



Superpower

without empire

How the USA achieved global dominance

The USA is a superpower which has never had an empire. Instead it has achieved ideological, economic and political dominance using its financial power and exploiting the spread of its culture by globalisation. This article considers how the USA has used global systems to achieve its geopolitical status

Since 1945, the USA has been the world's dominant non-communist player and, after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the only **superpower**. However, unlike every superpower before it, the USA has not built an empire by colonising other nations. Instead, it has used 'soft' mechanisms, such as aid and trade strategies, to spread its ideologies, culture and power.

Note that, although this article focuses on the USA, which is still a leading power, China has risen to be of almost equal importance. Some experts believe China will be the next dominant nation, while others envisage a 'multipolar world' in which China, the USA and the EU vie for dominance.

Aid, debt and strategic alliances

One of the ways in which the USA has maintained its power in the world is by the way it distributes economic and military

aid (Table 1). Despite the poverty of many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Table 1 shows that the top aid recipients are located in other, strategic, regions:

- Long-time ally of the USA, Israel, is often the top-ranked recipient of US aid, not because it needs support to provide welfare for its

people, but because the USA gives it military help to maintain its existence in an unstable political region.

- The USA offers aid to Pakistan to try and steer it away from Islamic extremism and in this way help fight terrorism, as well as attempting to foster better relations in the region.

Table 1 Top six recipient countries of US foreign aid, 2013 (US\$ billion)

Country	US total economic and military assistance	Economic assistance	Military assistance
Afghanistan	4.53	2.65	1.88
Israel	2.96	0.02	2.94
Egypt	1.57	0.33	1.24
Jordan	1.21	0.88	0.33
Kenya	0.88	0.84	0.04
Pakistan	0.80	0.79	0.01

George V having lunch on a tiger hunt in Nepal, during a visit to India to celebrate his coronation. European imperialism was overt



Glossary



Capitalism An economic and political system in which a country's economic activities (including trade) are controlled by private owners and geared towards profit making, with various forms of governmental support.

Imperialism Extending one country's power and influence over others through formal occupation or direct control of government and/or the military.

Superpower A nation with the means to project its power and influence virtually anywhere in the world.

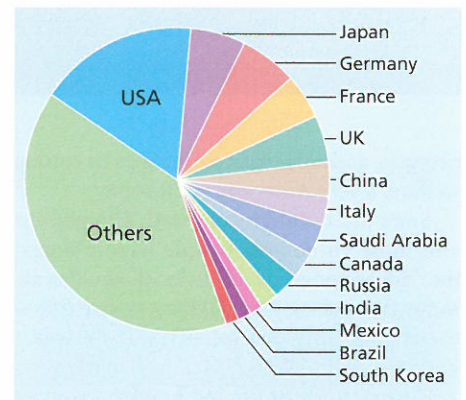


Figure 1 IMF members' voting power (% of votes by country)

■ Aid to Egypt has similar goals, but has many other advantages including maintaining US naval access to the Suez Canal, maintaining the 1979 Israel-Egypt peace treaty and promoting democracy and economic growth within Egypt, the region's largest Arab country.

The USA not only provides aid to key strategic partners around the world, but also uses it to stimulate wealth back in its home country by creating a market for its goods. For example, from the military aid Egypt receives it is obliged to spend a certain percentage to buy US goods. Since the 1980s, Egypt has spent approximately \$12bn on purchasing 1,000 US tanks and 221 fighter jets, far more than it actually requires. Up to 68% of US aid was tied to such purchases in 2005.

Good governance?

American aid has been beneficial in bringing more stability to particular regions and the USA has been successful in using it to promote 'good governance' and 'sound economic practices'. But does this mean that countries end up following an 'Americanised and Western' style of leadership as a result? Not always. Although US aid has brought its version of

democracy to some regions, many of the top ten recipients of US foreign assistance continue to practise torture and are responsible for major human rights abuses (according to Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch).

In reality, then, a major benefit of economic aid has been to maintain and develop political influence in overseas states. This is particularly true when some countries become dependent on US aid, e.g. Pakistan, which has received US aid every year since 1947. In the 1960s, US aid accounted for around 5% of Pakistan's GDP.

Intergovernmental organisations

Since the 1970s, the USA has been able to spread its influence and maintain its superpower status through intergovernmental organisations (IGOs), most notably the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). Both these organisations are effectively run on a 'dollar a vote' basis, where voting power of member countries is weighted according to financial contributions (Figure 1). The USA is the single largest individual contributor, which means it holds 17% of the vote, despite only accounting for 4.4% of the world's population. The IMF and World Bank also have their headquarters in the USA, and the president of

the World Bank is always a US citizen. It seems likely that such influence often allows the USA to have a disproportionate say in the political and economic affairs of other countries.

The IMF and structural adjustment

The IMF was set up in 1945, after the Second World War, with the aim of fostering global monetary cooperation and securing financial stability. Today, it has 188 member countries. During the 1970s–80s, some poorer countries had huge debt and little economic growth. These countries, mainly although not exclusively in sub-Saharan Africa, needed financial aid to restructure their economies and help tackle their indebtedness.

The IMF offered loans at a much lower interest rate than governments could get directly for themselves. But in order to qualify for this aid, governments had to agree to structural adjustment programmes (SAPs). This involved IMF teams visiting the country and assessing the state of its economy, then making recommendations to the government before loans were transferred. For the most part, SAPs involved 'opening up' the local economy to the world market, selling state assets, encouraging private investment from



McDonald's in Marrakech, Morocco

Further reading



Time article on five reasons why the USA remains the world's only superpower: www.tinyurl.com/hm3a69x

Vanity Fair article about China overtaking the USA economically: www.tinyurl.com/ojempnn

- At the London summit on the 2008 food crisis, Cargill was invited to advise on policy.
- When the USA needed to appoint someone to lead the reconstruction of agriculture in Iraq, it turned to a former Cargill executive.
- In China Cargill has trained over 2 million farmers in the American way of agriculture.
- It held 217 patents between 1997 and 2007, with a further 175 pending, allowing it to have monopolies on future technology
- Its revenue is larger than Morocco's GDP.

So although Cargill is 'just' a company, it is so powerful politically and economically that it has become an agent by which US interests are maintained. Table 2 shows how powerful some TNCs are becoming.

TNCs and culture

TNCs not only have an interest in manufacturing goods in global markets, but more importantly,

overseas, and reducing state budgets by cutting welfare, a very American philosophy.

SAPs often didn't work well. The poorest and most vulnerable people were plunged into deeper poverty, while local, small-scale industrial and agricultural sectors were forced to compete with global (often US) TNCs, which now had unlimited access to new markets.

This strategy of forcing poorer countries to adopt US economic ideals not only spread **capitalism** throughout the developing world, but limited the spread of the competing ideology of the time, communism. In other words IGOs like the IMF and World Bank have allowed the US to assert its ideological dominance without any requirement for military force or occupation.

Transnational corporations

The IMF strategy of getting poorer nations to open their markets to foreign companies has allowed transnational corporations (TNCs) to spread their trade operations, and their culture and values, globally. Forbes Global 2000 identifies the 2,000 largest TNCs in the world. In 2015, US-based companies accounted for 579 of the top 2,000, 232 were Chinese, 98 British. So it is likely there is at least some branch of a US TNC working in every country on the planet.

What is of particular interest for geographers is that even American TNCs which have no government involvement are active in assuring US dominance abroad. TNCs are often welcomed into poorer countries, only for them to exploit the host's cheaper labour and transfer profits back to home countries. The fact that the vast majority of world trade is conducted in dollars and the language of global business is English, has entrenched an American culture of consumerism, capitalism and attaining wealth across almost every country.

Cargill

Cargill is a US TNC that provides raw materials to the global food system. It is one of four US TNCs that account for between 75% and 90% of the global grain trade. As well as being a leading player in the trading, processing and transporting of the most important agricultural commodities, its influence carries further. For example:

Table 2 Top five US transnational companies 2015, by revenue, compared to countries

US rank	Company	Revenue (\$ billion)	Higher revenue than
1	Walmart	482	Poland
2	Exxon Mobil	268	Chile
3	Apple	234	Finland
4	Berkshire Hathaway	211	Portugal
5	McKesson	179	Romania

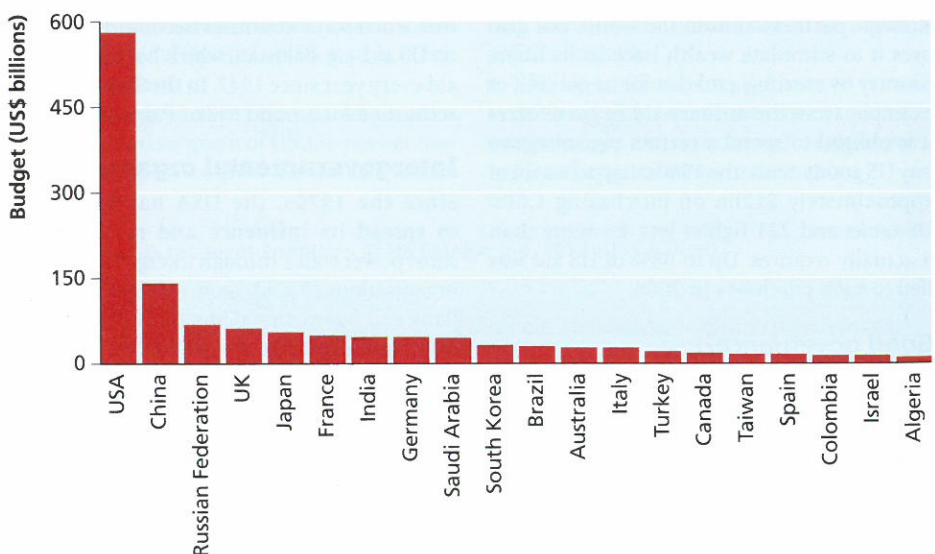


Figure 2 Military spending: top 20 countries



Source: DoD, as of 2002

Figure 3 US military bases worldwide

want to sell their products in these markets, often at the expense of local culture. McDonald's and Walmart are among the largest TNCs operating overseas in their respective sectors. These companies are changing local traditions and ways of life: the clothes people wear, how they shop, what they eat and how they eat it.

Such issues are not only a concern in developing countries, but in every country in the world, as culture and lifestyle become increasingly Americanised. Nowhere is this more evident than on the internet, as US TNCs Google and Microsoft package US culture, US-centric news, information and values. The popularity of US brands, perceived lifestyles and easily accessible culture cements the USA's dominance as a global superpower, through a 'soft' medium of power.

Whether this is always welcomed is another question. Terrorist group al-Qaida has claimed that its attacks on the USA have been partly motivated by a reaction to perceived US cultural imperialism.

Summary

The USA does not have an empire in the way that European countries did in the nineteenth

century. American imperialism takes a more subtle form. The USA has used economic aid and trade in such a way that its political, economic and cultural values are entrenched in global society. It is inevitable that the USA will not be able to maintain its global dominance, if only because history suggests superpowers do not last forever. However the USA's superpower status is unlike that of any other. It is mainly established and maintained through 'soft' power, unlike earlier superpowers that relied on territorial dominance and empire.

Questions and activities

- 1 Analyse the data in Figure 1 on voting power at the IMF. How far does the voting power reflect the economic power of the nations shown?
- 2 Study Figures 2 and 3. How far can the information they show be interpreted as the USA's attempt to dominate global geopolitics?
- 3 Evaluate the view that, in the twenty-first century, the 'soft' power of US TNCs, their brands and culture is the most significant type of superpower influence.



A US airbase in Germany

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Key points

- The USA has been a dominant world power since 1945.
- It has used means other than colonisation to gain and maintain this status.
- These include using international aid for political ends, and dominance of certain IGOs which allowed the spread of US political ideology.
- Globalisation and the global spread of US TNCs has introduced US culture throughout the world, adding to its power.

Desert Landscapes in the Nile Valley



This true-colour satellite image of the Nile Valley in northern Sudan covers an area of about 40×30 km. It highlights striking contrasts between the desert landscapes on opposite sides of the river. The landscape to the north and west is dominated by yellow windblown sand from the north. Linear features are well developed and there is a long belt of barchan dunes in the far west of the image. The river provides an effective barrier to the movement of windblown sand so that prominent sand dunes have built up along the left bank.

The landscapes to the east of the river are very different. Here the land surface is dominated by bedrock and by ephemeral river networks. These dryland channels or wadis only flow with water during rare extreme rainfall events.

Stream networks are present on both sides of the Nile but they are blanketed by sand in the north because of the abundant supply of sand which is transported by aeolian processes. All the modern

settlements and most of the agricultural activities in this part of the Nile Valley are located on the two largest islands (Sai and Ernetta) and on the right bank where they are protected from the damaging effects of windblown sand.

Locate this area using Google Earth (it includes the modern town of Abri) and explore the nature of the wider desert and Nile Valley landscapes.

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