



Geopolitics

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The Superpowers of the Future



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The term “superpower” was coined in the Second World War. In 1944, Professor Fox elaborated on the concept. He identified three states as superpowers: the United States, the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom. The UK suffered serious economic problems after the War, and its Empire began to unravel in the post war decades, leaving two superpowers – the USA and the USSR.

The absence of the term ‘superpower’, or some equivalent, before the 1940s is significant. Although there were huge empires – particularly across the land masses of Eurasia – the idea of global power would have seemed impossible. The peoples of different continents lived in ignorance of and, in some cases, completely unaware of the existence of other parts of the world. Global hegemony was impossible when parts of the globe were unknown to each other.

After World War 2, there were just two contenders: the USA and the USSR. And much of the world took “sides”, or at least found itself co-opted into one camp or other. Spheres of influence were generally recognised, and where the boundaries were unclear, they were resolved, often by local wars or confrontations – Korea,



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Vietnam, the Cuban missile crisis, the post-colonial conflicts across sub-Saharan Africa – establishing spheres of influence as an outcome.

In 1991, the collapse of the Soviet Union left Russia at the heart of the old “Empire”, with its nuclear weaponry intact, but with just half the population of the old USSR, and a much-diminished GDP. Russia was forced to abandon many of its “client states” around the world. The United States became the world’s only superpower. Despite its matchless military power and economic strength, it soon over-committed. Its actions in Iraq and Afghanistan effectively demonstrated the limits of its power, both to the USA itself, and to the rest of the world.

Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, China has clearly expressed its intention to be a superpower to match the USA. And looking further ahead into this century, given India’s size, and economic potential, it is seen by many as a potential superpower.

This blog looks at what are the key components of superpower status, and what political, economic and environmental factors may change what it takes to be a superpower in the future.

What are the Properties of a Superpower?

In his 1988 classic, The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers, Paul Kennedy described seven “dimensions of state power” – which may be summarised thus, in the context of today’s world:

- Geography – being in the right place in terms of history and geopolitics, and at the heart of “where the action is”; since the end of the Cold War, we have seen a shift from the Atlantic to the Pacific, as the main stage.
- Population – it is not really possible to aspire to superpower status without having a very large population – the British Empire circumvented this problem by the co-option of millions of colonised subjects, but Empire seems an unlikely option for the future. The halving of the population due to Russia’s loss of the Soviet “Empire” concerns Kremlin strategists today. The concept of Eurasianism seeks to address this by asserting an underlying “Greater Russian” identity.
- Economy – again the decline of the British Empire and the USSR provide evidence of the fate of superpowers that lack the economic strength to support their aims. Even the USA found the cost of its wars in the Middle East and Afghanistan more than it felt able ultimately to bear. Being a superpower is expensive.
- Resources – it helps an aspiring superpower if it is well supplied with the resources it needs to bolster its economy and its military power. Both the USA and the USSR were relatively well placed in this regard. One of the challenges facing China and India will be how they are able to overcome resource bottlenecks – for example in energy and food.



- Military size and strength – a superpower needs to be able to project power and, when necessary, deploy it effectively and overwhelmingly. Possession of weapons of mass destruction is a sign of “superpowerdom”, but conventional military power are probably of greater utility, given the potentially catastrophic consequences of using nuclear and other WMD.
- Diplomacy – even superpowers need friends. They need support in international forums, such as the United Nations, as well as markets for trade, and allies and supporters in regional disputes. And superpowers will forge alliances with each other. The Partnership Agreement between Russia and China, agreed on the eve of the 2022 Winter Olympics, will have helped embolden President Putin to invade Ukraine.
- National Identity – superpowers need to be able to explain clearly to their own citizens, and to the rest of the world, what they stand for, and why their world view is most cogent and compelling.

Drivers of change for Superpowers

The nature of what makes a superpower, and the challenges they face, are both evolving all the time. For example, as the focus of global strategy moves from the Atlantic to the Pacific, reflecting economic and demographic realities, there is an immediate challenge for Europe, which remains powerful economically, if not so much militarily. How does Europe retain its relative importance in this evolving world?

The rise of new would-be superpowers inevitably challenges the existing world order. Just as Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has led to an escalating confrontation with NATO and the EU, so China’s ambitions to dominate what it sees as its “backyard” sows the seeds of a potential series of confrontations – with the US, Japan, India, Australia, and the members of ASEAN. After the end of the Cold War, global optimists looked forward to a period of consensus, based on international rules. There is today, a stronger flavour of different powers jockeying for competitive advantage. But this brings its own limits. Tomorrow’s superpowers will need to be flexible, asserting their power selectively and strategically, if they are not to overreach and bankrupt themselves.

Access to Resources

The need for superpowers to be self-reliant (even if not self-sufficient) in key resources is itself a driver of change. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has prompted Europe to seek to accelerate its strategic shift from fossil fuels to renewable fuels and energy. By its actions, Russia may have put into hazard, at least in the medium term, the commercial value of its prize asset: its abundant supplies of oil and gas. China and India too are striving to reduce their dependence on energy sources, on which they depend on imports.



Research & Innovation

As well as self-reliance in access to resources and economic power, superpowers need to be agile and innovative. Research and innovation are critical in achieving an advantage, especially in a multi-polar, competitive world.

Changes in technology will challenge actual and potential superpowers to keep ahead of developments. The conflict in Ukraine (and the more localised one last year in the Nagorno-Karabakh region of the Caucasus) suggest that reliance on heavily armoured manned battlecraft (on land and sea) may be becoming a threatened means of projecting power, if not actually a redundant one. The use of hand-launched guided missile systems and drones to attack tanks and ships challenges many current assumptions about warfare. It also raises the question of whether it will be increasingly attritional and expensive for superpowers to occupy the territory of their adversaries, given the damage that resisting forces can do with portable and relatively inexpensive new weapons. This in turn raises questions about how a superpower exercises its power if direct military intervention is riskier, and carries a higher cost. Alliances and diplomacy, especially with regional powers, may become even more important.

Environmental Change

Environmental and global warming are likely to mean that there is no “level playing field”. Although superpowers would be expected to be more resilient against adverse climate impacts than most other states, geography means they may be particularly affected by changes. For example, the spike in temperatures in the Indian sub-continent is an indicator of potentially serious problems ahead, both in access to water and in agriculture. Some changes may be to the geographical advantage of particular states or regions. The opening up of the Arctic due to melting ice offers potential for greater commercial activity in the region, alongside the known dangers of ice melts. Research in Russia envisages scenarios in which its agriculture may benefit from climate change, increasing its importance as a supplier of food, even as other areas are under threat of loss of yields to drought and/or global warming.

Demography

Much of the world, including most of the existing and former superpowers, is facing the prospect of aging population and falling birthrates. The phenomenon was given prominence in Bricker and Ibbotson’s “Empty Planet”. China’s birth rate has fallen from 14.274 births per thousand people in the last year of the last century, to 10,902 births per thousand last year. Its population may already have peaked, and will begin to become smaller in number and older in average age.



How will a superpower comprising increasingly old and middle-aged people seek to operate in the world, as compared with one populated by legions of young people?

Conclusion

Even if the world were inherently stable, the shift to a competing, multipolar system would constantly challenge actual and aspirant superpowers. The drivers listed above show that the world will be even less predictable than under the stable model. It's catnip for scenario planners.

Written by David Lye, SAMI Fellow, published 27 May 2022



What does the future hold for Europe?



Image by Gerd Altmann from Pixabay

This blog looks at the issues Europe faces in a changing world. Primarily the focus is on the European Union, whose 27 member states encompass the main body of Europe, but the blog will touch on the wider group of European states.

Context

The European Economic Community was originally established for two reasons: to assist the post-war reconstruction of Europe's economies and societies, and to make unlikely the chances of another war between the states of Europe. The Treaty of Rome (1957) encapsulated these aims. The Treaty remains the foundation stone of the EU, but subsequent treaties have developed and widened the role of the Community. In particular, the Maastricht Treaty (1992) removed the word "economic" from the Treaty of Rome's official title, and the Lisbon Treaty renamed it the "Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union". Underlying these treaties has been an assumption of an "ever-closer union" between member states.

This continuity of basic purpose must exist in a volatile world. The EEC was founded in the days of the Cold War, when there was the ever-present threat of conflict between the West and the USSR and its allies. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the dissolution of the USSR, the EU (as it became after the Maastricht Treaty)



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became part of a network of liberal, capitalist countries operating in a more open and global economy.

Recent events have seen an interruption to what was, for the EU, a relatively benign context. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the EU has a war being fought on its borders. Globalisation has come under threat, following the credit crunch, and the advent of renewed rivalry between powerful nations and regional blocs around the world. The “New World Order” has become a multi-polar world instead.

While Europe enjoys cordial relations with many other powerful and influential states, for example Canada, Japan, South Korea and the members of ASEAN, relations with Russia are obviously tense, relations with the USA took a turn for the worse during the Trump presidency – although under President Biden, they have improved. And China, as an emerging superpower, poses new strategic, economic and policy challenges for the EU, as well as the rest of the world.

Closer to home, there has been a rise in populism in most member states following the credit crunch and the imposition of austerity across the eurozone. Some member states, for example Greece, resisted austerity measures imposed as part of the financial rescue packages agreed by the European Central Bank and the European Commission. Countries including Hungary and Poland have unresolved disputes with the Commission about the extent to which they can receive EU funds while bypassing EU rules on governance and transparency.

More specifically, Brexit was an unwelcome development for the EU. So far, any collateral damage has been limited. A survey of voters in 10 European countries show that although a minority think that Brexit has made EU member states less united, the biggest group of voters thinks that it has made no difference.

However, with the global economy heading back into recession, and high inflation caused by rising fuel and food prices, there is no cause for complacency. A squeeze on standards of living in Europe may give a boost to populist and/or extremist political movements.

Turkey is another powerful neighbour – after the United States, NATO’s biggest military power, with 355,000 active armed forces. Like Russia, it has disagreements with Europe, for example mineral rights in the Aegean Sea, and is militarily powerful enough to be a seriously disruptive influence.

Looking South, the EU was rocked by a large-scale influx of migrants in the wake of the conflict in Syria. The African Youth Survey for 2022 has found that 52% of respondents plan to move abroad in the next three years. There may be a massive wave of young migrants seeking to make better lives for themselves in Europe in this



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decade. Europe may see this as an opportunity or a threat, but either way, it will be a disruption.

Europe in a multi-polar World

Not only is the World changing, but Europe's place in it is changing as well. In 1980, the EU (based on statistics for its existing 27 members) share of global GDP, based on purchasing power parity, was just over 30%. In 2017 the share had fallen to just below 15% – Europe's total GDP had grown, but the rest of the world had risen much faster overall, particularly in Asia.

Europe remains a very significant and influential player in the global economy, and will continue to do so, barring unforeseen disasters, but it carries less power and influence than it did. There are other aspects. The population of Europe in 1980 was 17% of the world's total. In 2020 it was just 10%. Its population had risen slightly over the period, but other regions had grown faster

Europe's nation states have powerful armed forces, but the EU itself has no army, and no strategic command, relying instead on the member states and on NATO. In that very real sense, Europe cannot be said to be a superpower, as described in a previous blog

In other fields too, Europe lags a little behind the front runners. In the critical field of Research & Development, its Gross Domestic Expenditure on R&D (GERD) of no more than 2.2% of GDP in 2019 was behind Japan (3.2%) and the USA (3.1%). It was equal to China, whose trajectory is a faster rising one.

This is the global context in which Europe needs to think about its strategic future. Currently there does not seem to be great enthusiasm for further constitutional changes immediately, although the EU has agreed to look into possible future evolution, but Europe needs to think how it is to respond to the challenges it faces – and how to exploit the opportunities.

In his speech on 8 May, at the closing of the Conference on the Future of Europe, the President of France, Emmanuel Macron, stepped up to the plate

In the speech (see the link), he focused on independence and effectiveness, encompassing defence capability, decarbonisation and self-sufficiency in areas such as food production. He also put forward the notion of a "European Confederation", reviving an idea suggested by former President Francois Mitterrand. M. Macron said,

"Joining it would not prejudice future accession to the European Union necessarily, and it would not be closed to those who have left the EU".



The institutional architecture of the EU is largely a matter for the EU, and its member states themselves. But the future world, and Europe's place in it, will be shaped not only by what Europe wants, but by the way that other Regions, and in particular the most powerful ones, and the nearest ones, seek to develop.

Conclusion

Europe has supported strongly the idea of a global rules-based system of trade and governance. In doing so it has been an advocate for global action – for example on decarbonisation and preventing global heating, on international collaboration in research in key areas such as health.

The “Safire” global scenarios prepared by SAMI as part of a project for the European Commission's Research & Innovation Directorate illustrates clearly that the world may be developing in ways other than the ones that Europe would prefer – and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which took place after the Safire Report had been published, adds to this possibility.

With an aggressive and expansionist Russia on its Eastern borders; with a resurgent China, keen to assert its superpower status, with the USA perhaps more unpredictable, owing to the growing divide between Democrats and Republicans, the challenge for Europe is decide how it positions itself in a world in which there is less collaboration and more competition, and in which a relatively peaceful and benign world order gives way to widespread disruption.

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