

Geopolitics and international affairs

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“ What are the key factors in contemporary redistributions of Geopolitical Power?”

The Encyclopaedia Britannica describes Geopolitics as “ analysis of the geographic influences on power relationships in international relations” (2010); therefore Geopolitical Power is the power certain nations have over other nations, based upon Geographic influences and advantages.

Across the world the geographies of power shift from nation to nation over time (such as the shift in power from Britain to the USA after WWII) and the hegemonic structure has a huge effect on world dynamics such economy, politics, society and culture. The nation with the most power tends to have the greatest influence over these and other factors. Currently, and in recent years there has been a notable rise in power from nations in the geographic east (most notably China) simultaneous to the apparent decline in power by the worlds current top geopolitical power (the USA). This is raising serious questions as to the future of the current hegemonic structure.

There are a number of key factors which are driving this shift in power and here I aim to address and analyse these so that I may answer the question “ What are the key factors in contemporary redistributions of Geopolitical Power?”

The USA is currently the world’s dominant geopolitical power and has been since World War II. According to Fareed Zakaria (2008) “...the United States’ [unrivalled economic status] has lasted more than 120 years” and that “ The US economy has been the world’s largest since the middle of the 1880’s”. As

of 2008, The CIA World Fact book ranks the USA as having the highest GDP/PPP of any individual nation (The EU is ranked higher than the USA but is technically a united group of countries) which stands at \$14, 440, 000, 000, 000; around double that of the next country on the list, China (CIA, 2008). In 2004 James F. Hoge, author of ' A Global Power Shift in the Making' (2004) explained that " China's economy is growing at more than nine percent annually" and that " China's economy is expected to be double the size of Germany's by 2010 and to overtake Japan's, currently the world's second largest, by 2020". To put China's rapid growth into perspective in 2010, its GDP has already overtaken that of Germany's, with economic spectators forecasting China's economy to outstrip Japan's this year- 10 years prior to Hoge's 2004 prediction.

However, the economy of a nation may be an important indicator of world power, but is by no means the sole factor in determining hegemonic status; the USA is still dominant for other reasons.

Military strength is- and always has been- one of the key ways of determining the power of a nation. The ' Stockholm International Peace Research Institute' (SIPRI) cited the USA as having a military expenditure in 2008 which amounted to \$607, 263, 000, 000, accounting for 41. 5% of the world's total military spending (SIPRI, 2009). Military strength provides a nation with the means of physically exercising its geopolitical power over other nations, and the USA currently dominates land, sea and air with its military presence. China may be a growing militant power and have a larger army in terms of personnel, however its military expenditure is a fraction of

the USA's; and one must also take into account the sheer size of the population in China which explains the high numbers of active servicemen in the country.

Both countries currently have a nuclear capability, which during the Cold War was “ widely seen as a necessary qualification for a seat at the top table”. This is no longer the case and now the possession or development of nuclear weapons is deemed unacceptable behaviour (Hurrell, 2006). This is an example of how the factors of determining Geopolitical power change over time.

The demographics of a nation are also of vital importance to its development and changes in population structure can have dramatic effects within both developing and developed nations. As of the 13th Jan 2010, the population of the USA is around 308, 478, 201, (United States official population clock, 2010) whilst the population of China is around 1, 335, 035, 010 (Chinese official population clock, 2010) – over 1 billion more than the USA. This is a vital factor in explaining why China has been experiencing such rapid growth in the past decade.

Firstly, a large population means more people spending money, which raises the country's GDP- China is currently the world's second largest consumer behind the USA (Zakaria, 2008 [2]). In the current economic climate with recession still looming over many nations, it is important for the general population to keep spending in order to stimulate the economy; in China, this is no issue due to the huge numbers of people. This is why China, and Asia in

general, has not been so greatly affected by the ‘ global’ recession as the USA and Europe.

A population of this size also provides China with a huge number of people of working age to power the world’s largest manufacturing industry, as well as other important areas of industry from banking (to lead China through this economic shift) to farming (to feed the vast numbers of people living in the country). China is so competitive on the international scene due to its vast labour force.

However, it is the structure of a population which is really vital in determining the future power of a nation. An ageing population can put a strain on the relatively smaller working age population due to the cost of providing health care, pensions, housing, etc. A youthful population puts strain on education and health services, food supplies; and can result in too a lack of jobs in the future. Both have their issues, but both also have benefits. Japan for example has the world’s largest ageing population with 12. 1% aged 65 and over in 2000, with a predicted rise to 26. 2% by 2020 (Anderson, Hussey. 2000). Japan is now experiencing deep demographic issues with the working age population being too small to support the large elderly population, and the birth rate continually falling; having implications to the development of the country which has experienced declining power over the past 2 decades.

There is a well known phrase that ‘ children are the future’ and this wisdom is heeded particularly well in the USA. Whilst China may have a huge workforce, they are relatively uneducated. The USA prides itself upon the

fact that its education system is so highly regarded, having a high output of skilled workers graduating from its prestigious universities every year.

According to Zakaria (2008 [2]) “ America trains more high-quality 4 year engineering graduates per capita than any other country” with “ Eight of the top 10 universities in the world...in the United States”. This is why when visiting many US (and European) higher education facilities it is easy to notice the high proportion of Asian (particularly Chinese) students, as these institutions offer a far higher standard of education than would be available in Asia. These Asian students typically stay in America after they have completed their education due to more job prospects with a better rate of pay than available back home, so are a vital resource to the country.

America’s acquisition and prolonged control of power can largely be thanked to the younger generations who have been educated by US education facilities and gone on to create a huge pool of skilled and talented workers. These workers drive the economic industries of the US, whilst their high expenditure on commodities and consumer goods helps fuel growth of its GDP.

Many people believe that China is the sole competitor to the USA for hegemonic status, believing that eventually China will overtake America as the sole dominant world power in terms of economy, military, culture, etc. However, others – such as Fareed Zakaria (2008 [2]) – believe that “ the rise of rest” is far more likely; meaning that power will become dispersed amongst a number of powerful nations under America so that global decisions will no longer be made from one side of the globe. The countries believed to be the main competitors to this state of uni-multipolarity are

those referred to as BRIC countries: Brazil, Russia, India and China. Uni-multipolarity will be the resulting situation whereby the US is still the superpower, but with these BRIC countries having much more participation in world affairs than they have done in the current uni-polar (US dominant) geopolitical structure.

This shift in power may come as a shock to America and there is likely to be resistance of some sort from the west, although it is very unlikely that the US will lose its dominance so it should look to facilitate the transition of geopolitical power to make this inevitability happen as smoothly as possible.

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