Responsibility to Protect: Great Powers in a Polycentric World

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Based on a paper prepared for the Yalta International Forum, Moscow, November 2025.

DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2026-24-1-8-14

At Yalta in 1945, Stalin, Churchill, and Roosevelt had no doubts about the role their great powers would play in pacifying and stabilizing the postwar international order: the victorious allies that had won the war would collaborate to preserve peace, if necessary, by the combined deployment of their enormous military power.

The Big Three's Yalta meeting is often associated with Europe's postwar division into Soviet and Western spheres of influence and with the subsequent outbreak of the East-West Cold War. Yet there was little or no discussion of spheres of influence at Yalta. The conference was devoted not to carving up Europe but to unifying and integrating it under the combined tutelage of the main victors of World War II—Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States (Roberts, 2017).

The key Yalta decision was finalization of the agreement on the establishment of the United Nations as successor to the League of Nations.

The driving force behind the foundation of the UN was the United States and President Roosevelt's vision of the Big Three (+ China) acting as an international policing force that would jointly impose peace and stability on a disorderly world. In effect, it was a prescription for a universal sphere of influence under the benign hegemony of the great powers—the re-creation on a global scale of the 19th century Concert of Europe.

Another important point to note about the Yalta conference is the extent to which it stood for a *restorationist* peace: the Big Three's aim was to shore up the existing system of international politics—the international society of sovereign states that had developed since the Westphalian treaties of 1648.

There were, of course, many important changes in international politics as a result of the Second World War. The global balance of power swung to the Soviet Union and the United States. The process of dismantling European colonial empires accelerated. The exercise of sovereignty was increasingly the prerogative of peoples as well as elites. But the most fundamental outcome of the war was continuity in the underlying structure of international politics—an outcome that the Yalta project of a peacetime grand alliance of the Big Three was intended to protect.

The Yalta perspective failed for many and varied reasons, but perhaps the most important—and paradoxical—was that it lacked what its critics accused it of—an explicit great-power spheres of influence agreement—an absence that spawned numerous tensions, contradictions, misunderstandings, and disagreements—all of which were exploited by political forces striving to destroy the unity of the grand alliance.

One person who foresaw the dangers of grand but vaguely defined roles and responsibilities of great powers was the Deputy Soviet Commissar for Foreign Affairs, Maxim Litvinov, who headed the Soviets' postwar peace planning commission. He thought that great-power rivalries and conflicts were all but inevitable. The question was how to organize those rivalries so as to contain conflicts that could threaten the very fabric of global order.

Litvinov argued for a global security system in which each of the great powers was responsible for defined zones of security. To avoid

conflicts and clashes, he argued, the great powers needed to delineate and separate their respective spheres of security.

Russian historian Vladimir Pechatnov summarized Litvinov's vision as an "Anglo-Soviet strategic condominium in Europe, a stable but more remote relationship with the U.S., a division of the world into respective security zones among the great powers, sanctioned and liberalized by the rest of the international community through what would become the United Nations… [a] synthesis of geopolitical realities, great-power cooperation and certain respect for the right of smaller nations and legitimate rules of the international game" (Pechatnov, 1995, p. 14).

Litvinov was not the only one making such arguments. Similar views were expressed by pre-eminent American political commentator, Walter Lippmann, who advocated a postwar division of the world into great-power spheres of responsibility. Under Lippmann's schema, big states and small states would provide each other with reciprocal security. Great-power interests would be served by these spheres, but they would also protect the security and interests of smaller states (Roberts, 2002).

Recently, Jeffrey Sachs (2025) has revived—or rather reinvented—the Litvinov-Lippmann idea of benign spheres of security/responsibility.

According to Sachs, great-power *spheres of influence* typically involve big states' interference in the internal affairs of smaller states, the aim being to control their domestic as well as their foreign policies.

A great-power *sphere of security*, on the other hand, is defined by the absence of such meddling. The focus is on foreign policy and mutually beneficial security arrangements that empower as well as safeguard smaller states. Crucially, a global order based on spheres of security can only work if all great powers refrain from interfering in each other's security arrangements with smaller states.

The quintessential example of a mutually beneficial sphere of security between a big and small power is the post-World War II relationship between Finland and the Soviet Union. Moscow imposed a defense pact on the defeated Finland (which allied with Hitler during World War II)—a treaty that located the country within the Soviet bloc in security terms, whilst at the same time refraining from interference in Finnish internal affairs. Moscow's Cold War rivals also acted with

a degree of restraint in relation to Finland's domestic affairs, though mainly because Helsinki was wise enough to shield itself from outside interference (Rentola, 2021).

In this connection, we can also refer to the work of American historian Paul Schroeder (1994), who studied the period of general peace in 19th-century Europe.

According to Schroeder, the Concert of Europe worked because the great powers were able to establish what he called 'political equilibrium' between themselves, which involved a commitment to maintain peace and stability by respecting each other's rights, responsibilities, security, status, and interests: "Europe remained generally peaceful throughout the nineteenth century not by the natural workings of the balance of power, but by restraints on it—a system of rules, norms, and practices enabling actors, especially the great powers, to act on the assumption that rivalry and competition, though inescapable, would not destroy them" (Schroeder, 2025).

In effect, the 19th-century European great powers exercised a benign collective hegemony for the sake of both self-interest and the common interests of all sovereign states. It was the erosion and disintegration of the Concert of Europe that led, says Schroeder, to the outbreak of the First World War.

Schroeder's take on Russia's role in the Concert is also very interesting and highly relevant to contemporary discussions about the new, polycentric world order.

Imperial Russia emerged triumphant from the Napoleonic Wars and was in a position to become a hegemonic world power, but opted instead for membership of the Concert and the European community of nations, and voluntarily enmeshed itself in restraining relationships with its friends and allies.

Schroeder sees Tsarist Russia as "conservative, legalistic, anti-revolutionary and oriented towards peace and great-power cooperation." Russia's good behavior as a great power, stresses Schroeder, was not primarily a function of benign intentions, but of "the existence and operation of a system—a stable network of rules and relationships between states—that enables statesmen effectively to seek peace and,

even in a sense, compels them to promote it whether they want to or not. …Russia was restrained not mainly by her moderate impulses, but by a viable international order she herself helped to create."

Russia was a key player in the successful functioning of the Concert of Europe because it valued membership in the European great powers' club and was willing to sacrifice particular interests for the sake of the common good (Schroeder, 2004).

The Yalta-Potsdam system was an abortive effort to re-create a 20th-century Great-Power Concert. Still, degrees of 'political equilibrium' were achieved, even during the Cold War. The 1970s détente between the Soviet Union and the United States witnessed the creation of a highly developed infrastructure of consultation and co-operation designed to manage U.S.-Soviet rivalries, not least in curbing the nuclear arms race (Garthoff, 1985).

For Schroeder, the great tragedy of the post-Cold War era was Russia's exclusion from a common European security system, thereby missing a golden opportunity to establish a contemporary version of the Concert of Europe. In the contemporary world, BRICS and the SCO's workings provide a further perspective of effective great-power collaboration for the common good.

Now, you could argue that in practical terms this so-called global political equilibrium envisaged by Schroeder is just a glorified version of détente: the better the great powers get on with each other, the fewer there are conflicts and the more stable the international system will be.

That's true—but an enduring political equilibrium requires something more than mere détente: it needs a commitment by the great powers to prioritize the collective interests of the international system, i.e., to support the prime value of safeguarding the sovereignty-based international society of states.

An alliance of great powers committed to the construction and maintenance of a global political equilibrium is not something that can be conjured by schematizing, theorizing or even historicizing. It is a matter of political will and diplomatic practice.

Unfortunately, a key partner in any future great-power global compact is the country that hitherto has been least inclined to embrace

such a project: the United States. Indeed, it is U.S. exceptionalism and moralism and its poisonous domestic politics that have stifled the post-Cold War emergence of a stabilizing great-power collaboration reflective of the multipolar constellation of power that now prevails.

But the times are a-changing. The new Trump administration has declared a realist foreign policy and accepted the reality of a multipolar world. Trump's recently published *National Security Strategy* (2025) eschews American global domination and declares a 'predisposition' to non-intervention in the internal affairs of other countries. It also supports a sovereignty-based state system: "the world's fundamental political unit is and will remain the nation-state. It is natural and just that all nations put their interests first and guard their sovereignty… We stand for the sovereign rights of nations, against the sovereignty-sapping incursions of the most intrusive transnational organizations."

"Trump is the 'President of Peace'," proclaims the document. His foreign policy is pragmatic without being "pragmatist," realistic without being "realist," principled without being "idealistic," muscular without being "hawkish," and restrained without being "dovish."

Actually, the document's concept of the balance of power is determinedly realist in conceiving it as conflictual and competitive rather than (potentially) collaborative. It talks about peace through strength and of working with allies to thwart "the emergence of dominant adversaries." It opposes further NATO expansion and states a commitment to seeking strategic stability with Russia but devotes many more pages to America's economic and strategic rivalry with China. It unilaterally proclaims an American sphere of influence in "its Western Hemisphere"—a reaffirmation of the Monroe Doctrine (with a "Trump Corollary") (that displays little or no awareness of the aspirations of other great powers, notably those also located in the Americas).

But Trump has, perhaps, opened the door to a conversation among the great powers about how they could and should collectively police the new, polycentric world order for general as well as mutual benefit.

Without the wholehearted participation of the United States, the new, multipolar world will be inherently unstable. Partnership with

Washington, no matter how difficult to achieve, is indispensable to the aim of stable multipolarity based on sovereignty, political and cultural diversity, and shared security.

Arguably, a key strategic task of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and other advocates of multi-polarity and polycentrism should be to persuade, pressure, coax, and incentivize the Americans to embrace a collective hegemony of the great powers—and thereby establish a global political equilibrium that will maintain peace and contain the pressures that threaten strategic stability.

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