Power and Russia’s backyard

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In Winston Churchill’s memoirs, he records a meeting with Stalin in October 1944: “The moment was apt for business, so I said ‘Let us settle our affairs in the Balkans...’ As far as Britain and Russia are concerned, how would it do for you to have 90 per cent predominance in Romania, for us to have 90 per cent of the say in Greece and go 50/50 about Yugoslavia?” While this was being translated, I wrote out the percentages on a half sheet of paper. I pushed this across to Stalin... There was a slight pause. Then he took his blue pencil and made a large tick upon it, and passed it back to us. It was all settled in no more time than it takes to set down.”

I was in Georgia – Stalin’s birthplace – last week. The country regained its independence in 1991. But its leaders fear that they may yet be subject to a modern version of the Churchill-Stalin percentages deal – in which the west casually assigns Georgia into Moscow’s “sphere of influence”.

Georgian fears have been stoked by Nato’s failure to give Georgia and Ukraine “membership action plans” at the alliance’s recent summit. It is true that the summit communique asserted that the two countries must eventually join Nato. But it is clear that some members of the alliance harbour deep misgivings. François Fillon, the French prime minister, says that: “We are opposed to the entry of Georgia and Ukraine because we think it is not the right response to the balance of power in Europe and between Europe and Russia.” Such language is greeted with dismay in Georgia’s Mikhail Saakashvili, the Georgian president, told me last week that Mr Fillon’s comments were “clearly about spheres of influence, which is bizarre to say the least... What we are talking about is appeasement. And today it might be Georgia and tomorrow Estonia – and then hypothetically, Finland. Finland was also in Russia’s sphere of influence. It was part of the Russian empire.

To Mr Saakashvili, spheres of influence belong to the bad old days. US president George W. Bush agrees. He has denounced the Yalta agreement of 1945 – which recognised eastern Europe as a Soviet sphere of influence – as “one of the greatest wrongs of history.”

The arguments against informal recognition of a Russian sphere of influence are powerful. As one western diplomat puts it: “Either the ex-Soviet countries are independent states, or they are not.” As independent countries, Georgia and Ukraine should be free to make their own decisions about their security. As an alliance of free countries, Nato should not allow Russia a veto on who joins the club. In any case, Nato has already let in parts of the former Soviet Union – the three Baltic states – to the alliance. Russia has had to live with this decision.

But the counter-arguments should not be airily dismissed. For all Mr Bush’s impatience with the concept, untested spheres of influence do still exist in the modern world. There is a powerful moral case for recognising an independent Taiwan. Yet Mr Bush has hinted on Taiwan not to declare independence, because China is so implacable on the issue. Taiwan is, de facto, recognised as part of a Chinese sphere of influence.

Georgia and Ukraine are also harder cases than Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Russian culture has deep roots in Ukraine – and opinion polls suggest that the Ukrainian population is divided about Nato membership. Support for Nato membership is much less equivocal in Georgia. But Georgia is locked into territorial disputes with Russia – and its geographical position would make it harder to defend than the Baltic states. Yet, under article five of the Nato treaty, all Nato members would be committed to defending Georgia – a country of less than 7m people – in the event of a Russian attack.

Russia is also stronger and angrier than it was a few years ago, when Nato let it be the Baltic. And Russia’s concerns are not obviously unreasonable. I was in Georgia at a conference organised by the Brookings Institution. One of the American participants mused: “If the Russians were concluding military alliances with Mexico and Canada, I think we might have some concerns.”

The official American response is less understanding. The Bush administration argues that Nato is a defensive alliance and that Russian concerns are irrational and outdated. As Mr Bush put it as his recent summit with Mr Putin: “The cold war is over.”

But the Russians are not reassured. On my last visit to Moscow, Grigory Yavlinsky, a liberal politician, explained to me that Nato’s military intervention in Kosovo had made it much harder for Russian liberals to make a pro-western case. Yes, Mr Yavlinsky said, Nato might have intervened on human rights grounds – but the Russian population knows that its own army has committed human rights abuses in Chechnya. If Nato could bomb Belgrade in a war over human rights, why couldn’t it bomb Moscow?

Mr Yavlinsky said that the Russians had concluded that the only difference was that their country was too strong and frightening to take on. So the only response to Nato expansion was to be even more assertive. It would be nice to believe that the argument about extending Nato membership to Georgia and Ukraine was purely about principle. But, in reality, it is also about power.

If Nato ultimately decides to admit these two countries to the alliance, it will be taking a calculated risk. The risk may be a small one. But it is not unreasonable to do a little more calculation before taking it.