

Exploring the Concept of Spheres of Influence in Historical Context

A sphere of influence is an area of control without formal political power over the region. Nations use economic and military power to obtain spheres of influence. Formal agreements are sometimes used to establish control. Spheres of influence often lead to exploitation.

What Is A Sphere of Influence?

A "sphere of influence" is control over a region without it actually being part of your country. Military and economic power allows nations to have spheres of influence throughout the world without needing to extend the resources of colonial rule. Colonies are part of the nation itself.

A nation is able to both demand special privileges (dominance) and deny such power to other nations (monopoly). This is a form of imperialism, which involves power over other areas. If it does not rely on military power, it can also be a form of "soft" power.

The term arises because a nation has power (influence) over a certain area (sphere).

Imperialism v. Free Trade

This practice can be a result of an agreement among different nations. European nations during the [Age of Imperialism](#), for instance, split up control of Africa by **formal agreement**.

European nations hoped that a formal arrangement would provide a means to keep the peace. Consider it a bit like mob bosses agreeing to certain territories. In this case, the arrangement had a short time success rate. Imperialism still contributed to the [outbreak of WWI](#).

The United States proposed an "**Open Door**" policy in China at the turn of the 20th Century. Free trade, not a special sphere of influence by any one nation, would be upheld. China would retain more control over its own government while trade would still be promoted overall.

U.S. and Latin America

A sphere of influence results from a stronger nation having the military and economic power to control other nations. A weaker government might rely on a richer one as a market for its goods, becoming indebted in the process. This can be a more **informal arrangement**.

The United States has long had a sphere of influence over Latin America because of its military power and Latin America's reliance on the U.S. as a market for its goods. [Monroe Doctrine](#) was a warning to European nations not to try to have new spheres of influence in the region.

The term "**banana republics**" arose because of the power of U.S. fruit companies over Latin American countries. Big businesses had much control over local affairs. Various attempts were made to regain local self-government, including by [Fidel Castro in Cuba](#).

Russian Spheres of Influence

Russians learned from multiple attacks (including from Napoleon's France and Hitler's Germany) the value of a buffer zone. After WWII, the Soviets [used Eastern Europe](#).

The Soviet Union did not directly govern the region but used military power, trade, and communist ideology to help retain control. Eastern Europe balanced the United States, the competing Cold War superpower, having much power over Western Europe during this period.

Russia today (2023) is fighting a war in Ukraine, which is not supportive of Russia's attempts to form a sphere of influence that includes parts of if not all of that country.

White or Black Man's Burden?

Rudyard Kipling is famous for classics such as *Jungle Book*. Kipling is infamous for a poem entitled "The White Man's Burden," which provided a racially paternalistic argument for American control of the Philippines after the [Spanish-American War](#) (1898).

Edward Morel later spoke of the "[Black Man's Burden](#)," discussing the many problems that arose from white "spheres of influence" over Africa, resulting in many forms of racial exploitation.

A sphere of influence often leads to exploitation. A more powerful nation benefits from the resources of a weaker nation without needing to respect its needs.

Final Thoughts

Spheres of influence are not just a result of economic and military power.

The Soviet Union used communist ideology as a means to retain a sphere of influence.

[Religion](#) can also be a means to help retain a sphere of influence. Ethnic and racial connections can also be used. There are many ways for powerful nations to spread their influence.