



SUPERPOWERS

Introduction

A superpower is a nation or group of nations that has a leading position in international politics. The concept of a superpower has developed to include economic, cultural, military and geographical influence, for example, the development of the USA and the former USSR, and more recently the growth of China, India and Brazil.

Superpowers are able to influence policy on a worldwide scale, and often in different regions at the same time. The term was first used in 1944 by T.R. Fox, in his book *The Superpowers: The United States, Britain and the Soviet Union – Their Responsibility for Peace*. These three nations fought on the same side in the Second World War, but afterwards became involved in a battle for economic, political and military power. At the end of the war, the British Empire covered about 25% of the world's land area and 25% of its population. However, its power was in decline, whereas the USA and USSR were emerging as the new superpowers.

Fig. 1 Features of superpower status.

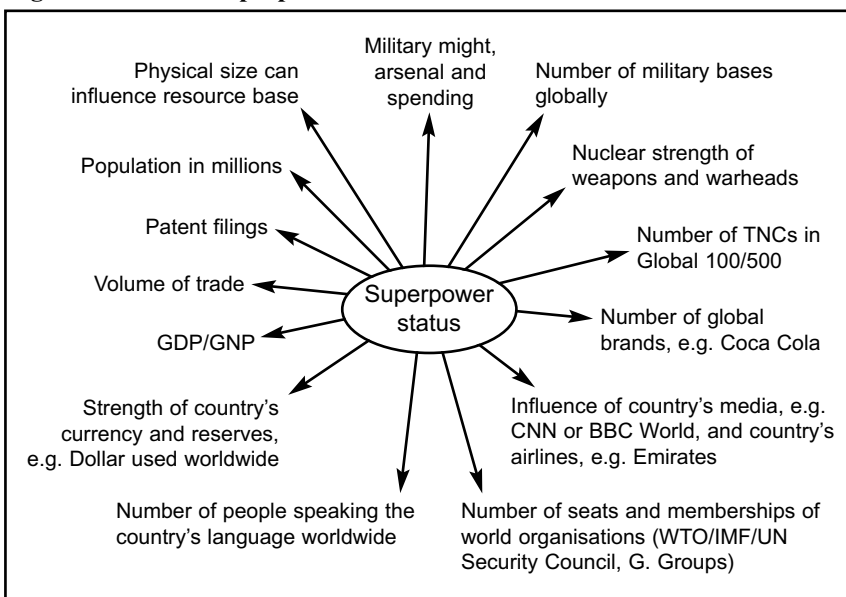
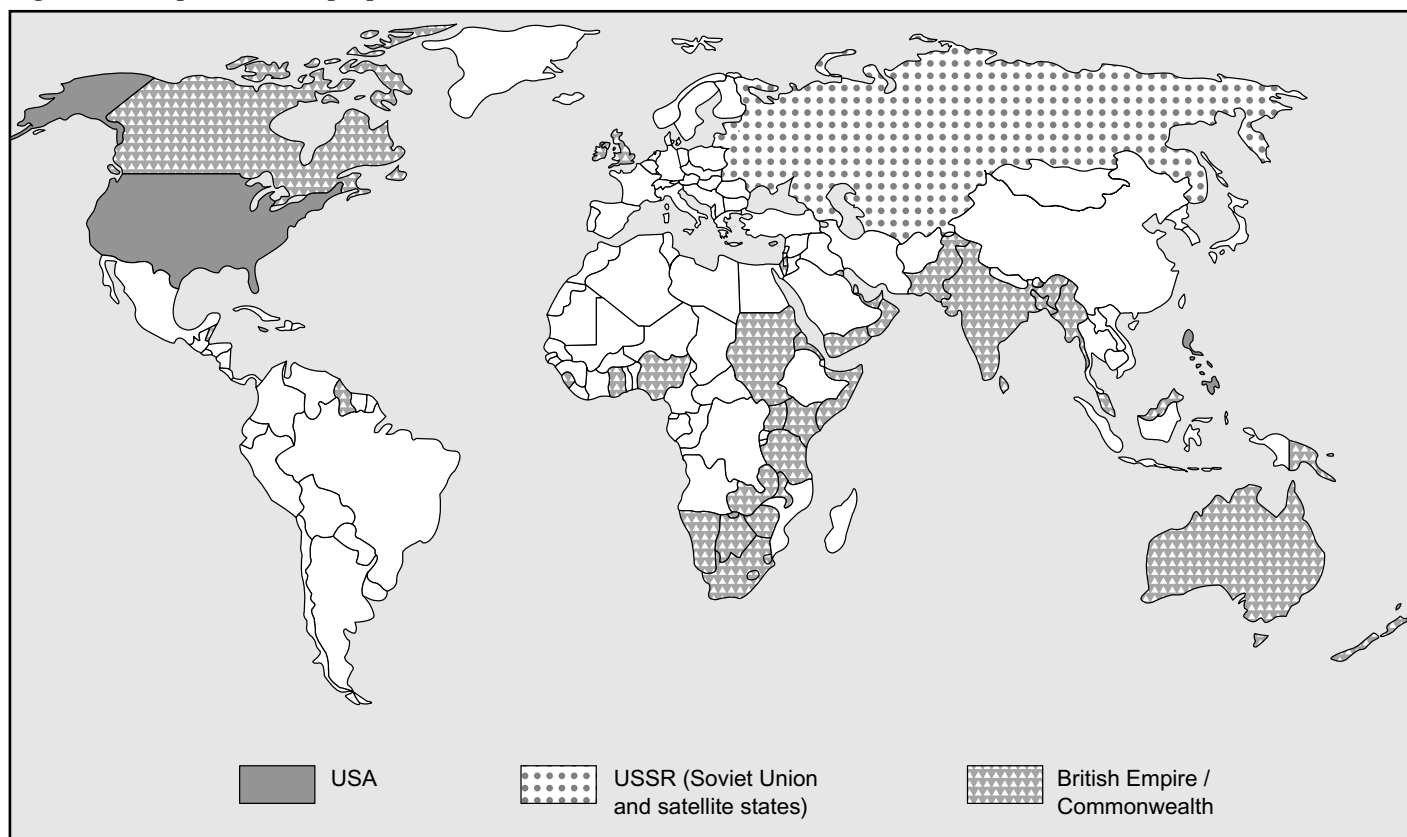


Fig. 2 1945 map of world superpowers.



The Cold War period of two superpowers

After the war, competition between the USA and USSR led to the development of the **Cold War**. Both countries sought to increase their dominance on the world scene. By the 1980s their respective powers had greatly increased.

There were a number of differences between the USA and the USSR. Politically, the USSR promoted communism and the economy was state-controlled. In contrast, the USA was managed as a democracy and had a free market approach to the economy. Both countries were keen to extend their influence and support other countries. The USSR developed strong links with eastern Europe and developing countries. The USA, on the other hand, had firm relations with western Europe, the Commonwealth, Latin America and key Asian countries. The USA also supported a number of right-wing dictatorships in their attempt to reduce Soviet influence and the spread of left-wing tendencies.

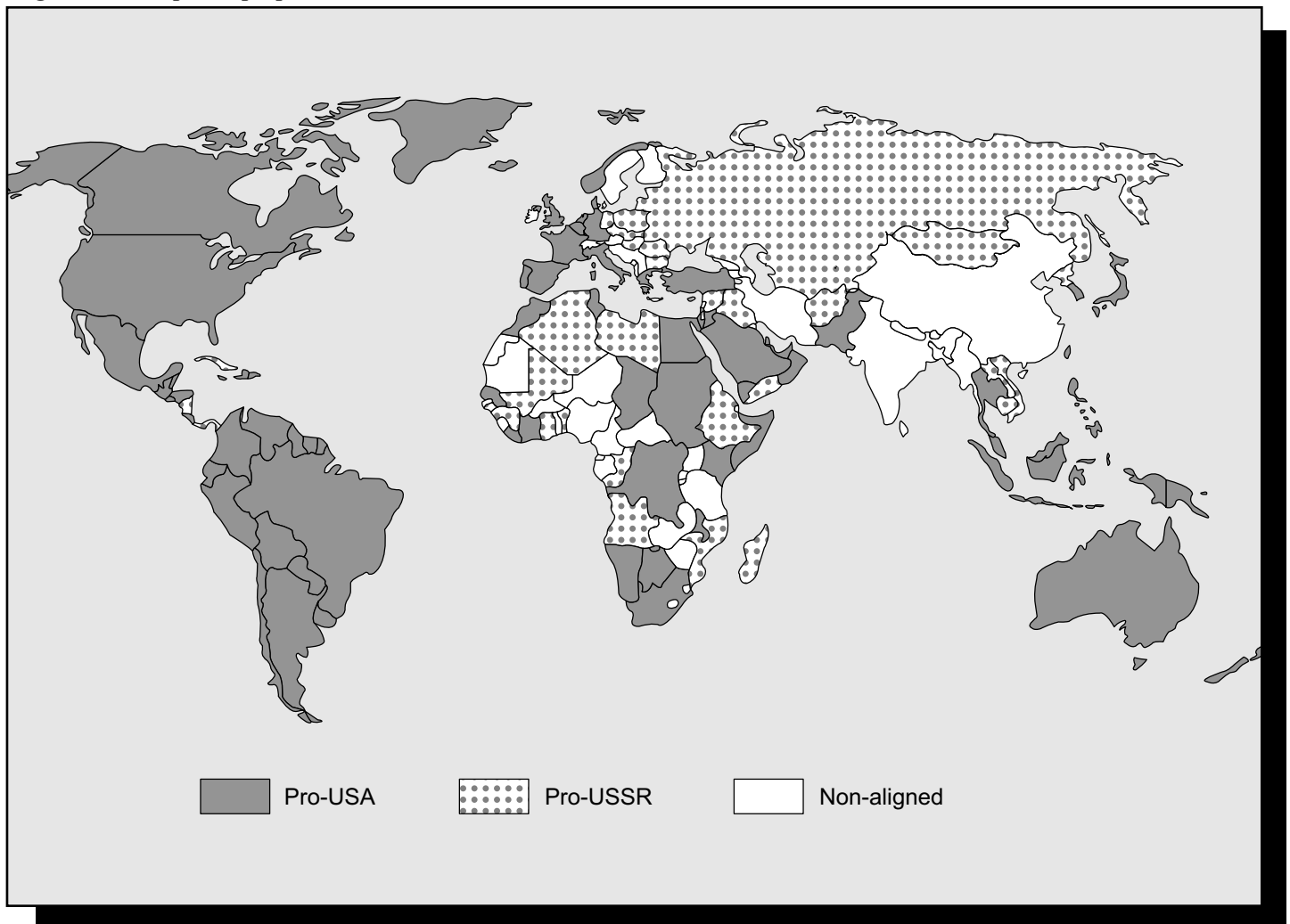
The two nations also had shared characteristics in terms of population, land and resources. While the USSR was the world's largest country, with a land area of over 22 million km², the USA was the world's third largest with over 9 million km². The USSR was the world's third largest in terms of population size (over 285 million at the time of its break-up), whereas almost 250 million people resided in the USA. Both had many valuable economic resources; in particular the USSR had oil and gas, whereas the USA contained valuable minerals, metals, forests and a modern agricultural and industrial system.

At the time, the USA had the world's greatest economy, while the economy of the USSR was the second largest. To complete the superpower checklist, the USSR had the world's largest land-based army and the world's largest stockpile of nuclear weapons. In contrast, the USA had the world's largest and most powerful navy and one of the two most powerful air forces in the world.

Conflict between the two superpowers was not just limited to military threats — the **Cold War** also affected the world of chess and basketball, and the respective countries and their allies did not attend the Olympic Games held in Moscow in 1980 and Los Angeles in 1984.

After the collapse of communism and the break-up of the USSR in 1991, the USA was left as the world's only superpower. However, since 2001 and the terrorist attacks on the USA, US military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan has not achieved its desired ends. Some critics argue that the USA is losing its superpower status. Economically, following the 2008 financial crisis, the USA has lost economic strength (as have many countries that had been propped up by US money) and other nations are on the ascendancy. China in particular has experienced massive economic growth, as well as having a very large military. Whether it yet fulfils all of the criteria of a superpower is debatable. The European Union, a group of 27 countries, has also been described as a superpower. However, internal differences between member countries reduce the cohesion of the EU as a superpower.

[Fig. 3 1980s map of superpower influence.



The geography of power and international influence - The USA: the military industrial complex and the evolution of a superpower

After the Second World War, the USA had a greatly enhanced status and power. The Great Depression of the 1930s had been replaced by an economy stimulated by wartime production. Unlike Europe, the USA did not suffer from wrecked infrastructure. US involvement in the Second World War — the large-scale air and land campaigns in Europe and the ‘island-hopping’ war against Japan in the Pacific — set a precedent for the global projection of US military strength.

It was not just economic and military strength. The USA encouraged the establishment of international institutions and international law. The United Nations headquarters were located in New York, and the World Bank and International Monetary Fund were based in Washington. Although these were, and continue to be, international organisations, US institutions had greater access to them than if they had been located elsewhere.

The USA has by far the world’s largest and most technologically advanced fleet of warplanes, ships, tanks and artillery systems. These give it dominance over air, sea and land. Control of space and information are key aspects of US military strategy for the 21st century. There are many interlocking strands in the USA’s global military presence. These include overseas bases, ships and aircraft that allow the USA to apply force to any part of the globe, the supply of weapons and military training to a wide range of countries, and a network of listening posts which gather and disseminate vital information.

The US defence industry employs over 2 million people, with local manufacturing plants or research and development facilities in most US states. Approximately 1 in 6 households in the USA have someone employed in the military industrial complex. Annual spending on defence exceeds \$100 billion a year. Federal funding for military research is \$40 billion a year, twice what is spent on health, energy and environment combined. The institutions and organisations which have developed over 50 years of intensive military spending have created vested interests with huge political clout.

Moreover, the US accounts for half of all international arms sales. Much US military equipment destined for export is manufactured abroad under licence. For example, Turkey has made F-16s since the mid-1980s. The US cooperates closely with certain allies, including the UK and Israel, on high-tech projects such as missile defence.

The implications of shifting power – post-Cold War

The US National Intelligence Council produces a global trends review every four years. In 2004 it predicted there would be continued US dominance globally as most major powers had stopped trying to catch up with the US economy. In 2008, however, in its report ‘Global trends 2025: A Transformed World’, it suggested that China, India and Brazil would grow at the expense of the USA and EU. It predicts a world that will be increasingly fragmented, with conflicts over scarce resources, limited effective action by international organisations and the proliferation of nuclear weapons, especially in the Middle East, and even nuclear war. It suggested that the trend of wealth moving from the West to the East would continue, especially after the global financial crisis of 2008.

This is an emerging **multi-polar world** in which the USA will be less dominant. It suggests a rocky time ahead with many potential crises, such as shortages of fuel, food and water and climate change, possibly triggering international flashpoints. Even countries that have been friendly up until now (such as EU countries and the USA) have been at loggerheads over how to deal with climate change, trade and market access.

New political unions

The USA lost no time rewarding its new allies in the war against terrorism. It lifted economic sanctions on Pakistan and India, rescheduled \$379 million of Pakistan’s bilateral debt, offered to expand Indonesia’s

special trade preferences and passed a long-delayed free-trade agreement with Jordan. Egypt’s official foreign debt was cut in half in 1991, partly as a reward for its help in the Gulf War.

In a particularly striking shift in long-term thinking, Russia said it wanted closer ties with, and perhaps even membership of the EU. When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, Egypt gave prompt and full support to an American-led alliance, decisively tipping the Arab world against Saddam Hussein. Egypt’s government was not about to let down a superpower that provides \$2 billion a year in military and economic aid.

Emerging superpowers

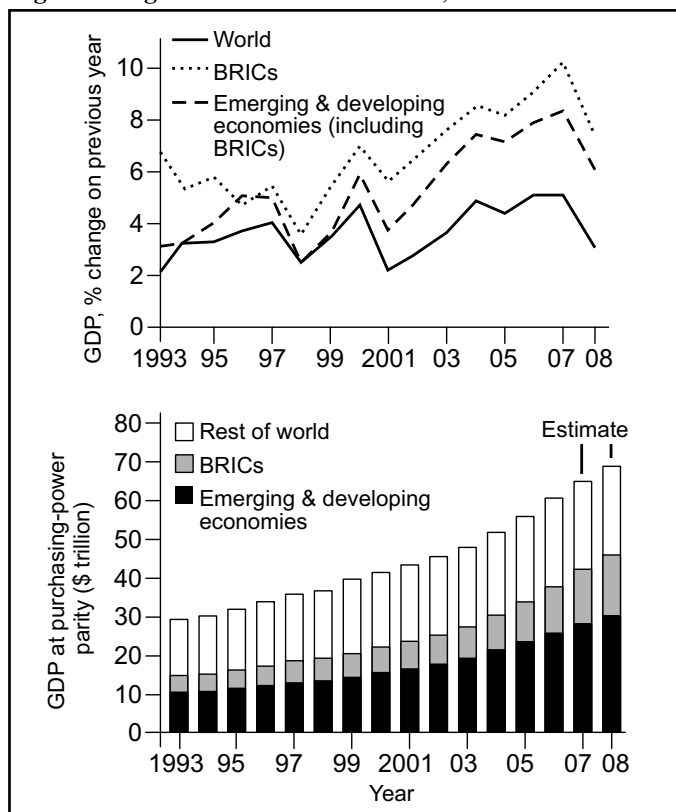
The economic rise of the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India and China) and the oil-rich OPEC states brings economic benefits to many. Equally there may be economic costs to the existing superpowers and environmental and resource implications. In an increasingly globalised and inter-dependent world, it is likely that tensions will develop as power shifts.

The rise of the BRICs is related to a number of geographic factors. Firstly, they all are large countries. In terms of physical size, Russia, China, Brazil and India rank first, third, fifth and seventh respectively. In terms of population, China, India, Brazil and Russia rank first, second, fifth and eighth. In addition, some of these countries have many resources — Russia in particular has oil and gas; Brazil has gold, diamonds, iron ore and rainforest; and India and China have vast quantities of coal. Nevertheless, China does not have a vast supply of resources given its population size and area.

BRICs, emerging markets and the world economy

In 2000 developing countries accounted for 37% of world output (at purchasing power parities). Last year their share rose to 45%. The share of the BRICs leapt from 16% to 22%, a sharp rise in such a short period. Almost 60% of all the increase in world output that occurred in 2000-08 happened in developing countries; half of it took place in the BRICs alone (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4 Changes in GDP and total GDP, 1993-2008



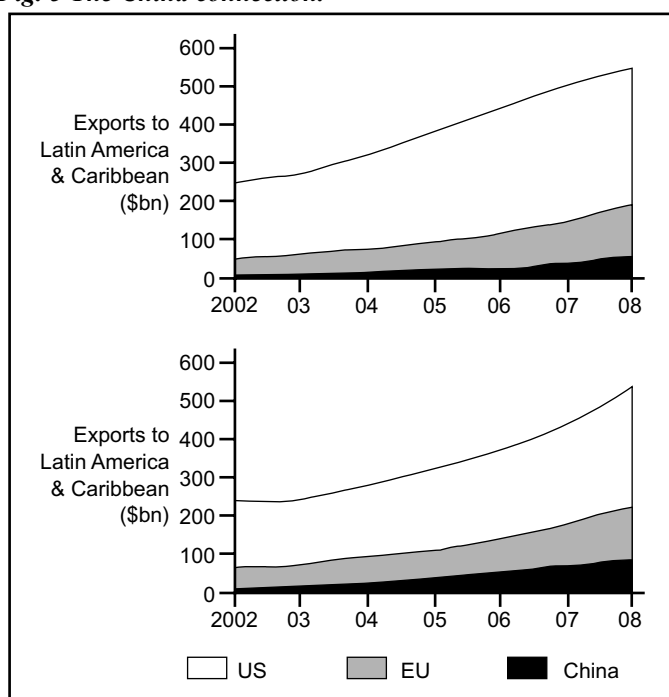
Source: IMF

Case Study: Latin American geopolitics

Burgeoning trade and investment are fast turning China into a leading economic partner for many Latin American countries. The China Development Bank and Sinopec, a Chinese oil company, will lend Brazil's state-controlled oil company, Petrobras, \$10 billion in return for up to 200,000 barrels a day (b/d) of crude oil for ten years from the country's new deep-sea fields. Weeks earlier China offered Argentina a currency-swap arrangement involving use of yuan worth \$10 billion, and lent cash-strapped Jamaica \$138m to enable it to stave off a debt default. Chinese companies have bought stakes in oilfields in Ecuador and Venezuela, and are talking of building a refinery in Costa Rica.

It is not just China that is taking a much bigger interest in Latin America. So too, in different ways, are India, Russia and Iran. The United States (and Europe) are still far bigger traders and investors in Latin America as a whole than China, let alone India or Russia (see Fig. 5). What is clear is that there are new and potentially powerful actors in the region.

Fig. 5 The China connection.



Source: IMF

The arrival of the BRICs coincides with, and is partly a consequence of, two other developments. The first is the relative decline in the economic and political pre-eminence of the United States after its brief moment of unchallenged power at the end of the cold war. More specifically, under George Bush the United States was widely held to have neglected Latin America because of more pressing priorities elsewhere, especially the 'war on terror'. That neglect has helped others to slip in.

The second factor is that many Latin American countries have become more self-confident and bent on asserting their diplomatic independence.

In the United States some Republicans worry that China's growing economic weight poses a political threat. But many Latin Americans prefer to see China's expanding ties to their region as an opportunity.

Two questions need to be addressed. First, is the industrialisation of China and India helping or hindering Latin America's economic development? Secondly, are growing economic and political ties with non-democratic countries such as China, Russia and Iran undermining Latin America's own hard-won commitment to democracy?

Economic ties between Latin America and Asia are not new. But the suddenness and scale of the link with China (and to a much lesser extent India) are new. The first, and still the biggest, impact is indirect. Chinese and Indian demand for raw materials has driven world prices for commodities to unprecedented levels. Second, China's trade with Latin America has grown at an annual average rate of some 40% since 2003.

Chinese investment has so far been overwhelmingly concentrated in mining and oil. China's stake in Venezuela is contentious. The United States has long been the main foreign market for Venezuelan oil. For Mexico, one of the region's most industrialised countries, China is a competitor. Between 2000 and 2005, China's share of American clothing imports doubled, to 26%, while Mexico's fell from 14% to 8%.

The pattern of trade and investment so far reinforces the fear among some Latin Americans that China is causing the region to re-specialise in commodities, as it did in the 19th century, to the detriment of industry. Soya beans and iron ore account for two-thirds of Brazil's exports to China, and crude oil for a further 10%. By contrast, Brazil's exports to the United States are mainly manufactures.

There are some signs that the impacts of growth in the BRICs are being felt farther afield. One example is the 'land grab' in which China and Gulf countries are buying millions of acres of farmland in Africa and South-East Asia. Another is trade. China overtook America to become Brazil's largest export market in March and April; it is also now the largest exporter to India. China's appetite for raw materials explains the 36% rise in industrial raw-material prices since the start of this year, benefiting exporters of things like copper.

A country's size is important when world trade is falling because large economies have large domestic markets when foreign markets fail. China is the best example. Large economies also tend to be diversified. India, for example, exports not just garments and cheap electronics but ships, petrochemicals, steel and business services. Being diversified is a big advantage when recovery begins since there is likely to be a business in which demand is rising.

Note: Exploring Chinese influence in Africa is another case study.

Summary

The concept of a superpower has developed to include economic, cultural, military and geographical influence. However, patterns of power change over time. There are differences in the emerging powers versus the existing superpowers in terms of regional and global influence. Superpowers play a key role in international decision making. Nevertheless, there are changes occurring in the world order – away from a sole superpower to a multipower world. The rise of the BRICs and continued growth in superpowers has resource implications. The example of China's activities in Latin America illustrates this well. In addition, shifting power has implications for older core regions. Shifting power may yet cause increased tensions between one global culture and another.

Acknowledgements

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