

## Spheres of interest

ATLE HETLAND

EN ROUTE

**T**he degree of cooperation, or otherwise, between states is mostly based on history, traditions, geography and economy. Larger countries' spheres of interest are decisive. In the last over one hundred years, ideologies have also played major roles, notably capitalism versus socialism and communism, and debates about democracy and degrees of state control and regulations. Smaller countries always have to toe the line of the larger countries, indeed the superpowers and the major regional powers. Today, their ways of influence are mostly structural, based on economics and information, rather than military.

I am writing today's article because a friend from Ukraine encouraged me to do so. Well, he expressed disagreement with something I said in a few earlier articles about today's relationships between Western Europe and Russia. Indeed, he did not like that I expressed understanding for Russia's position, notably that it has some legitimate reason for keeping former Soviet Union countries, such as Ukraine, Georgia and Belarus, in its sphere of interest, if not under its thumb. And I have also criticized politicians in the West for 'playing with fire' when it uses propagandistic and inflammatory language against Russia, and through that pushes it away from further democratic development, dialogue and cooperation with the West.

We are on the verge of drifting into a new Cold War, several analysts have warned, including the former USA Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. The West cannot just blame Putin and Russia. The West must also analyze its own role. And the Eastern European states must not become Americanized puppets either. Of course, the big Russian bear must step lighter with its paws on its neighbours' lands and allow new more equal forms of cooperation.

Central in my thinking is that I believe the West must do much more to accommodate Russia in the 'good society', and it must not encourage conservative and other groups in the former Soviet Union states to be unrealistic in their independence dreams and tempo of ideological and economic reforms, and they, too, must do it in democratic ways.

Some of the questions are: Why do large countries and continents, such as Russia and Western Europe, the latter supported by America, play power games? Can they not allow countries in their spheres of interest to have a level-headed debate, and can they not allow a country to be both Western and Eastern? Would EU and NATO ever have accepted that any of its members changed side and became Russia-sympathizers? But we expect Russia to 'let go' of Ukraine? Can we not be more pragmatic and allow smaller countries to have dual or multifaceted cooperation across the 'blocks' now when the Soviet era is over and Russia is capitalist too?

If the West is genuine in its claimed desire of seeing a more democratic Russia, it should help the large country to develop its institutions. We need peace and cooperation in Europe and beyond, not naive policies. In the longer run, the West may regret a China-Russia superpower. That would hardly be in our interest in South Asia either.

In our time, the West and NATO, as well as Russia and other major powers, do not practice what they preach. Well, intellectuals in the West and elsewhere may do what they can, but politicians seem not to do as much as they should – and sometimes, they actively support, or even lead in conflict-mongering. I expect more of the West than of Russia, considering that most of Russia's democratic development has

taken place only since its regime-change about 25 years ago. Hence, Russia needs time and support, not hostility from the West – and, yes, Russia and the West must let Ukraine and other states develop without arm-twisting threats or false promises. I agree with my Ukrainian friend that Russia’s role has left much to be desired, to put it diplomatically. But so has the West.

Generally, I don’t like big countries; I like medium-sized and small countries. USA, for example, might have been better for itself and indeed for Latin America and the rest of the world if it were smaller and less powerful, say four or five countries. China, India and Russia may also be too big and diverse for real democracy and people’s participation to develop. Some of the larger European countries, on a continent mostly made up of small countries, would perhaps have been better off if the four or five big countries had been less dominant. In all countries, small and big, people would have lived better had the peripheries and sub-regions been more autonomous, and if the centre had had a deeper understanding of the democratic ideas – yes, also in Europe.

As regards the former colonial powers, indeed the United Kingdom, it is generally agreed by most politicians and social scientists that it became a better country after the empire collapsed, when it was no longer an empire ‘where the sun never sat’; it became better for the colonies and the people of UK itself. UK is today in a process of further devolution within the ‘united kingdom’. That can only be positive.

I believe in smaller entities where debate can be deeper – yet, with impulses from outside. I don’t necessarily think that it is realistic, not even ideal, that larger countries split up either. But there is need for greater regional and local autonomy within big countries. In future, I believe these issues will be the key political issues in all countries.

I am from Norway, one of the five quite similar Nordic countries. We are so alike that we could perhaps have been one country, or had a union; that would at least have gone well with Norway and Sweden, which in any case were in a union for a hundred years from 1814-1905. Before that, Denmark-Norway was one country for four hundred years. Yet, I believe that the five Nordic countries, with a total population of about 26 million people, do well the way they are as independent states. Their close cooperation is essential for their success. Today, the three Baltic States, with just over 6 million people in all, form a natural part of the Nordic and Baltic Council. It is probably luck that none of the five Nordic countries, plus the three Baltic States, is so big that it could dominate the rest; it is cooperation among equals.

Again, I would emphasize my basic premise; that cooperation must be fair for all; power must be decentralized, and small units should make decisions in liaison with central bodies. I have said I don’t like big countries; that is so because they often dominate other countries and sub-regions and groups within countries. We have not yet found good ways to curtail dominance. In our time of globalization of trade and information, there is probably more, not less dominance, subtle and disguised.

My dear friend from Ukraine, there is no quick fix to how to reduce Russia’s inclination to dominate your country. There is no quick answer either for how to make the West limit its expansionistic ambitions in the word, in trade, information and more. What I do know, though, is that we must keep analyzing and discussing these issues, end exposing those who overstep fair play, also in small states.

The writer is a senior Norwegian social scientist with experience from university, diplomacy and development aid