Spheres of influence: A few reflections on the concept

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Abstract

In the frame of the Ukrainian crisis the question of spheres of influence has returned to political discourse. This may be an awkward subject, but what if we only deny the existence of such power constellations as spheres of influence? Do spheres of influence exist, or are they relics of history, and mere rhetoric? And if they exist, where can we find them? The hypothesis in this article is that instead of being a tangible reality, spheres of influence are obscure and contested political constructions, which nevertheless can have an impact on political behaviour. To demonstrate this, the article will first introduce a few examples of the current use of the concept. Secondly, a few remarks follow concerning the different IR schools of thought, and conceptual history as a method. Next, the article turns to discussing a few dictionaries and the empirical material for the present inquiry, which consists of recent textbooks, i.e. the current political science curriculum in one particular university, at the University of Tampere, Finland. More empirical cases deal with the division of Africa, the post-WWII situation, and the Hungarian revolution of 1956.

Keywords: conceptual history, spheres of interest, IR, colonisation, Hungary, 1956

Introduction

In the frame of the Ukrainian crisis the question of spheres of influence has returned to political discourse. Both the EU and Russia have denied the existence of their respective "spheres", but at the same time accused each other of building such entities. Susanna Hast (2012) has recently noted that it is impossible to find a non-Russian scholar who does not take it for granted that a sphere of influence should not belong to Russian foreign policy. The "sphere" has become a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, however, a mantra. According to Hast, there is no room for discussing the phenomenon, and the only justifiable way to approach it is "to avoid any references to it, or to formulate new

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expressions" (Hast 2012, 15, 33, 287). Although I hesitate to accept Hast's conclusion as to the need to think of "spheres" as a kind of potential model, she has captured a crucial problem for conceptual history. What if we only deny the existence of such power constellations as spheres of influence?

Thus, do spheres of influence exist, or are they relics of history and mere rhetoric? And if they exist, where can we find them? The hypothesis is that instead of being a tangible reality, spheres of influence are obscure and contested political constructions, which nevertheless can have an impact on political behaviour. Thus, the paper examines several classical cases from the colonization of Africa, through Churchill's attempt to gain influence in East Central Europe, to the Hungarian revolution of 1956. I will, on the one hand, use conceptual history and inquire about the linguistic use of the concept. Secondly, I will examine if Hungary, and 1956 in particular, plays a role in IR textbooks anymore.

At first, I will introduce a few examples of the current use of the concept. Secondly, I have a few remarks concerning the different IR schools, and conceptual history as a method. Next, I will discuss a few dictionaries and my empirical material, which consists of recent textbooks, i.e. the current political science curriculum in one particular university, at the University of Tampere, Finland. More empirical cases deal with the division of Africa, the post-WWII situation, and the Hungarian revolution of 1956. The source material is based on textbooks and dictionaries, documents, and newspaper material.

Political thought vs. different IR schools

Although Susanna Hast is not a conceptual historian, her starting point has similarities with the nature of such an approach: she focuses on the use of the concept of spheres of influence (2012: 281). Indeed, an *ad hoc* Google search (2014) concerning a few Finnish and British newspapers revealed a clear peak in its use in the aftermath of the Crimean crisis. When it comes to „sphere of interest," *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Ilta-Sanomat* both seem to connect the concept to Russia and the crisis in Ukraine. (cf. Helsingin Sanomat, March 29, 2014; Nyyssönen, 2014). In the *Economist*, however, there were not many references to spheres of interest, whilst sphere of influence is connected either to ideas such as China's economic might, or specific countries such as Congo, Rwanda, Russia, Brazil or the United States.

In conceptual history, sphere of influence is not one of those positive concepts, like democracy or freedom, which all political actors eagerly try to monopolize. Instead, I argue that it is obviously pejorative in nature, and as such it has served as a convenient label to depict a political opponent in Russia. Thus, the aim is not to argue whether spheres of influence *de facto* "exist," but to claim that a notion of these spheres can be found in political thought. Someone's political thought is not necessary fully coherent, but it is full of perceptions, prejudices and even stereotypes. Hence, a sphere of influence is an ideal type, and a discourse with serious political consequences, as it can make an impact on behaviour.

In this sense conceptual history is not necessarily bound to any of the major IR schools. It merely studies the "isms" and the schools themselves – theories like "Realism" and "Liberalism" are rough models to stress particular notions, such as security or international organizations. I might be labelled a "post-positivist" as in my understanding the basis of international relations is rather social than material (cf. also Austin, 1962; Wendt, 1999).

History matters, meanwhile, and recently there has even been a discourse of IR's historical (re)turn. I accept Hobson's and Lawson's view that history has always been a core feature of the international imagination. The English school is an especially important interface between the study of history and IR. However, there are similarities to other fields as well, such as in neoclassical realist studies and constructivist approaches. I agree with Elman and Elman that it is not always easy to distinguish historians and political scientists; some political science reads very much like history with its attendant focus on contingency, agency, historically circumscribed causal arguments, and particularistic explanations. Similarly, some 'new' history has moved toward an analytic approach that looks and reads quite like political science (Hobson and Lawson, 2008: 415–435; Keene, 2008: 381; Elman & Elman, 2008: 357–358). A case such as Hungary 1956 is already so well documented and studied that the focus could, by now, be turned towards the natura of the use of this history – along with its misuse and abuse (Nyyssönen, 2016).

Hobson and Lawson have reframed E.H. Carr's famous question by applying it to international relations: "What is History in IR?" For them, there are four ideal types, and the answer varies according to where the researcher is located on a continuum connecting these. The degree of willingness to generalize matters: "History without historicism", like its neorealist version, generalizes most, whilst "radical historicism" and "traditional history" avoid generalizations and represent the other extreme point on the continuum. There is, however, an "historicist historical sociology", which overlaps with all of the other three approaches. Although this category looks somewhat loose, it includes such formidable figures as Quentin Skinner, E.H. Carr and R.G. Collingwood. This ideal type accepts that history is knowable, but produced within a certain time and place, and subject to the interpretations of its practitioners (Hobson and Lawson, 2008: 415-435).

Constructivist history is essentially "Skinnerian" in nature, distinguishing itself from realist materialism, and the history of ideas. Here the construction of history takes place on two levels: on the one hand, politicians construct their own view of history; on the other, scholars do the same afterwards. In this approach, speaking and using language is already an act, as the speaker simultaneously says something and does something. Thus, the present study is Skinnerian in a sense that it tries to identify the questions of a certain time, and these may be plausibly established when knowing the contemporary context. Moreover, I posit that the use of political language is the central object of the history of political study (Reus-Smit, 2008: 395-414).

Conceptual history is not (yet) an IR theory, but through post-positivist approaches and constructivism it opens new IR discourses. A crucial problem is whether a phenomenon may have existed before it was linguistically constructed and named? This may be illustrated with reference to the *Treaty of Tordesillas* in 1494, wherein Spain and Portugal divided the newly discovered lands outside Europe. In the agreement, mediated by the Pope, they concluded that specific territories "belong" to them, and may even "belong [to them] forever" (*Treaty between*…). The agreement made an impact on political behaviour particularly in Latin America (Brazil has the Portuguese legacy, whilst the rest of the continent speaks predominantly Spanish), and in Portuguese colonialism directed to the "East" i.e. to Africa and Asia. Whether this was already an arrangement of spheres of influence, however, is not explicitly answered by the treaty.

According to Reinhart Koselleck (1979), a scholar either uses the linguistic conventions of the time period of interest, or categories created *ex post*. I think that we need both approaches at the same time. Contemporary expressions' relevance has to be discovered not only in the sources but in the historian's composition, too. Reference to the linguistic conventions of the time period studied do not lead sources to dictate, but offers the advantage of decreasing the risk of anachronisms, and it enriches our whole picture of history. In this paper, discourses are traced from past treaties and speeches in which their manifestation in speech acts is noted.

The concept and its use: From Berlin to Morocco

At first sight, „sphere of influence" is not a common concept at all. In the library University of Tampere a quick perusal of textbooks reveals that only a few indexes included the concept: *Introduction to Global Politics* (2008) is an exception, and connects the concept to Eastern Europe, as Stalin's and Churchill's WWII conversations in October 1944. Surprisingly the term is not included in the textbook of „isms" either, i.e. *International Relations Theories* (2007), presenting the discipline and its diversity from classical realism to post-colonialism and green theory. More surprising is that not even *A history of International Relations theory* (1992) included the concept in its index.

According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1968: 12-13), sphere of influence is "A diplomatic term that signifies a claim by the state to exclusive control within a foreign territory." This control could be found in economic or military matters, in politics, or it may concern the overall government of the territory. The dictionary also mentions cases such as the Monroe Doctrine and the Soviet policy. Moreover, Frederick L. Schuman (1934) linked the concept to African imperialism since the 1880s. With time, the expression extended to cover a close relationship between small European states and great powers with which they are not in a formal alliance, and whose protectorate they are not under. For example, Austria and Hungary were said to be within the Italian sphere of influence already in 1934 (Schuman, 1950: 297).

Also known as the Congo Conference, the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 regulated colonization and trade in Africa. Under a humanitarian façade diplomats laid down rules for seeking colonies, but in the end they could not prevent rivalry. Sometimes it is claimed that the term „sphere of influence" emerged at this conference, but in the closing document, in the *General Act of the Berlin Conference*, the term does not yet occur. Instead, they repeat twice, in Articles 6 and 9, the formula of exercising "sovereign rights or influence in the territories" [the second time: "in the afore said territories"]. (General Act of…, 1885).

However, there is an agreement between Great Britain and Germany (1885), which is considered to be the first to make use of the term (Encyclopaedia Britannica 1968, 12), referring to "a separation and definition of their respective spheres of influence in the territories of the Gulf of Guinea." Both powers agreed to cede all protectorates, which they had already established beyond these limitations to the other party. The encyclopaedia stresses that agreements of this kind dealt with territories that were ungoverned and thus could be acquired by whatever nation (*ibid*.). In the headline of the agreement they still speak about “spheres of action” instead of “influence.” If we regard this as accidental, we can compare the headline (1885) to a later agreement signed in Berlin in 1890: “Arrangement between Great Britain and Germany, respecting Zanzibar, Heligoland, and the Spheres of Influence of the two Countries in Africa” (cf. BFSP Vol. 76: 772–778; BFSP Vol. 92: 35–37). The latter document was signed on July 1, 1890, which coincides with the end of the Bismarckian “Realpolitik” – the old Chancellor had resigned only a few months earlier.

In 1907 Britain and Russia divided Persia and thus nded “The Great Game”. The dispute had unfolded between Britain and Russia for decades over Afghanistan and neighbouring territories such as Tibet and Persia. The most important of these, the agreement concerning Persia, did not eliminate all competition between the two powers with respect to their policies in Iran. Although they did not use any expression referring to spheres, they argued that a line existed, i.e. beyond a certain line they would not offer any concessions for railways, banks, telegraphs, roads, transport, insurance, etc.

Furthermore, Britain and France settled many long-standing issues in the *Entente cordiale* in 1904. This “cordial understanding” was soon tested by German *Weltpolitik*, and the subsequent Moroccan Crises in 1905 and in 1911. During the first crisis Kaiser Wilhelm II challenged the French by backing Morocco’s sovereignty. However, in Algeciras, in 1906, German imperial aims were supported only by Austria-Hungary. The second, i.e. the Agadir Crisis of 1911, is one of the best examples of gunboat diplomacy. Germany accepted France's domination in return for territory in what was known at the time as *Neukamerun*. This, as Schuman (1950, 297) noted, meant also that the internationalisation of spheres of interests failed: in 1912 France and Spain partitioned Morocco and terminated its belonging to an international sphere – only Tangier held this position until much later.

What is typical of these examples is the imperialist nature and control of “spheres.” The African map was depicted as a vacuum, with white spots symbolising “unorganised” territories waiting to be filled, due to the white man’s burden. Moreover, it was typical that great power antagonisms played out on other continents. As a result, a crucial negative surplus remains in the meaning of the concept of „sphere of influence,” i.e. that the great powers were reorganizing territories against the will of smaller powers.

Hitler, Stalin and Churchill

The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (*Deutsch-sowjetischer Nichtangriffspakt*, Договор о ненападении между Германией и Советским Союзом) is probably the most well-known example of the division of spheres of interest. In the public part of the agreement both sides stressed that they would desist from any aggressive action and any attack on each other, either individually or jointly with other powers (see Article I). The idea of spheres was kept secret, and denied throughout the existence of the Soviet Union. Even so, in August 1989 the commemoration of the signing of the Pact united the people of the Baltic States in protest to form a chain of people over 600 kilometres long.

Thus, the act of dividing a region between great powers was basically an expression of respect for each other in its own "sphere." According to the first article of the secret protocol of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, "in a territorial and political rearrangement in the areas belonging to the Baltic States (Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), the northern boundary of Lithuania shall represent the boundary of the spheres of influence of Germany and the U.S.S.R." (*Der deutsch-sowjetische*…). The concept *Intressensphären* was also present in the second article: "in the areas belonging to the Polish state, the spheres of influence of Germany and the U.S.S.R. shall be bounded approximately by the line of the rivers Narev, Vistula and San." In fact the German term referred to interests, but the English translation equalized influence and interest. Regardless of the wording, in essence a kind of gentlemen's agreement was reached to close eyes and give free hands to each other: "attention is called by the Soviet side to its interests in Bessarabia. The German side declares its complete political disinterest in these areas" (*ibid*.).

The concept of sphere of influence was by this stage fully established. The only novelty was that even a post-1918 state, the Soviet Union, had by now learned the game of the imperialists – this is basically what Hannah Arendt commented in her famous essay on Hungary 1956. Nevertheless, the German-Soviet protocol was valuable only as far as both sides were convinced of its influence on military and political behaviour: already in late 1940 Hitler denied Molotov an acknowledgement of the Soviet Union's right to continue activities in Finland, and in 1941 the Soviets signed an agreement with Yugoslavia, when Germany started to carry out the operation Barbarossa.

Less known is that Winston Churchill also played this game, which he had learned already before WWI. By 1944, the future of East-Central Europe emerged as a question to be settled. Basically the US argued that it cannot accept any agreements, which can lead to division of Europe into spheres of influence (Sipos and Vida 1983, 79–82).

Churchill represented more balance-of-power-oriented views in his political thought, and without letting Roosevelt know about this, he visited the Kremlin in October 1944.

According to Churchill's proposition to Stalin, the Soviet Union would get 75% influence in Bulgaria and 90% in Romania. In Hungary and Yugoslavia influence would be shared 50/50. This proposal was published in Churchill's memoirs in 1953, but its more fatal step only in the 1970s. One day after Churchill made his proposal, Eden and Molotov agreed on Romania (sharing 90–10) and Greece (10–90), exchanging a subjugated role in the former for a dominant position in the other. Bulgaria's status varied from 75 to 90% influence for the Soviet Union, until eventually the two sides agreed on 80/20 in favour of the Soviet Union. Molotov had demanded 75% in Yugoslavia, but no changes were made there. The final result in the case of Hungary was 80/20 to the benefit of the Soviet Union. (Gati 1986, 29–31).

On the one hand, "percentages" were as impossible an idea as it would be to say that a woman is partly pregnant (Max, 1985: 20). On the other hand, Churchill was an old-school politician, who tried to negotiate and achieve even the impossible. Churchill, however, was not alone with his thoughts looking ahead to a divison of spheres. There is an intriguing example in this respect in a relatively new IR textbook concerning how George Kennan, reflecting the spirit of the time, writing in a letter to his fellow diplomat Charles E. Bohlen, asked: "Why should we not make a decent and definite compromise… divide Europe frankly into spheres of influence – keep ourselves out of the Russia sphere and keep the Russians out of ours?" (Mansbach & Taylor, 2012: 109). Thus, the idea of a sphere mattered not only in Greece but for example in Iran as well: When Iran nationalized oil facilities, this led to the 1953 CIA coup securing the Western interests there up until the late 1970s. In the Western hemisphere interventions were quite numerous, from Guatemala to Cuba, from Chile to Grenada and Panama.

Interestingly, even according to Samuel P. Huntington's civilisational theory, the basic "spheres" in the Cold War were the "Communist Bloc" and the "Free World." South Africa and Portuguese African colonies, as well as Spain and Portugal themselves, belonged to the "free world" in Huntington's map. He, however, did not classify countries such as Sweden or Finland any more in the "free world" (Huntington, 1996: 23-26). Thus, even the "free world" seemed to represent a kind of sphere of influence: it referred to close US allies, whatever their political system might have been. Even a more cynical definition could be found under the Reagan administration: Jeane Kirkpatrick argued in the early 1980s that the US could support authoritarian but not totalitarian, i.e.

Communist, regimes. To answer the question of whether a country like Hungary was totalitarian or authoritarian is not the aim of this paper.

Hungary challenging the status quo in the making

In *Eisenhower's New-Look national security policy, 1953-61*, Saki Dockrill has devoted a chapter to "The US sphere of influence." There Docktrill refers to a discussion in the National Security Council (NSC) in Washington in December 1954 about US security interests in the world. Reflecting on the situation in Asia, Secretary of Defence Charles Wilson argued that the US needed a sphere of influence, although it must not make this public. The President opposed "the concept of line-drawing", because

> "…if and when you should decide on a policy of drawing a defensive line beyond which you tell the enemy he cannot step without risking a clash, you automatically give the initiative to the enemy to seize whatever falls short of the defensive line." (Dockrill, 1996: 126-127)

This statement refers in a clever manner that no particular lines existed, which offered space for more practical lines on whose basis decisions could be made. According to Dockrill, the US was not eager to act alone, but moved the Hungarian question to the UN, and expected support from Britain and France. Thus, if France and Britain would not agree, "at least we would have a reason for not acting." On the 26th of October, 1956, Eisenhower revealed that he did not want to push the Soviet Union too far, and on the next day Dulles went to say that the US would not "look upon these nations [in East-Central Europe] as potential military allies" (Dockrill, 1996: 160). For President Eisenhower Hungary was as far and unreachable as Tibet (cf. Kitts & Grad, 1993). At first sight, this statement may seem odd: Hungary is located in East Central Europe, and thus in the heart of Europe. Nevertheless, Tibet was a question of that time, as Communist China had occupied it as recently as in 1950, and even a revolt took place there a few years after the Hungarian events.

In our IR textbooks in Tampere, Hungary is not often present, and 1956 even less so. However, for Kenneth Waltz and his structural realism, 1956 is a textbook example. In his defence of bipolarity he even mentions Dulles' statement that one great power tolerates the other "because their competing interventions would pose undue danger" (Waltz, 1979: 208). Another classical textbook of realism, *Politics Among Nations*, reminds that 1956, 1968 and 1973 (in the Near East) all represented manifestations of a balance. Therefore a possibility for *détente*, too, resulted from that balance (Morgenthau, 2005: 206, 371). Thus, zero was the number of wars fought by the Cold War superpowers against each other. Neither did they send troops to contested areas, i.e. to Berlin, Hungary, Vietnam, Czechoslovakia or Afghanistan (Pinker, 2011: 259). Michael Walzer's (2000: 94, 292) *Just and Unjust Wars* has an implicit reference to 1956, when Walzer writes that military action can be "honourable and virtuous" but not always "prudent". Finally, one interesting case is the book *Peace Research*, in which Peter Wallensteen offers a discussion of the role of the UN and its Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld in the crisis (2011: 122, 158-166).

In the Cold War, superpower interests did not remain only regional but went global and beyond. A book entitled *Unspoken Rules and Superpower Dominance*, from Paul Keal (1984) reveals the complexity of the discourse. Unjust as the system was, superpowers behaved in the end in ways that suggested that they had recognized each other's spheres of interest in the Western Hemisphere and in Eastern Europe (Keal, 1984). This is a cynical view, but „sphere of influence" makes a distinction between "takers" and "makers." For example, in Finland President Kekkonen wrote in this diary in 1958 that if Finns do not understand that they find themselves in a sphere of influence, the Soviet Union will show the limits to them. Such a statement, however, could not be said aloud in public. Even if relations do not deteriorate as a result of making statements like this, at the least they certainly do not improve one's position in the international field and in diplomacy. A very good example is the struggle of neutrality, in which the Soviet side usually recognized Finnish attempts at expressing neutrality, but not neutrality itself (Nyyssönen, 2006: 37–38).

Thus, while there were agreements in Teheran and Yalta, there was no treaty or agreement ever made that granted the whole region of Eastern Europe to the Soviets as a sphere of influence. However, the most important lesson that the non-response of the Western states to the second Soviet intervention in Hungary in November 1956 taught was that spheres of interest, based on the mutually accepted post-war European status quo, did exist and was in practice. Those who could not acknowledge the situation, were to be confronted again and again with new proofs, as the reform attempts of the following decades all failed in Eastern Europe, reiterating a fact that had become obvious in 1956 in Hungary for the first time (Békés, 1995).

In the aftermath of the Hungarian 1956 we can find a few references to spheres of influence in Finnish diplomatic papers. In July 1957, Chargé d'affaires Antti Hjelt, who had witnessed the autumn in Budapest, surmised that Imre Nagy and his government had gone too far to the right. Although it was impossible to find the borderline between possible and impossible, “Moscow’s attitude to free elections in countries under its sphere of influence is well-known,” Hjelt wrote. Hjelt’s successor T.H. Heikkilä offered an assessment of Western views of the situation in September 1957. According to Heikkilä, Hungary did not benefit territorially in the end of the WWII, contrary to the other “satellites” of the Soviet Union. Therefore gratitude to the Soviets could not grow significantly, particularly when the Communist leadership was fully under the control of Moscow. Exactly for this reason, Heikkilä speculates that Hungary would be a very difficult problem if it would belong to the Western sphere of influence. By referring to the views of Western representatives, considers this an irony of fate, he concludes that because of its earlier territorial losses, in the Western sphere of influence Hungary would look for a territorial revision in the face of its neighbours, and thus a constant danger of conflict would appear in this part of Europe (7D2 UMA, 5.7., 6.9.1957).

Conclusion

In the paper I have demonstrated the difficulties of tracing spheres of influence. As Susanna Hast (2012: 287) has noted, influence as such is not pejorative, but the “sphere” is something clearly negative. Indeed, ”sphere” is something final and exclusive in political life, and as such it is full of illocutions. Historically the concept is usually linked to the rise of imperialism in the 19th Century, but already in 1494 Spain and Portugal divided the newly discovered lands between themselves driven by similar considerations. After the Cold War, the concept seemed to go into the dustbin of history. Mechanisms of power have become more sophisticated. Nevertheless, Russia’s recent activity, and particularly its denied activity in Ukraine, have kept the term on the agenda. In present-day usage the concept is directed at political opponents as a negative remark, as seen in the debate between Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs (at the time) Sergei Lavrov and former Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt (see e.g. Bloomberg, 2015). No doubt, European Neighbourhood Policy sounds better, but arguments such “we are only responding to the demands of these countries” may ring hollow in ears on the other side of the debate.

In general the concept seems to belong to a grey zone of politics. Sphere of influence is a kind of paradox, which might exist but cannot be publicly recognized. Even if its potential existence might have an impact on behaviour, its public admittance would restrict one's political room for manoeuvre. On the basis of the cases studied here, I propose that it is usually the actor with the weaker bargaining position (at the time, and in the given context), such as Bismarck in 1884, Stalin in 1939, or Churchill in 1944, who tries to save as much as possible by seeking to formalise recognition for one's sphere. From this point of view, it may be interesting to consider the statement attributed to former Polish foreign minister Radosław Sikorski, according to whom Putin proposed to divide Ukraine when Poland's then Prime Minister Donald Tusk visited Moscow in 2008. Sikorski himself, however, cancelled his statement a few days later, and said that "some of the words have been over-interpreted" (RT 21.10.2014; cf. Reuters 20.10.2014).

As to when Hungary was at stake in 1956, we cannot find many references in the IR textbooks to its case. Neither to spheres of influence, nor to 1956 itself. Every now and then Hungary is present in IR textbooks, but mostly in lists of newly acceded EU and NATO member countries. Sometimes the situation of the Hungarian economy, and even the Jobbik party are mentioned, as well as the dispute between Hungary and Slovakia concerning the Gabčikovo dam issue (Kupchan 2013: 154, 173; Keukeleire-Delreux 2014: 315-318; Pinker, 2011: 269). Perhaps the silence about the events of 1956 may reflect in part that the outcome is in a sense recognised as inevitable and thus natural, with reference to a Soviet sphere of interest, although further research may be required to verify this conclusion.

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