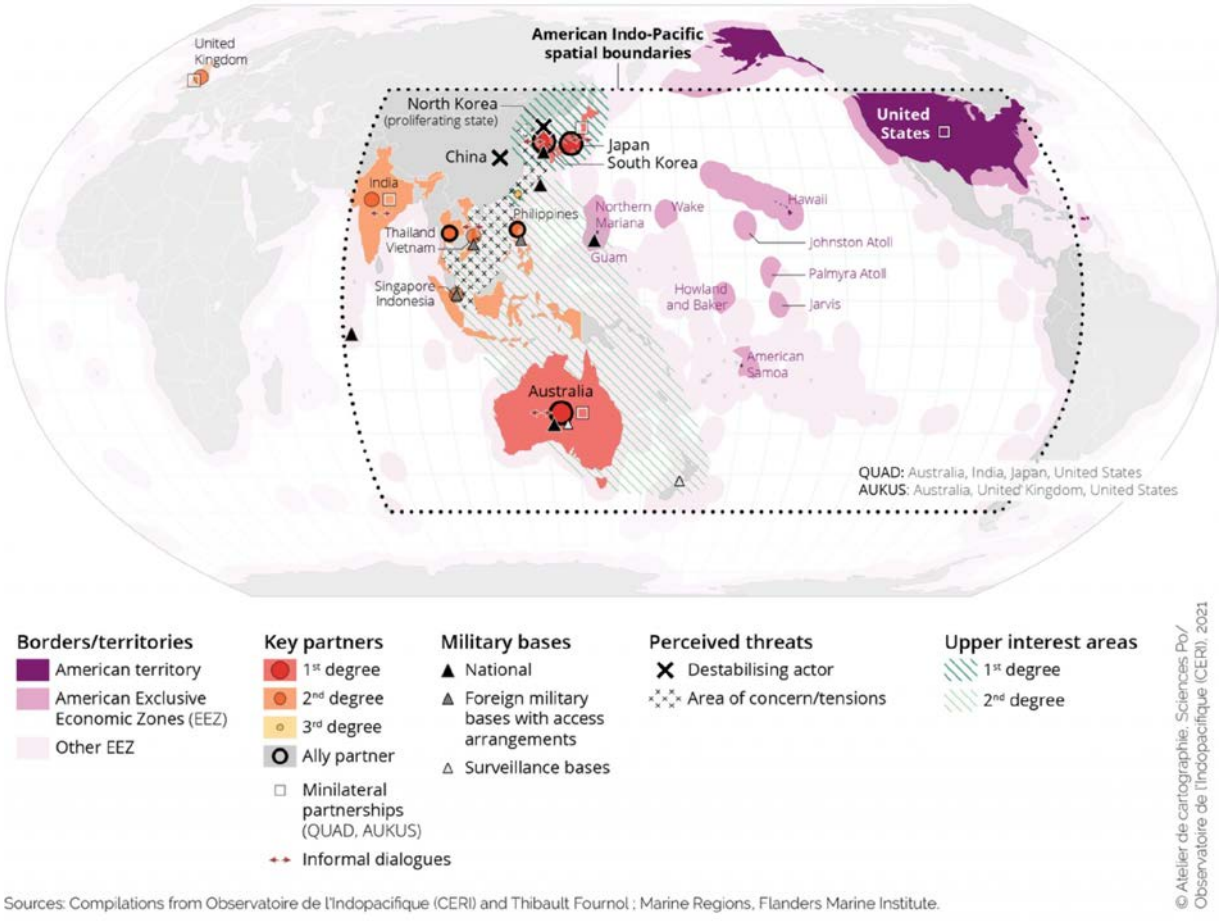


Figure 4. The Indo-Pacific from the U.S. perspective. **Source**: Indo-Pacific Observatory

[20] Some examples include: the 2023 U.S.–India military cooperation agreement; the 2022 Strategic Partnership Agreement with Vietnam; the 2024 Defense Agreement with the Philippines; and the 2024 renewal of the Defense Agreement with Japan.

On the other side, China has advanced its own sphere of influence in the region[21], combining an expanding naval presence with economic and diplomatic tools. Within this logic, Beijing aims to establish a zone of strategic dominance in its immediate periphery, with a particular focus on the South China Sea, the Strait of Malacca, and the routes connecting to the Indian Ocean. This sphere of influence is expressed not only through the construction and militarization of artificial islands[22], but also through the selective use of economic incentives and political pressure on Southeast Asian countries.

Like the United States, China builds alliances, provides protection, offers financing, and designs institutional frameworks to project its vision of international order[23] albeit from a more authoritarian understanding of internal power and sovereignty[24]. The result is an increasingly polarized region split between two power poles: one centered in Washington and the other in Beijing, competing not only in strategic terms but also in governance models, development approaches, and civilizational narratives.

Within this framework, a third actor appears, less prominent but still significant: Russia. Its projection toward the Pacific has been weakened by the war in Ukraine and its growing energy dependence on China, leaving it far from the levels of influence it once held in Eurasia. Nevertheless, Moscow maintains strategic ties with key actors such as India[25], North Korea, and especially China, with which it has deepened a partnership of convenience in opposition to the West.

[21] A prominent case on the other side is the well-known *Belt and Road Initiative*.
[22] In addition to its longstanding disputes with regional countries over control of the Spratly Islands, the Paracel Islands, and others, China has also recently experienced a spike in tensions with Japan after entering Japanese airspace without consent, specifically over the Senkaku Islands. For more information, see: https://thediplomat.com/2025/05/in-first-china-coast-guard-helicopter-enters-japans-airspace-near-disputed-islands-escalating-tensions/
[23] From improving dialogue with organizations such as ASEAN to promoting the expansion of the so-called BRICS, and even negotiating a free trade framework with neighboring countries like Japan and South Korea.
[24] This applies both domestically and abroad, as one of the core principles of Chinese foreign policy is non-intervention in the internal affairs of other countries. A policy that stands in stark contrast to the approach taken by the United States in previous decades.
[25] Its strategy oscillates between aligning itself with U.S. partners on matters related to technology and defense, while simultaneously cooperating with Russia on energy-related issues.

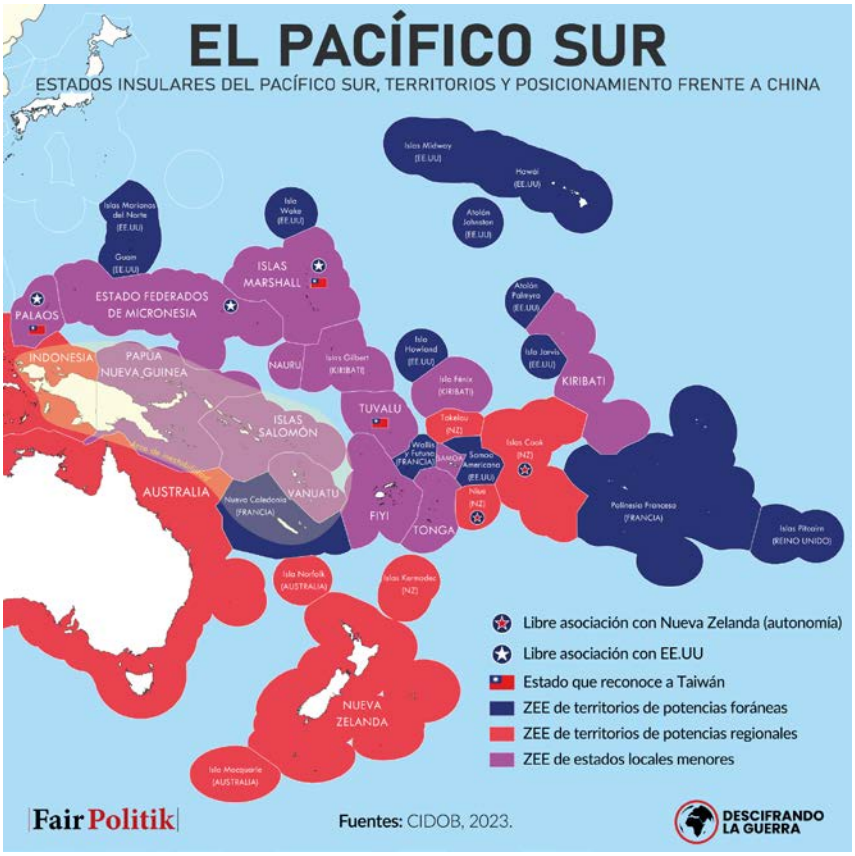


Figure 5. Regional positioning toward China in the South Pacific. **Source:** DLG.

Although Russia's capacity to project power in the Indo-Pacific is limited, it functions as a residual power that reinforces certain dynamics of polarization, particularly in the realms of military and diplomatic cooperation. And if forced to align with one of the dominant spheres, the Chinese option appears to best suit its interests. The region, therefore, does not follow a rigid structure but rather a more complex system of overlapping alliances, relative autonomy strategies, and indirect power plays, where intermediate actors seek to preserve room for maneuver without fully aligning with either of the dominant powers.

The Indo-Pacific thus represents the most advanced manifestation of a reconfiguration of the international order based on spheres of influence. This region exhibits all the key elements of that logic: hegemonic rivalry between superpowers, balance of power between primary and secondary actors, formation of both defensive and offensive alliances, arenas of direct (military or economic) confrontation and indirect ones (such as the Taiwan case), as well as disruptive actors with regional destabilization capacity, North Korea being a prime example.

What sets the Indo-Pacific apart, however, is that this confrontation goes beyond a mere contest over geographic power. It has evolved into a clash between competing worldviews and political, economic, and cultural models. As such, it reshapes the concept of spheres of influence: they no longer merely define zones of strategic control, but also embody rival civilizational projects. This is why the region has become not only the epicenter of global geopolitical competition, but also a revealing example of how the current forces shaping spheres of influence are structured.

Spheres of Influence as a key to global disorder

Far from being an anachronistic vestige of the Westphalian order or a relic of the Cold War, the concept of the sphere of influence has re-emerged as a privileged lens through which to understand the logic driving great power behavior in the 21st century. In contrast to the narrative that once promised a world governed by norms, institutions, and cooperative mechanisms, today's international system reveals a sustained return to power politics, strategic competition, and the fragmentation of global frameworks.

Within this context, spheres of influence have resurfaced not only as an observable empirical reality, but as an indispensable analytical category for interpreting the shape of the emerging order. International relations theory has long argued that in an anarchic and competitive system, great powers tend to demarcate spheres of influence to secure their immediate surroundings, project power, and contain external threats. It is clear that this strategic rationale did not disappear with the end of the Cold War, but rather evolved and adapted to new configurations of power.

The absence of clear global leadership, the erosion of international normative consensus, and the rise of emerging powers have created an environment in which zones of influence are once again central, albeit in more complex and diffuse forms. Unlike the rigid geopolitical divisions of the 20th century, contemporary spheres of influence are no longer defined by territorial occupation or direct military control. Influence is now exercised through a blend of tools: strategic investment, technological presence, economic interdependence, regulatory standards, and diplomatic networks.

This hybridization of instruments enables powers to shape their surroundings without the need for formal domination, operating instead through asymmetric relationships and

functional dependencies. As such, today's spheres of influence extend beyond geographic boundaries to encompass normative, economic, and civilizational domains. The revitalization of this concept carries profound implications for the analysis of the international system.

First, it signals the return of a bipolar logic, in which great power competition is reshaping the rules of global engagement. Second, it introduces growing volatility into international politics, as the autonomy of intermediate states is increasingly constrained by the pressures of emerging blocs—though there are notable exceptions such as India, whose growing power affords it a degree of strategic maneuverability. Third, it increases the risk of indirect conflicts, regional escalations, and protracted disputes, as major powers prove unwilling to cede ground in their respective zones of strategic interest.

In this scenario, the key question is not whether spheres of influence should exist—since they are already operative—but how they might be managed to mitigate the risk of open confrontation. Is it possible to establish tacit arrangements among powers that define areas of interest without leading to conflict? Can competing visions of world order coexist without triggering a systemic war? These questions point to the need to move beyond the current paradigm and embrace, from a critical perspective, the idea that today's world is governed by more direct, realist, and adaptive frameworks for managing power.

*Miguel Ángel Melián Negrín**

Consultant and International Analyst in Geopolitics, Security, and Defense