IB GEOGRAPHY / GLOBAL INTERACTIONS

GLOBAL SUPERPOWERS

Economic and geopolitical influence of the USA and China

A superpower can shape decisions, flows and events far beyond its borders. The USA and China are central to global power, but their strengths differ. The USA combines finance, alliances and cultural reach; China combines manufacturing, trade and growing technological and military capacity. Power is uneven across places and changes over time.

HOW POWER WORKS

Hard power uses coercion or material incentives: military force, sanctions or conditional payments. **Soft power** works through attraction, credibility and persuasion, including culture, education and diplomacy. **Smart power** combines these approaches. Infrastructure investment is not automatically soft power: its effect depends on whether it generates trust, dependence or pressure.

ECONOMIC INFLUENCE

USA - A large consumer market, major transnational corporations and deep financial markets give the USA influence over investment and trade. The dollar's central role in global reserves and payments strengthens its financial reach. Sanctions can restrict access to US finance; however, their effectiveness depends on cooperation and the availability of alternatives.

China - Manufacturing networks and demand for energy, minerals and agricultural products connect China to economies across the world. Chinese investment can expand transport, electricity and digital infrastructure, while creating opportunities for exporters. Dependence on Chinese demand or components can also expose other countries to disruption.

Comparing economic size - World Bank figures put 2024 GDP at **US$28.75 trillion for the USA** and **US$18.74 trillion for China**, using market exchange rates.[1] China is larger on the purchasing power parity measure, which adjusts for price differences. GDP measures output, not control over other states or average living standards.

GEOPOLITICAL INFLUENCE

Geopolitics concerns how location, resources, territory and strategic relationships shape power. US alliances, overseas access and naval capabilities support global military reach. China's modernisation has strengthened its regional capacity, especially around Taiwan and the South China Sea. These waters matter for shipping, security and competing territorial claims.

Military spending in 2025 - USA **US$954 billion**; China **US$336 billion** estimated.[2] The US total was about 2.8 times China's. Spending indicates resources, but geography, logistics, technology and alliances also determine capability. China's military can no longer be dismissed as broadly technologically backward.

USA		CHINA	
$28.75tn	$954bn	$18.74tn	$336bn
GDP 2024 [1]	Military 2025 [2]	GDP 2024 [1]	Military 2025 [2]
Current US dollars		Current US dollars | spending estimated	

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INFLUENCE AND ITS LIMITS

Institutions cultural influence and a contested world

INSTITUTIONS AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Both countries are permanent members of the UN Security Council and can veto substantive resolutions.[3] This gives them influence over collective responses to conflict, but can also cause deadlock. The USA has greater voting weight than China in the IMF: **16.49% versus 6.08%** in April 2025.[4]

China's **Belt and Road Initiative**, launched in 2013, links transport, energy and other infrastructure projects with trade and diplomacy. Better connectivity can reduce transport costs and improve access to markets. Outcomes depend on project quality and local decisions: debt burdens, displacement, environmental damage and opaque contracts can reduce benefits.[5]

CULTURAL INFLUENCE

USA - Hollywood, music, sport, universities, consumer brands and digital platforms give American culture extensive reach. English helps ideas and products circulate. Attraction can encourage study, tourism and favourable attitudes, but commercial popularity does not guarantee support for US foreign policy. Military interventions and perceptions of double standards can weaken credibility.

China - Chinese cuisine, diaspora communities, language programmes, educational exchanges and entertainment also create cultural connections. Games such as *Genshin Impact* illustrate the international reach of Chinese creative industries. Censorship and concerns over surveillance and rights can limit attraction. China is deeply globally connected and should not be described as culturally isolated.

TECHNOLOGY CONNECTS ALL THREE FORMS OF INFLUENCE

Innovation supports exports, military systems and cultural distribution. WIPO's 2026 ranking places **25 of the top 100 innovation clusters in China** and **20 in the USA**.[6] Competition over semiconductors, artificial intelligence and digital infrastructure shows why access to networks matters. Neither country controls innovation alone.

AN UNEVEN AND INTERDEPENDENT WORLD

The USA retains broad global reach, while China is a major challenger with particular strength in production and trade. Their rivalry coexists with economic interdependence. The EU is an influential economic and regulatory bloc, rather than a single state; India, Russia and other powers also shape outcomes. Many countries negotiate with several partners instead of simply choosing sides.

Geographical judgement - To evaluate influence, ask: power over whom, through which networks, at what scale and with what consequences? Large resources do not always produce the intended outcome.

SOURCES AND DATA NOTES

[1] World Bank, GDP current US$ (2024); International Comparison Program, PPP. data.worldbank.org
[2] SIPRI, Trends in World Military Expenditure 2025 (April 2026). sipri.org
[3] UN Security Council, Voting System. main.un.org/securitycouncil
[4] IMF Annual Report 2025, Appendix IV (30 April 2025). imf.org
[5] World Bank, Belt and Road Economics (2019); risk framework, not current project totals.
[6] WIPO, Global Innovation Index 2026, Innovation Cluster Ranking. wipo.int