

## SUPERPOWERS: THE USA, A CASE STUDY

Geographers know that most information can be located on a map. Geographers also know that by studying the patterns and relationships shown, they can gain insights into the world we live in and the way we live in it. You might think that it would be impossible to map power, because it is intangible. Power in international relations refers to the ability of national states to influence or control other states. How can that be counted or located? This **Geofile** aims to show that power can be mapped using other quantifiable evidence: the economic, military, cultural power and the geographical influence of a state. The patterns and relationships shown reveal concentrations of power that can be termed superpower. These patterns show that the USA is at the moment the world's one true superpower. However, some countries, such as China, are acquiring some of characteristics of superpower. Studying the way the USA projects its power will improve our understanding of many other geographies that you may be studying, such as energy geographies, water geographies, development geographies and technology geographies.

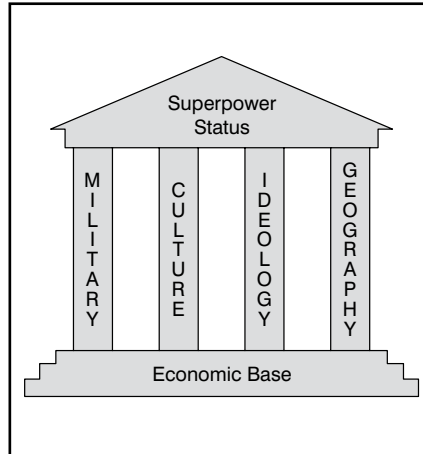
### Quantifiable evidence for power

There are four types of power that can be quantified and mapped.

#### 1. Economic power

The economic power of a country can be measured simply as gross domestic product: the total amount of goods and services produced annually. It is also possible to measure the total number and size of the transnational corporations (TNCs) domiciled in a country. The global networks constructed by these TNCs are the sinews of economic power. Therefore, it is also necessary to measure gross national income, to take account of the revenues accruing to a country from its investments abroad. Other measures of economic power include the total stock of global currency reserves and the total stock of other financial

Figure 1: Model showing the building blocks of superpower status



Source: Cameron Dunn

assets such as government and commercial bonds and bank deposits held by a country.

#### 2. Military power

Military power can, in theory, be measured and mapped: the number of troops, tanks, war planes, capital ships such as aircraft carriers etc. However, as much of this information is confidential, this evidence often relies on broad-brush statistics. The most potent form of military power is nuclear power and intercontinental ballistic missiles. This links to space programmes. Further measures of military power include spy technology, unmanned drones and cyber warfare capability.

#### 3. Cultural power

Cultural power is also called 'soft power'. The term was coined by American academic Joseph Nye in 2004. It is the ability to obtain what one wants through co-option and attraction. It can be contrasted with 'hard power', the use of coercion and payment. Soft power can be wielded not just by states, but by all actors in international politics, such as NGOs or international institutions. It is the hardest of all four measures of power to quantify. However, it is possible to measure the value TNCs attribute to their brands. It is possible to measure and map the global networks of film and TV distribution as well as to collect qualitative data on how people respond to global cultural trends.

#### 4. Geographical power

Geographical power is physical or cultural presence in a specific place, which results in influence over that place. It can be measured by counting and locating military bases abroad, recording the 'sphere of influence' that countries perceive themselves to have, and studying the distribution of language areas, currency zones and cultural links. It is also connected to networks of expatriate communities abroad.

### What is a superpower?

Figure 1 shows how economic, military, cultural and geographical power combine to create superpower status. A superpower is a state with a leading position in the international system and the ability to influence events and its own interests and project power on a worldwide scale to protect those interests.

The model stresses the importance of a strong economy to provide the means to project power and influence globally. These strands appear separate in the model; however, in reality they overlap and are mutually reinforcing, eg the US news media's portrayal of US military action and the ideological messages tied up with global brands that relate to free markets, consumption and individuality.

The model also refers to the ideology of a superpower. This is not a building block of power. This means their shared goals, expectations and beliefs. Studying a superpower's ideology helps us to understand and predict how the superpower may use its power and influence in the world. For example, the USA is a capitalist country. It is also a democracy. Therefore, the USA aims to promote open markets around the world and encourages other countries to become democratic.

### How well does the USA fit the superpower template?

#### 1. Economy

According to the International Monetary Fund, in 2009 the output of the US economy (\$14,119,050 m) was nearly three times the output of

the world's second largest economy, Japan (\$5,068,894 m). This simple measure of American economic power actually underestimates the economic influence it has over other countries.

Firstly, the US dollar is the global reserve currency. This means key commodities, such as oil and gold, are priced in dollars. This makes them cheaper for the US to buy than other countries and their price, relative to the national currency is less volatile. Also, as a reserve currency, the US dollar is held in significant quantities by other governments and companies. This makes it cheaper for the US government to borrow money, as there will always be a big market for the US dollar.

Transnational corporations are the architects of globalisation, building the networks that are making countries increasingly interdependent. According to the *Financial Times*, in 2010, 162 of the world's 500 largest companies were domiciled in the US. These companies had a combined market value of \$8,663,255 m. The UK came in second place with 32 of the world's largest companies, having a combined value of \$1,875,429 m. This dominance of the world's largest companies is key evidence of America's economic power. This means that a disproportionate amount of investment decisions regarding the location of production, pricing, technology transfer and infrastructure investment for much of the world are taken in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco and other US world cities. Profits from these investments also find their way back in large measure to the pension funds and investment funds of American citizens and business.

This pattern is not restricted to companies. 30% of the world's millionaires reside in the US, and it is also home to 40% of the world's billionaires. Therefore, a disproportionate percentage of the global elite carry American passports. The global influence these individuals can exert is enormous. Think about the impact of the Bill and Melina Gates Foundation on global health, development and learning. Remember that the popular BBC TV show, 'The Apprentice', was first devised in the US starring

tycoon Donald Trump. You might ask yourself to what extent American billionaires are the role models for the world's mega-rich, setting standards of behaviour to be copied.

Finally, personal consumption accounts for 70% of the US economy. All successful businesses want to sell to American consumers. This means that companies design products with American consumers in mind. They make sure that their products meet American standards. They are keen to avoid bad publicity in the American media. This economic power may be harder to measure, as it is qualitative, but it is very important nonetheless.

## 2. Military

On a straightforward measure of military power, America does not come out on top. According to 2008 data from *Globalfirepower.com*, the USA has the world's second largest army (1.4 million active military personnel, compared to China's 2.3m). However, the USA has 25,000 aircraft and 11 aircraft carriers. China, Russia and India combined only have 10,000 aircraft and 3 aircraft carriers. It is clear that America's military is the only force capable of achieving global full spectrum dominance. This is a military concept whereby a joint military structure achieves control over all elements of the battlespace using land, air, maritime and space-based assets anywhere on the planet.

Taking into account nuclear weapons, again America does not come top. According to the Federation of American Scientists, in 2010 the US had 2,468 active warheads compared to Russia's total of 4,650. However, recognising that 2,468 modern warheads are quite sufficient to end human life as we know it on our planet, this number does not imply any military weakness on the behalf of the USA.

The best measure of American military might therefore be its annual defence budget: in 2009 the published budget was \$515.4 billion. No other country comes close to this figure. The next four biggest military spenders are France, China, the UK and Germany, with budgets ranging from \$62 billion to \$46 billion. Only America is able to spend enough on all branches of military power to be able to effectively deploy its power globally,

and if it chooses to, overwhelmingly. Nevertheless, the ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan show how even the strongest military force can struggle to defeat highly motivated guerrillas and insurgents.

## 3. Culture

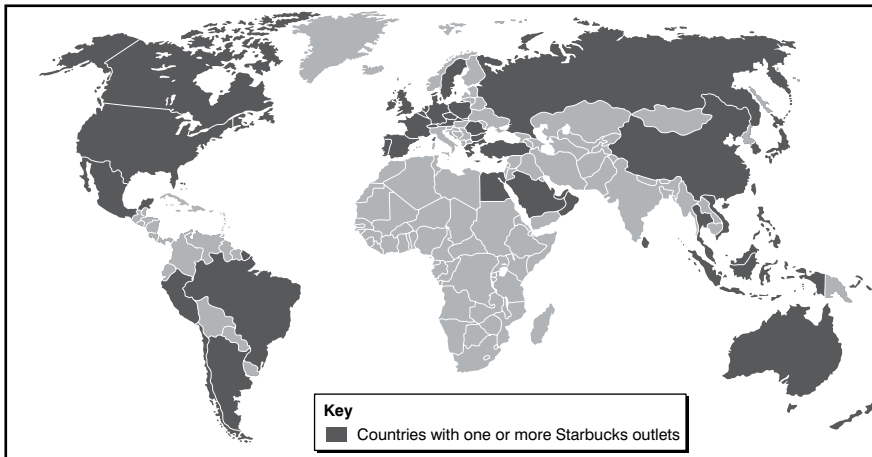
Andy Warhol was a leading figure in the visual art movement known as pop art. His work examined iconic American products such as Coca-Cola bottles, as well as celebrities such as Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, Muhammad Ali and Elizabeth Taylor. He understood the attractive power of American culture and the messages its cultural icons convey. He had this to say about Coca-Cola:

'What's great about this country is that America started the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the same things as the poorest. You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you know that the President drinks Coca-Cola, Liz Taylor drinks Coca-Cola, and just think, you can drink Coca-Cola, too. A Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking. All the cokes are the same and all the cokes are good. Liz Taylor knows it, the President knows it, the bum knows it, and you know it.'

Andy Warhol is saying that Coca-Cola is not just a soft drink. Its brand is also promoting the American belief in individual equality everywhere it is sold or drunk. Warhol's insight into the power of big American brands and popular stars, such as Coca-Cola, Disney, Madonna and George Clooney, is that they transmit powerful messages that shape our values, beliefs and behaviours. America has no need to threaten most of the world into sharing its values of individualism, consumerism, equality before the law, democracy, the American Dream. Many, if not most of us, find these values increasing attractive, due to the global reach of American culture.

However, this global projection of American cultural power can cause controversy and provoke resistance. Figure 2 shows the global presence of Starbucks outlets. US coffee culture, widely popularised on the US sitcom 'Friends', has spread

Figure 2: The global presence of Starbucks outlets



Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Starbucks\\_Map.svg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Starbucks_Map.svg)

globally, carrying with it American values and norms which are often in stark contrast and sometimes in conflict with local traditions. An example of this conflict can be found in France, where Starbucks' franchises have failed to succeed due to popular campaigns in favour of traditional French cafes.

**4. Geography**

Figure 3 shows the widespread geographical influence of the US resulting from its military bases abroad. Add to this the influence it gains from its embassies and consulates, ex-patriate communities and branch plants of TNCs. This influence is illustrated by the example of its military base at Diego Garcia.

Diego Garcia is a tropical, footprint-shaped coral atoll located south of the equator in the central Indian Ocean. It is part of the British Indian Ocean Territory. Since 1971, Diego Garcia and its territorial waters out to 3 nautical miles (6 km) has been exclusively used as a military base, primarily by the United States. The US operates a large naval ship and submarine support base, military air base, communications and space tracking facilities in the lagoon.

The base enabled the US to counter Soviet influence in the Indian Ocean during the Cold War. It helps the US police the sea-lanes for oil transportation from the Middle East. It operated as a 'fixed aircraft carrier'

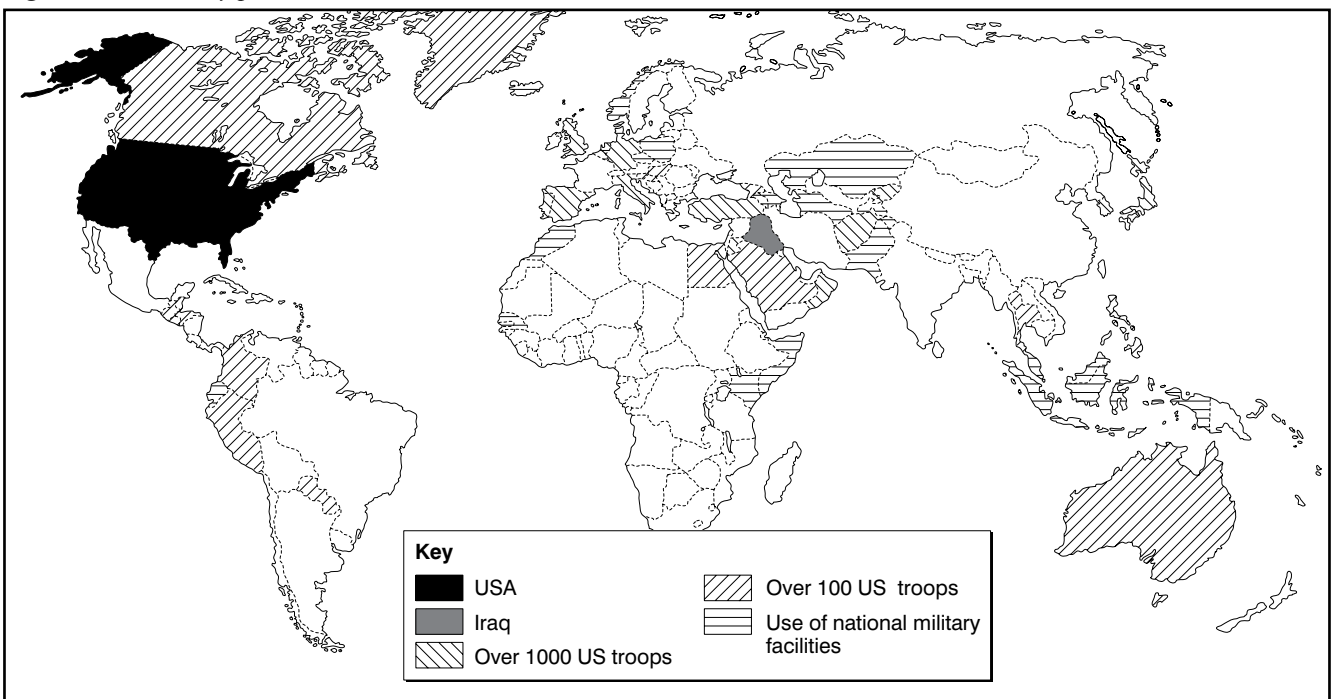
for the US during the Iranian revolution, the first and second Gulf wars and the current conflict in Afghanistan. Interestingly, Diego Garcia is also one of the five bases from which the US military manages its Global Positioning System, which is integral to many technologies.

This potent example of geographical power has caused friction between India and the US. Various political parties in India in the past called repeatedly for the military base to be dismantled, as they saw the US naval presence there as a hindrance to peace in the Indian Ocean. However, in recent years, relations between India and the US have improved dramatically and Diego Garcia has been the site of several naval exercises between the US and Indian navies.

**Changing patterns of power**

The USA's superpower status can only be understood in the wider context of modern history. The USA and the Soviet Union were the undisputed victors of the Second World War. Following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the USA's dominance of the global economy, international institutions, military power and culture may have appeared overwhelming. But the lesson of history (think here of the Roman and British Empires) is that patterns of power change over time (Figure 5).

Figure 3: US military presence in the world



Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:US\\_military\\_bases\\_in\\_the\\_world.svg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:US_military_bases_in_the_world.svg)

As our world has globalised under American leadership, the economies of Brazil, Russia, India and China amongst others have seen rapid growth. This seems to suggest a future in which American power will be less dominant. Goldman Sachs, an American investment bank, predicted in 2007 that by 2050 China will have the world's largest economy, America will be second, whilst India, Brazil and Russia will be close behind. To put this into context, in 2006 China was the world's fourth largest economy whilst India was 11th, Brazil 9th and Russia 10th. These countries are also committed to significant annual increases in military spending. Their TNCs are buying up strategic assets abroad. For example, India's Tata Corporation bought the UK's Land Rover and Jaguar car companies from the American TNC Ford in 2008. With the rise of Bollywood, a globally successful Olympic Games hosted by China in 2008 and Brazil due to stage the games in 2016, perhaps we are also beginning to see cultural power developing to accompany the evident economic growth.

Fortunately, however, in our rapidly changing world, one constant will remain the geographer's ability to map and understand the changing patterns of power using the evidence of economic, military, cultural and geographical power.

**Useful websites**

<http://www.usa.gov/> US Government Web Portal – find out about the activities of the US government.

<http://www.bea.gov/> US Bureau of Economic Analysis – find out about the US economy.

<http://www.state.gov/> US Department of State – find out about US foreign policy.

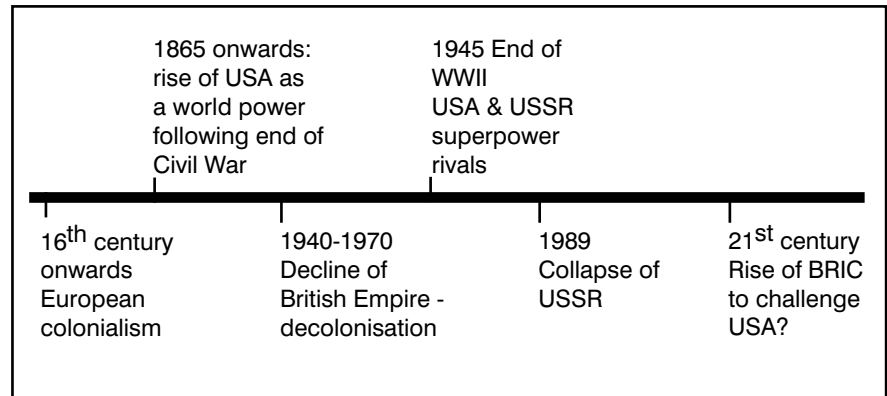
<http://www.defense.gov/> US Department of Defence – find out about US military spending and activity.

Figure 4: Comparison of relevant indicators with selected countries

Type of power		USA	China	South Africa	Australia
Economic	GDP 2009 in US\$ million	14,119,050	4,984,731	287,219	994,246
	# TNCs in FT Global 500	163	23	6	13
Military	Number of active military personnel	1,385,122	2,255,000	60,000	54,000
	Annual defence budget (US\$ billion)	515.4	59	3.7	22
Cultural	# of brands in Interbrand Top 100 by brand value 2010	49	0	0	0
	# global media corporations in world top 10	6	0	0	0
Geographic	# overseas territories or dependent territories	14	2	0	6

Source: CIA World Factbook

Figure 5: Modern timeline of changing patterns of superpower



**FOCUS QUESTIONS**

1. Read the international, business and cultural news sections of a broadsheet Sunday newspaper. Draw up an inventory of any examples of US influence. Categorise them under the headings economic, military, cultural and geographical.
2. Draw a spider diagram showing your own cultural influences. How many can you trace back to the USA? What values do you think are transmitted by these influences?
3. With reference to named examples and your own knowledge, explain how the USA maintains its superpower status.