

Resets and Spheres of Influence

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The Obama administration [has explicitly sought to "reset" the relationship with Russia](#), which had become [quite dysfunctional](#) during the final years of the Bush administration. Although Washington has not used the reset terminology with respect to the troubled U.S. relationship with China, the substantive goal appears to be similar. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates' [effort to restore the dialogue between the militaries](#) of the two countries is one indication of that intent.

Both goals, however, are encountering headwinds for a key reason. Policy makers seem unwilling to accept the reality that any great power in the international system expects, and will seek to enforce, a sphere of influence in its immediate region. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice famously (or infamously) [insisted that the concept of a sphere of influence was both obsolete and pernicious](#). But that viewpoint is dangerously erroneous. The tensions between the United States and Russia and those between the United States and China confirm that point.

The latest, clumsy provocation is [Moscow's agreement to help Venezuela build a nuclear-power plant](#). Predictably, that move has caused hawks in the United States [to thunder about perfidious Russian contempt for the Monroe Doctrine](#). There is more than a little hypocrisy in that outrage, since many of those same hawks successfully lobbied for adding the Baltic republics to NATO and now advocate deploying ballistic missile defenses in Eastern Europe and offering NATO membership to Ukraine and Georgia—as though Russia has no justifiable reason to object to such moves in its geopolitical back yard.

Like the proverbial broken clock that is right twice a day, however, the hawks are correct with respect to the Russian-Venezuelan nuclear deal. The United States has an important interest at stake in making sure that Latin America, currently a nuclear-weapons-free zone, stays free of nuclear weapons. Moscow's willingness to help Hugo Chavez, the Crazy Eddie of the Western Hemisphere, acquire nuclear capabilities—even if they are ostensibly for peaceful power-generation purposes—is an unfriendly act in *our* geopolitical back yard.

Both sides need to back off. Russia needs to find a graceful way out of its increasingly cozy relationship with Chavez, and the United States needs to stop talking about deploying missile defenses or expanding NATO eastward. Washington and Moscow must acknowledge that the concept of spheres of influence is alive and well, and that gratuitous violations of that concept will negate any prospect for a reset in relations.

U.S. leaders must also comprehend that cordial relations with China require a willingness to accept that East Asia's rapidly rising great power will seek to establish a sphere of influence in its neighborhood. Beijing's [expansive territorial claims in the South China Sea](#) and the recent [spat with Japan over disputed islets](#) in another body of water are signs of that process. China's growing power and assertiveness means that the United States will need to [tread softly](#) regarding such territorial disputes, as well as the even more sensitive Taiwan issue, if Washington wants to avoid nasty confrontations with Beijing.

Condoleezza Rice could not have been more wrong. Whether we like it or not, spheres of influence will be a crucial feature of international politics—and especially of great power relations—in the twenty-first century. It is imperative that U.S. policy makers understand and adjust to that reality.

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