

THE EMERGENT MULTIPOLAR ORDER: THE G2, 'BRIS' AND GLOBAL CHINA

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Biden and Xi's face-to-face meeting on the sidelines of the G20 meeting in Bali is a stark reminder that the US and China constitute a de facto G2 in the emergent multipolar order. The notion of a G2 has [been in use for about a decade](#), and it gained currency after the 2008 financial crisis when China's economy was the ballast that steadied the global economy. [Adam Tooze described](#) this unique and pivotal moment in world history:

In 2009, for the first time in the modern era, it was the movement of the Chinese economy that carried the entire world economy. Together with the huge liquidity stimulus delivered by the US Federal Reserve, China's combined fiscal and financial stimulus was the main force counteracting the global crisis. Though they were not coordinated policies, they made the real vision of a G2: China and America leading the world.

In the shockwaves of the collapse of the US subprime mortgage market rippled across the world, stabilizing the global economy was in the shared interest of Beijing and Washington. But their domestic objectives diverged as time wore on – Donald Trump promised to 'make America great again' while the [Chinese Communist Party asserted](#) that it was closer than ever to achieving 'national rejuvenation' under the leadership of Xi Jinping. Both projects are meant to restore an imagined past and they are mutually exclusive. Something had to give, and not only did US-China relations sour during Trump's presidency, but their rivalry took on global significance. [Daniel Yergin made the point](#) in 2020:

[I]here is the 'G2.' Except there is no G2, at least not officially. Yet it is very real, in the sense that it is the most decisive grouping of all. It has more to say over the future of the world

SECOND COLD WAR OBSERVATORY

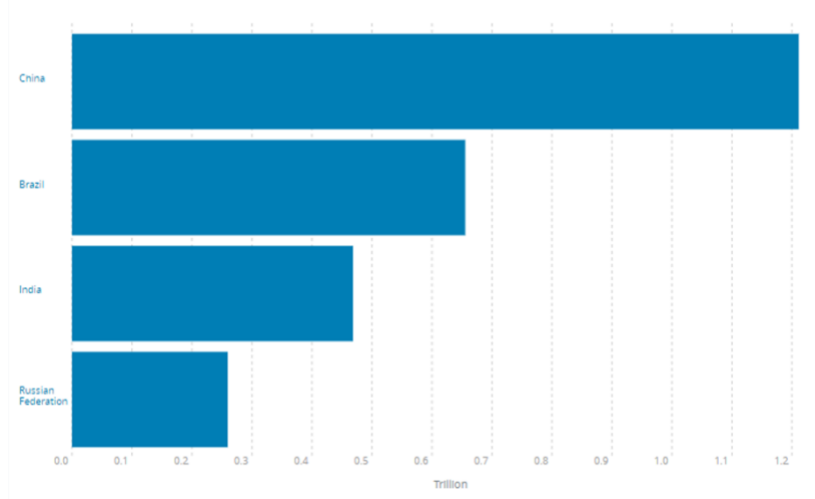
economy—and indeed, over the rest of this century—than any other grouping. The G2 comprises just two countries—the United States and China—which together represent about 40 percent of the world’s GDP and 50 percent of its military spending. The G2 is not an alliance or a forum for decision-making. Rather, it underlines the importance of the relationship between these two countries—and their new rivalry—and its impact on the entire world.

As Sino-US relations deteriorated into a trade war, the idea that the rivalry amounts to a new Cold War proliferated in the media. The *Financial Times* even launched an entire series dedicated to the New Cold War. Commentators who [reject this analysis](#) tend to argue that the USSR and present-day China are incomparable. Whereas [the USSR struggled to innovate and integrate with the global economy](#), China is deeply integrated with global value chains and its leading firms are competent at the technological frontier. China’s manifold global entanglements are captured by the notion of *Global China*. According to [Ching Kwan Lee](#) the term’s significance lies in its focus on the power relations in which China is embedded. Indeed, these expansive social, economic and political relations allow China to sustain the weight of the adjective ‘Global.’ And so, in analyzing Global China’s role in world affairs as a constituent member of the G2, it pays to keep these relations in mind and ask: **Is Global China a leader among developing countries opposed to the US-led international order, or is it a global superpower whose interests are in the stability of that order?** History shows that it’s difficult to be both at the same time.

Soviet leadership learned the hard way that this was a difficult balancing act. Nikita Khrushchev’s repudiation of the brutal excesses of Stalinism served as a warning to Mao Zedong that personality cults were vulnerable after the death of their progenitor. The split between Moscow and Beijing that followed precipitated [their intense struggle for legitimacy](#) and leadership among newly independent countries across Asia and Africa. Mao considered Leonid Brezhnev’s attempt to improve relations with the US as evidence that the USSR was simply another imperialist power. Mao believed that China was uniquely positioned to lead the world revolution, and throughout the long-1960s China’s foreign policy was animated by [revolutionary evangelism](#).

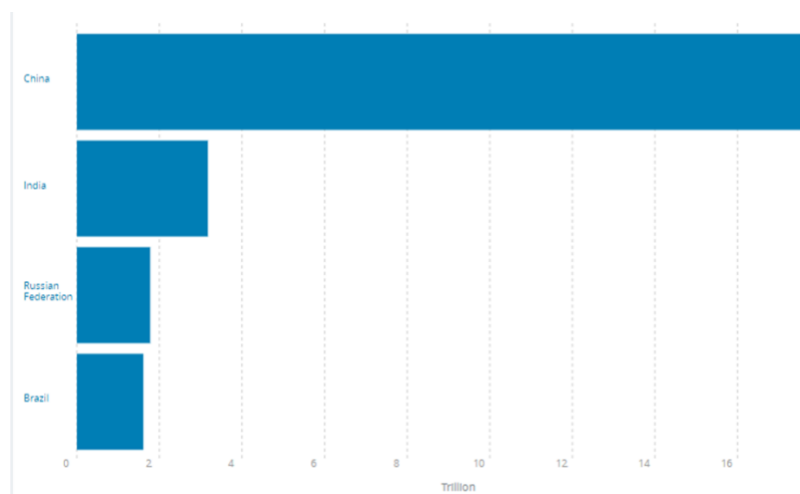
By the early 1970s China and the USSR were on the brink of war. Fear of being ‘encircled’ by the USSR and its allies led Mao to repair relations with Washington. This ultimately forced Beijing to temper its support for revolutionary movements. Not only did China curtail support for revolutionary groups, but on multiple occasions [Deng Xiaoping counseled African](#) leaders to dispense with anti-imperialism and to expand their economic ties with western countries. Deng practiced what he preached, and under his leadership [the CCP prioritized economic growth over revolution](#). Sweeping reforms progressively liberalized the Chinese economy and opened it to foreign investors.

China’s reform and opening up to the global economy precipitated sustained economic growth, but it wasn’t the only country whose economy grew throughout the 1990s. Robust economic growth in a number of developing countries led many observers to conclude that the 21st century heralded a new era in which Brazil, Russia, India and China – [the much-celebrated BRICs](#) – would increase their share of global GDP and drive global growth. Among the BRICs countries, China’s economy was the largest in absolute terms, but Brazil’s economy was more than half the size of China’s while India’s was approximately a third. Russia’s economy remained in the doldrums but in 2001 it registered the fastest economic growth among the BRICs. South Africa was subsequently added to the group, making it BRICS.



GDP (current US\$) 2000. Source: [World Bank](#).

In the first two decades of the 21st century, economic growth in Brazil, Russia and India was modest in comparison to China. By 2021 China's GDP had grown to more than twice the size of the combined GDP of Brazil, Russia and India. Furthermore, China had become the most important trading partner for many countries, and its largest firms displayed an ability to compete globally.



GDP (current US\$) 2021. Source [World Bank](#).

The gulf that opened between Global China and the BRICS countries in the past two decades – not to mention their qualitative differences – undermines the logic of grouping them together. It is now appropriate to distinguish Global China from the “BRIS.” And while Global China's economic growth places it in a different league from BRIS, it also affords Beijing an expanded role in world affairs. In recent years, Beijing has deepened its bilateral ties with countries around the world through the Belt and Road Initiative, and in a series of regional meetings with [African](#) and [Middle Eastern](#) states. Furthermore, China has sought to bolster its leadership credentials in international institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the New Development Bank.

China's ability to exert influence and offer leadership is unsurprising given the extent to which its oversized economy is globally integrated. What remains unclear, however, is whether Global China is willing to parley its influence

into transformative changes to the global economic system in ways that benefit other countries. For all the talk in Washington that China is a “[revisionist power](#),” it is difficult to see what Beijing hopes to revise other than its status in the international order vis-à-vis the US. Indeed, Global China does not offer the vision of an alternative world order in which developing countries are empowered. Xi Jinping has doubled down on the [importance of economic globalization](#) while trying to limit the influence of the US. This stands in stark contrast to the efforts of postcolonial countries in the early Cold War era whose vision for a new world order constituted what historian [Adom Getachew](#) calls *worldmaking*.

In the absence of a worldmaking agenda, it is unlikely that Global China can sustain claims to leadership among developing countries. Developing countries may hedge between China and the US, but this is a political strategy rather than fidelity to shared ideology or objectives. For example, [Argentina hopes to join BRICS](#) but this is at least partly driven by its desire to renegotiate a recent IMF. Like many countries, Argentina seems to be responding to the recognition that the US and Global China constitute a G2, but it is not committed to supporting Chinese leadership let alone an international order anchored by Global China. Beijing may soon realize that being powerful and wealthy is easier than being a leader in world affairs.

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