



# Africa in the World

A rising China but still a dominant West

Jakkie Cilliers

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## A rising China but still a dominant West

The rise of China and surrounding Asia as the most important source of economic growth globally and the associated shift of economic heft eastward is well established and widely reported. Given its growing population and deepening ties with China, Africa is well-positioned to benefit from this trend. The result is a commensurate reduction in the West's relative economic and political weight and the rise of additional sources of capital and influence, such as from the Middle East (particularly the UAE and Saudi Arabia), reflecting an associated trend towards **regionalism** that reinforces global fracturing. Today, Asia's economy is less dependent on trade with other regions and is increasingly more integrated and self-sufficient. China is at the heart of Asia, but Asia is much more than China, as the region includes many dynamic economies and large powers such as India and Japan — both of whom are at odds with China.

For over a century, the US has been the most powerful country in the world (both in hard and soft power terms). It has successfully presented a narrative that equates global development, stability and progress with American interests. The close connection that it has established between democracy, the free market and so-called Western values is, however, starting to fray.

The US derives considerable advantage from its dominant global position. Globalisation allowed it substantial advantages, attracting investment and allowing the US to manipulate the international system to its benefit. The status of the US dollar as the global reserve currency allows America to consistently run a more significant current account deficit than other countries. That advantage will fade in the years ahead as the use of national currencies in some regions, including in Africa, gains momentum, but it will take a long time.

The fracking revolution in the US, together with the fallout from the war in Ukraine, means that China has become the most significant fossil energy market for the billions of dollars of oil exports from the Middle East, Russia, Venezuela and others. A new world energy order is taking shape that will eventually transact in various currencies, not only in the dollar. That shift will set the scene for the steady diminution of the dollar-based financial system and the benefits that flowed from it for the US. While China powers ahead, expanding its relations in the region through the Belt and Road Initiative and other efforts, the US is in danger of withdrawing from the world. Globalisation is now less popular than previously, with the belief that it allows 'others' to steal US intellectual property and catch up in a remarkable display of historical amnesia. The reaction to globalisation across rural America and the rise of domestic populism has translated into a resurgence of nationalism and a degree of isolationism detracting from US soft power.

The presidency of Donald Trump and the US's lack of consistency on global matters — ranging from its vacillations on the utility of NATO (Trump), stepping away from membership of the International Criminal Court (that predates Trump) to a lack of support for the World Trade Organization — have been deeply damaging to the US. It has undermined its global appeal and the trust that others have in the US as a dependable ally, notably where foreign policy approaches may diverge significantly between presidents, such as views on Ukraine, North Korea, Russia and Taiwan when comparing the Trump administration with those of Obama or Biden.

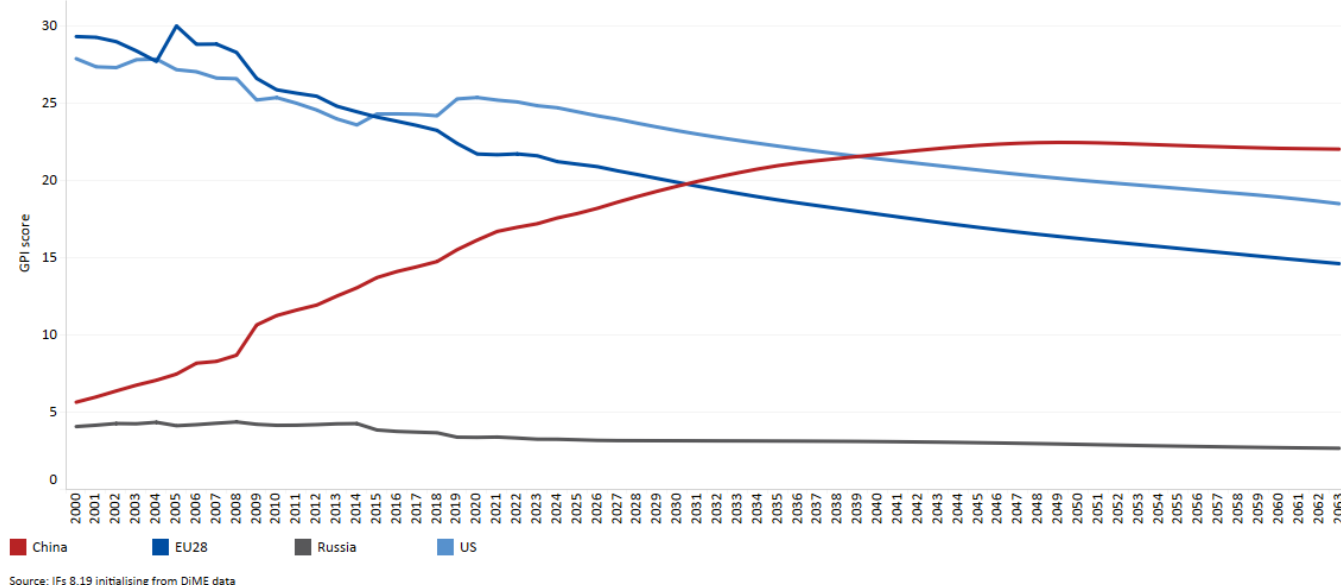
Given economic growth in Asia and elsewhere, the US's hard and soft power advantage is declining. Its reaction to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, its subsequent military operations in Afghanistan and, in 2003, the disastrous invasion of Iraq that rescued Al Qaeda from the jaws of defeat and ignited ISIS have affected perceptions of US hard power capabilities, even as the success of Western military equipment on the battlefield in Ukraine has restored some of that lost advantage. More recently, the impunity that the West has provided to Israel for the oppression, repression and war that it is pursuing in the wake of the terror attacks by Hamas of 7 October 2023 has reinforced views amongst the global South that different standards apply for people generally considered part of the 'civilised West' versus the rest.

The trend in the decline in the soft power of attraction enjoyed by the US is well established. Most damaging was the image of a mob violently occupying Capitol Hill at the instigation of Donald Trump as he sought to overturn the

presidential election results of 2020. The damage will resume if he is re-elected as US president in 2024, with significant ramifications for the US.

The inevitable power transition between the US and China is confirmed by work published early in 2022 by our colleagues at the Frederick S Pardee Center for International Futures. Using 29 alternative scenarios about the future diplomatic, military and economic capabilities of the US and China (including forecasts of nuclear weapon stockpiles) within its Diplomacy, Military and Economy (DiME) Index, the Pardee Center concludes that Chinese capabilities surpass the United States in 26 scenarios before 2060, with the most frequent period of power transition being the early 2040s. Chart 3 presents one scenario result consisting of the per cent of the global power of the EU 28 (including the UK given its alignment as part of the West), the US, the Russian Federation and China from 2000 with a forecast to 2063, this time using the Global Power Index (GPI).

Chart 3: GPI measure of global power from 2000 to 2063 on Current Path for key countries and groups



The EU, with an economy comparable in size to that of China and the US, sets the global ‘ethical’ standard among larger powers on many issues, ranging from antitrust activities to Internet privacy, membership of international organisations, etc. Still, it suffers from an acute deficit in hard power capabilities compared to the US and China. Its social-democratic or more egalitarian model of development, particularly that of the Nordic countries, stands in sharp contrast to the raw capitalism in the US and the denial of individual rights in China although that model is steadily in question with the rise of populist parties. For the time being, European soft power is more significant than any other group of countries although its stance on intellectual property waiver for COVID-19 vaccines, rising xenophobia and its response to Ukraine vs Palestine is steadily eroding that advantage. **Populism is driving politics in Europe** and it will negatively affect its relations with Africa.

Given its history of colonialism, it is not surprising that even in 2000, the combined US/EU group had eight times more influence in Africa than the combined influence of China and Russia. But by 2023, the ratio had declined to only three times more influence, and it is declining.[1]

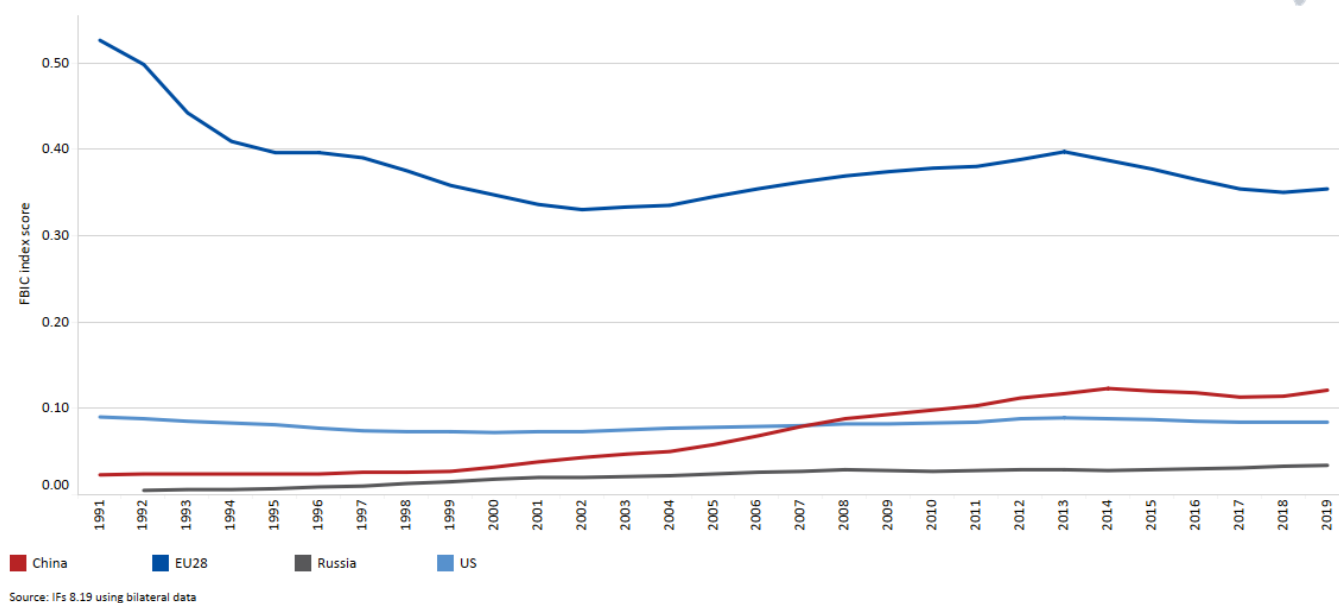
Also, Western countries evidence a trend of power **diffusion** away from the state, which is today less central in many people’s lives as additional patterns of interaction emerge. New technologies, the internet, and lately artificial intelligence, detract from social cohesion, infusing hate speech, extremism, and conspiracy theories into echo chambers on social

media that serve to divide rather than cohere society. A range of non-state actors, including from the private sector, civil society, and social media influencers, now serve as alternative sources of authority and reference, complicating and crowding the space previously occupied by traditional media, bureaucracies and elected representatives.

These technologies detract from the ability of democracies to offer freedom of speech and access to information in a balanced and unbiased manner, both of which are now increasingly manipulated, whilst strengthening the ability of centralised systems of authoritarian countries such as China and Russia to monitor and control their populations. The power of generative Artificial Intelligence in today's connected yet divided world is such that the World Economic Forum's [Global Risks Report 2024](#) identified misinformation and disinformation as the number one global risk over the next two years, given the number of elections that will occur.

The flow of materials from Africa to China and the investments made by Beijing in building infrastructure in and trade with Africa are shifting relationships. Using FBIC (see Chart 4), China has increased its influence in 53 countries, and FBIC only calculates a small decline in one country, Tunisia. The UK has seen a decline in its influence in most African countries. Taking 2000 as a baseline, by 2019, the UK had increased its influence in 18 African countries but experienced a decline of double that number. The recent surge in anti-French sentiment in its former African colonies speaks for itself. The picture for the US is *mixed*. Following waning Russian influence for much of the 1990s, Moscow is making a concerted effort to expand its political and economic footprint in Africa as it seeks to attack Western influence wherever possible. Still, with an economy, the size of Brazil lags significantly behind great powers, the *US and China*.

Chart 4: Sum of influence of EU28, China, Russia and US on all Africa countries, 1991–2019



Measures of influence are at an early stage of development but are bound to become more popular over time.

In summary, should we consider the West (North America, Europe, Japan, South Korea and others) as one group and juxtapose it with countries aligned with China, the relative power and influence of the West is declining as a portion of the global total but remains dominant globally as the wealth and technology of its citizens and states significantly outpaces that of others. Despite the rise of China and Asia, the GDP per capita gap between North America, Europe and Japan, compared to China, has remained constant or will likely increase. The comparative advantage of citizens and countries in the West vs China and its few true partners, such as North Korea, Cambodia and others, remains large across the forecast horizon.

Although China will become hugely influential within our forecast period, its rise does not translate into globally dominant power capabilities in any of the four scenarios. Even a combination of 17 countries that include China, Russia, Iran and various other potential allies does not compare in power potential and influence to a combined West. The obsession among most analysts about the inevitable power transition between China and the US generally misses this larger picture. Current indications would, however, point to China becoming more influential in Africa than any other single country and the continent's future increasingly tied to Asia, particularly when including ties to countries such as India, South Korea and Indonesia. Rather than a new uni- or even bipolar order, **the global trend is towards a complex, multipolar global power configuration.**

The GPI and DiME indices clarify the actual state of power in the international system using a set of carefully curated measures and weights. In 2023, a combined West[2] constituted 57% of total power in GPI, declining to 46% in 2043, while China, Russia, Iran and others would increase from 25% to 32%. Using the DiME Index, the West would have accounted for 54% of global power in 2023 and a group consisting of China, Russia, Iran and others[3], 22%. By 2043, the numbers are 45% and 27%, respectively.

In considering these findings, it is essential to recognise the benefits that accrue to the US (and Europe) as the historical 'system makers' and, therefore, 'privilege takers' of the current **global order**. This group of industrialised, rich countries shares several core values (such as a market-based economy, democracy and human rights) and various cultural traits. The North Atlantic powers have dominated world affairs since the Industrial Revolution and have shaped today's rules, norms and values to determine inter-state relations in their interests.

We consider several large and powerful countries outside the North Atlantic basin as part of the West in the calculations included previously, including Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand although the orientation of these countries could shift in China's favour as leaders position themselves to benefit from China's rise. New alliances may also appear, such as between India and Japan. A Chinese decision to incorporate Taiwan and continued internal repression and human rights issues concerning communities such as the Uyghurs in China could exacerbate current regional divisions. The unification of the two Koreas would likely shift that country into a non-aligned grouping or China's orbit, given the proximity impact and the accompanying trade-offs. Similar to the problematic history that the US has in its relations in Central and South America, China's giantism is encouraging efforts at resisting its domination in Asia, particularly by the six or so countries that have territorial disputes with it.

The current configuration comes with significant penalties for those on the margins of the system makers, including for Africa, practically reflected in voting rights in important institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank, on the UN Security Council and punitive risk ratings from Western-based credit agencies, among others.

The rise of Asia is reshaping global relations. Beyond its growing economic heft, East and South-East Asia has a larger population than any other region. It is increasingly interconnected through efforts such as China's Belt and Road Initiative. Still, the region does not have the associated political superstructure, alliances or shared values to translate its growing economic heft into coherent power potential.

Views on China's global ambitions differ. Parag Khanna<sup>4</sup> argues that China's primary interests are 'foreign resources and markets, not foreign colonies.' He argues that its grand strategy of building global infrastructure and engagement in regions such as Africa aims to reduce its dependence on the West, bind its neighbourhood more closely together and reduce its reliance on foreign suppliers such as minerals from Australia and high technology from the US. In this view, China's ambition is regional, not global dominance, but it does require a facilitating international context. Students of Xi Jinping, such as Steve Tsang and Olivia Cheung, differ. Their book, *The Political Thought of Xi Jinping* makes a compelling case of huge ambition, to 'make China great again'. The successive release by President Xi of China's proposal on building a community with a shared future for humanity (in 2013), its Global Development Initiative (at the UN General Assembly in

2021), a Global Security Initiative (in 2022), in 2023, its Global Civilisation Initiative and, in September the same year its proposal on Reform and Development of Global Governance, present a comprehensive alternative framework to the Western rules-based system including on views on national sovereignty, national development, human rights, climate change, green and low-carbon development, globalisation, the role of the private sector, and more. It presents a model of domestic and foreign relations where regional powers are likely to dominate, free from interference from elsewhere, and where governments pursue national policies without the constraints of a free media, foreign interference or the need to balance the executive, judiciary and legislature - all subject to the requirement to pay due homage in a Sino-centric world.

Other regions and groups such as Latin America and the Caribbean, Oceania, and the Middle East (including Turkiye) each constitute less than 5% of global GDP, except for Latin America and the Caribbean, which have a share of almost 7%. However, that portion will decline to below 5% by 2043. Many countries may consider themselves a bishop or a castle (rook) in the global chess game, but most are plodding pawns.

**Whereas the West will continue to dominate in many aspects of material and soft power calculations, the picture is also a growing divide opening up with the Global South.**

## Endnotes

1. Using FBIC. Currently the IFs system does not provide for a forecast of FBIC
2. Consisting of Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Egypt, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Luxembourg, Morocco, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, Ukraine, UK and the US.
3. Consisting of Cambodia, China, Hong Kong, Iran, Kazakhstan, North Korea, Laos, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Russia, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam.
4. Conceptually, the FBIC Index is a bilateral measure, where one country or a group of countries 'sends' its influence to another. The amount of traffic (such as trade and financial flows) between the two is termed the 'bandwidth', and the extent to which it favours the sending or receiving state is termed the 'dependence'. Together they measure how much one state influences the other. Countries with high levels of dependence (such as many African countries on trade with China) are more easily influenced, but FBIC also reflects the stock of influence that the West has built up in several centuries of engagement in Africa. See JD Moyer, CJ Meisel, AS Matthews, DK Bohl and MJ Burrows, *China-US competition: Measuring global influence*, The Atlantic Council, May 2021.

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## About the authors

Dr Jakkie Cilliers is the ISS's founder and former executive director of the ISS. He currently serves as chair of the ISS Board of Trustees and head of the African Futures and Innovation (AFI) programme at the Pretoria office of the ISS. His 2017 best-seller *Fate of the Nation* addresses South Africa's futures from political, economic and social perspectives. His three most recent books, *Africa First! Igniting a Growth Revolution* (March 2020), *The Future of Africa: Challenges and Opportunities* (April 2021), and *Africa Tomorrow: Pathways to Prosperity* (June 2022) take a rigorous look at the continent as a whole.

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