

# Edexcel Geography A-level

## Superpowers Essential Notes



## Enquiry question 1: What are superpowers and how have they changed over time?

### Characteristics of Superpowers

→ Superpowers are states or organisations with a **dominant position** in the international system. They have the ability to influence events in their own interest and project power on a worldwide scale to protect these interests. The term 'superpower' was first used by T.R. Fox in 1944 in his book which examined the role of the USA, UK and the Soviet Union.



→ Superpowers primarily have **economic and military power**. Emerging superpowers, such as India and Brazil, have power based on their increasing economic importance and **resources**. Regional powers, such as Germany, have a **continental influence** rather than a global reach.

→ Power can be maintained using **soft power** through the spread of **culture and ideology**. For this, media is vital for promoting the beliefs and messages of superpowers. The current global superpower, America, uses soft power to maintain a global influence through **McDonaldisation** and 'Americanisation'. Soft power, though not violent, causes the erosion of traditional cultures and ideologies.



→ **Hard power** involves **military action** which is the most threatening mechanism. The USA has a military presence on every continent apart from Antarctica, with the NATO membership strengthening its military. This type of power can be seen as aggressive and hostile whilst inviting violence globally but it protects the superpower.



→ The importance of these characteristics and mechanisms for maintaining power have changed over time. **Mackinder's 'Heartland Theory'** states that whoever controls Europe and Asia, the largest land masses, will gain control over the world.

→ Mackinder believed that the 'heartland' extended from Eastern Europe into Russia with there being a 'pivot' in the centre. By controlling the 'pivot', the heartland could be controlled which would ultimately lead to global power.

→ Mackinder supposed it should be Russia who controlled because of their location and resources but, since they had poor governance and many borders, they were considered weak. Instead, Britain ruled the heartland because of its economic power, industrial revolution and military power. Today however, control is less violent and more influential.



## Patterns of Power

→ During the **imperial era**, power was maintained by colonial rule. Colonialism involved one nation carrying out:

- **Ethnic cleansing**
- **Direct military conquest/occupation** of territory
- **Cultural imperialism** through art, religion or language (Britain spread English, Cricket and Tea drinking)
- **Economic Imperialism** (e.g. exporting trade to home country)
- Challenging ownership **rights**



→ Colonialism finished between 1945 and 1980 when countries began gaining independence from the ruler.

→ A **unipolar world** is where there is only **one** dominant power, such as during the British Empire. A **multipolar world** involves **three or more** superpowers; a phenomenon that has been evolving since 2010 with the rise of the EU, China and USA.



→ A **bipolar world** involves **two** opposing superpowers. For instance, during the cold war, the USA challenged the USSR for global domination. This predominantly involved a clash of cultures between capitalism and communism political ideologies.

→ The emergence of China and the Cold War era saw multi-faceted indirect control. Despite, political, economic and military control, neo-colonial mechanisms became more important.

→ For example, both the USA and USSR refused to participate in the Olympics, began an arms race and race to launch spacecraft.

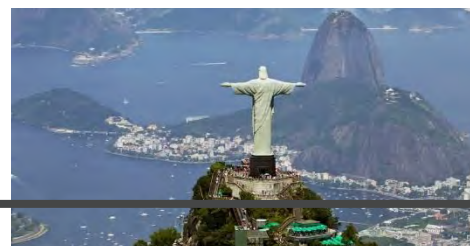
→ Today, China has evolved as a potential rival to the USA's hegemony. China has grown significantly in economic potential, has a powerful resource base, a large population and market, increasing global outreach (member of international committees) and powerful military potential.



→ Different patterns of power bring varying degrees of **geopolitical stability** and risk. Superpowers will face threats from emerging powers which may hinder their economy and global influence.

## Emerging Powers

→ A growing number of **emerging countries**, such as the BRICS, are increasingly important to global economic and political systems. Each emerging power has evolving strengths and



weaknesses which may inhibit or advance their economic and geopolitical role in the future.

- For instance, **Brazil** could be the next superpower as:
  - It has no enemy and wars and has avoided military conflict
  - The country has high interest rates
  - Abundance of natural resources (copper/food markets) and large biofuel base.
  - No natural disasters (only some flooding)
  - An abundance of water and oil (one of the largest oil finds were discovered off the coast of Rio de Janeiro, adding to the nation's energy security)
  - Governments runs a surplus on trade
  - Well-developed cities and infrastructure in places
- However, Brazil still faces governmental corruption, large gaps between rich and poor and high internal violence and crime rates. This may slow Brazil's growth as a future superpower but, over a long time-scale of perhaps 50 years, may be controlled and lead to Brazil's success.
- **Russia** has oil and gas reserves, a nuclear weapons proliferation and the largest landmass in the world. However, the population is imbalanced and ageing which impacts market size, the number of workers and dependents. Russia also has surges in poor health issues which damage work opportunities.
- In contrast, **India** has a large and youthful population, creating a huge workforce and consumer market. This, alongside energy reserves of coal, a growing industry base in science and technology and a large English speaking population, mean India could become a potential superpower by 2050.



→ Development theories can be used to explain patterns of power:



**World Systems Theory:** This treats the world as a single unit and divides countries into cores, peripheries and semi-peripheries. This recognises that some countries are more developed (core) than others (periphery) whilst some are emerging (semi-periphery).



**Dependency Theory:** Developing countries remain dependent on wealthier developed nations for trade.

**Modernisation Theory:** Countries move from underdevelopment to high mass consumption.

**Development Theory:** Colonialism is responsible for poverty's persistence as rulers exploit their subjects.

**Enquiry question 2: What are the impacts of superpowers on the global economy, political systems and the physical environment?**

### **Superpower Influence on the Global Economy**



→ Superpowers influence the **global economy** by promoting free trade and capitalism, as the USA has done. This is achieved through



a variety of International Governmental Organisations such as the World Bank, IMF, WTO and the World Economic Forum.

- **Organski** argued that superpowers set up these international organisations for their own interests. Perhaps this is supported by these organisations, particularly the World Bank and IMF, being located in the USA; the USA thus have the easiest access to their services.
- **TNCs**, whether public like 'Coca-Cola' or state owned such as Russia's 'Gazprom', are dominant economic forces in the global economy as they encourage economic and cultural diffusion through globalisation.
- These companies generate huge profits through **trade patterns and patents**, protecting their technology, which provides a boost for superpowers who can afford them. This however creates deep inequality in the world as some nations, for instance Ghana, cannot afford patented products such as medicines, impacting their health.
- TNCs have a strong role in maintaining power and wealth as they spread the **ideologies** of the superpower. The more TNCs a superpower owns, the wealthier and stronger the nation.
- Global culture influences are an important aspect of power as they link to economic influence and technology, for a superpower must have the means to project their beliefs and assets. **Global culture** is influenced through arts, food and media with their being a spread of 'westernisation' as eastern nations adopt western ideologies such as fast food, industry working and movies/television.



### International Decision Making

- Superpowers play a key role in **global action**, such as **sending aid**, responding to **crises, tackling climate change** and **resolving conflicts**. It is these powerful nations that act as 'global police', working to create peace internationally.
- Alliances can be either:
  - Military based: such as NATO and ANZUS (The Australia, New Zealand and United States Security Treaty)
  - Economically based: such as The EU, NAFTA and ASEAN
  - Environmentally based: such as the IPCC
- These alliances increase **interdependence** and are important in geostrategy and global influence, creating an integrated panel with leading superpowers.
- The United Nations (involving the Security Council and International Court of Justice) are important to global geopolitical stability as they carry out peacekeeping missions and hold climate change conferences.

### Superpower Influence on the Physical Environment

- Superpowers consume an **abundance of resources** including food, fossil fuels and minerals, which exacerbates **environmental degradation** and contributes to global





warming. Although they promote international conferences on environmental sustainability, they nonetheless consume the greatest.

- There are differences in the willingness to act to reduce carbon emissions and reach global agreements on environmental issues. The USA for instance refused to sign the Kyoto Protocol whereas the EU have set regulations on packaging and resource consumption, trying to control their carbon footprint.



- Future **growth in middle-class consumption** in emerging superpowers has implications for the availability and cost of key resources such as rare earth metals, oil, staple grains and water. This could cause future competition and conflict.

### Enquiry question 3: What spheres of influence are contested by superpowers and what are the implications of this?

#### Global Influence



- Tensions can result from competition over **physical resources**, such as Arctic oil and gas. Russia, for instance, has territorial claims over almost half of the Arctic Circle which is likely to spark conflict amongst other nations wanting Arctic resources.
- Tensions can also form from the disagreement over exploitation and expense.
- The global system of **intellectual property rights** can be undermined by **counterfeiting**, which involves producing products that closely resemble the copyrighted product. This strains trade relations and TNC investment but can provide business opportunities for poor nations who cannot afford protected products.

- **Political spheres of influence** can be contested when multiple interests overlap. This produces tension over territorial and physical resources. In some cases, tensions can lead to open conflict which has implications for people and the physical environment.

- For instance, the South China Sea is facing disputes between China and other neighbouring nations such as Vietnam, Taiwan and Japan. China has claimed islands within the South China Sea with the aim of creating military training bases, creating a direct threat towards other nations.



#### Changing Relations between Developing Nations and Superpowers

- Developing economic ties between emerging and developing nations (such China's African Policy) increases



interdependence, generates environmental impacts whilst bringing opportunities and challenges.

- Since 2006, China has invested in Africa by building bridges, roads and social infrastructure such as hospitals. China has also created business opportunities within Africa but these are usually filled by Chinese workers who have migrated to Africa. It has been reported that working conditions are extremely poor with factories having very few rights and little wages.
- Critics have been quick to notice that China's interest in Africa is largely for economic gain as Africa holds an abundance of natural resources and land.
- The rising economic importance of China and India, and other emerging Asian countries, increases the geopolitical influence of these regions, inviting economic and political tension.
- Cultural, political, economic and environmental tensions in the Middle East represent an ongoing challenge to superpowers and emerging powers because of the complex geopolitical relations formed from the supply of energy resources.
- The Middle East holds a vast supply of fossil fuels so diplomatic relations and the prevention of conflict is vital for countries to gain access to resources. For this to happen, nations must respect the cultural ideologies of The Middle East.



### **Economic Restructuring**

- Economic problems such as **debt, unemployment, economic restructuring and social costs** present challenges to superpowers, especially the USA and EU today.
- Maintaining military power (naval, nuclear, air and intelligent services) provide additional economic costs whilst **space exploration** is an opportunity for superpowers to gain greater recognition, albeit the expense.
- The future balance of global power in 2030 and 2050 is uncertain; the USA may face threats from China/India.

