

ON SUPERPOWERS

The Beijing consensus must not be allowed to replace the Washington consensus — a truth which both the US and India seem to have grasped at last, says DEEPAK LAL

There has been much talk since the financial crisis of the decline of the US as a superpower, and of China and India as emerging superpowers. But what is a superpower? Are the current characterisations of the US, China and India correct? What, if any, are the advantages of being a superpower, or is the pursuit of this status an exercise in national vanity at the expense of the common weal as some influential voices in India have claimed? These are the questions I consider in this column.

Superpowers, as the late Hedley Bull reminds us in his magisterial *The Anarchical Society*, are what were called great powers during the period when the balance of power characterised the international states system. Great powers were “two or more powers that are comparable in status”. The term “superpowers” was first applied by W T R Fox in 1944 in his *The Superpowers to Britain, the US and the Soviet Union* who recognised “the appearance of a new class of power, superior to the traditional European great powers, and alone capable of undertaking the central managerial role in international politics they had played in the past”. With the decline of Britain and during the Cold War, the US and the Soviet Union were the twin superpowers in the bipolar world.

But for a brief moment after the Second World War, when the US was seen to have overtaken the USSR in every correlate of power, US analysts like George Liska (*Imperial America*, 1967) argued that the US with no other rivals was not a mere great or superpower but was like Rome the sole dominant (imperial) power in international politics. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US, in fact, became the sole dominant imperial power in the world, as I argued in my *In Praise of Empires*. In fact, in terms of the analysis in that book, I would prefer to call superpowers imperial powers. Thus, when Fox devised the term, the three superpowers he identified were, in fact, the custodians of two imperial systems, the Anglo-American one (taken over by the Americans with the postwar decline of Britain) and the Soviet. The bipolar world of the Cold War is thus better seen as the clash and accommodation

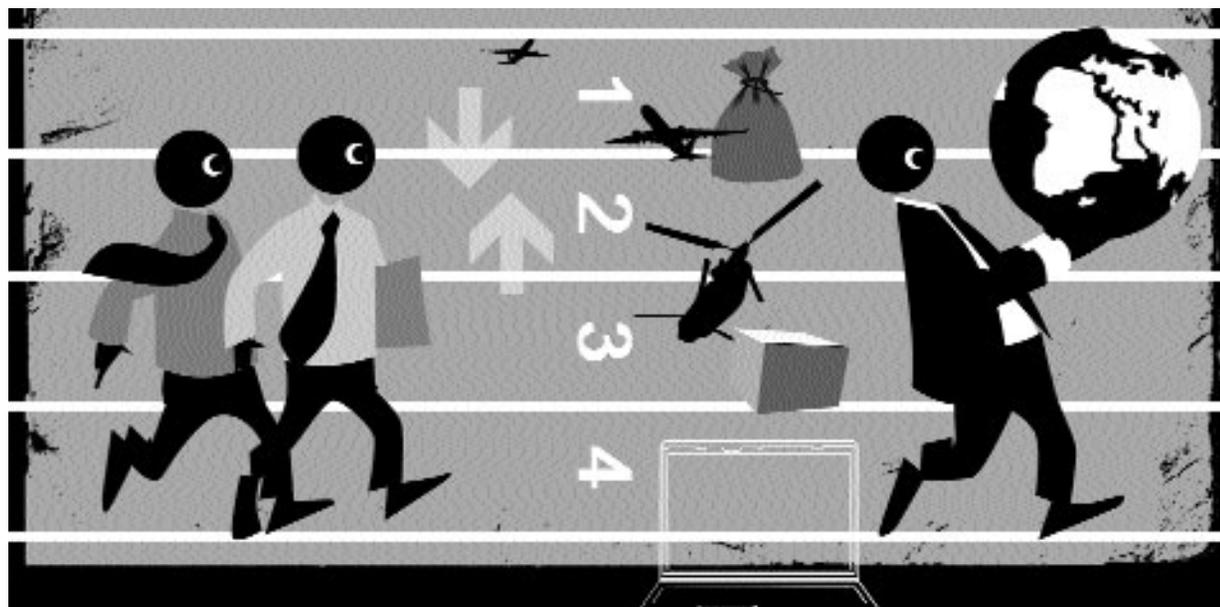


ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA

between two imperial systems. This is similar to the ancient world when there were a number of imperial systems coterminous with Rome, but which did not clash (till the later stages of the Roman empire when it was challenged by the new Arab empire) because of geographical distance.

The question today, therefore, is whether the current world hegemon (a term which has been described as “imperialism with good manners”) — the US — will be able to maintain this status. To answer this it is important to recognise the two major correlates of power: population size and relative economic strength. Larger populations can mobilise more warriors and if they are richer, can translate their relative economic strength into a fighting force to protect their own resource base and/or increase it by seizure from others. A rough measure of this relative power is provided by data on relative GDP. From the most recent set of comparable PPP data compiled by the late Angus Maddison, it seems that the US remains way ahead of all possible competitors at the moment, and despite prognostications of its economic decline (as I have argued in earlier columns), it would be foolish to write off the US. The US is and

is likely to remain the sole superpower for the foreseeable future.

It should be noted the possession of nuclear weapons is a necessary but not sufficient condition for being a superpower or great power, nor is membership of the Security Council either necessary or sufficient: as witness the role of Pakistan, or North Korea for the former, and the UK and France for the latter. China and India are already regional great powers. They are both trying to expand their global influence. But, until they can provide a credible challenge to US naval power, they are unlikely to be able to compete.

In a brilliant book, Walter Russell Mead (*God and Gold*, Knopf, 2007) has argued that world politics in the last 400 years can best be explained by the maritime system first created by the Dutch in the 17th century, and then adopted by the British and subsequently the US to create their imperia. In each version, sea power was used to build up “global systems of trade and might”. The open, dynamic and capitalist society this created “generated innovations in finance, technology, marketing, and communication”. The wealth generated provided the basis for military power. “The basic formula of an open society, world trade, and world power was the power secret... and the

major driving force in the history of the 400 years”.

Both China and India have realised the importance of sea power and are expanding their navies, though India seems to have a current edge. But, in the long run, if and when the US imperium declines as did the British, it is more likely that the Indian rather than the Chinese could replace it (as it did the British). For though the Chinese have adopted some of Russell Mead’s “power secret”, the essential “open society” element seems to be missing.

This also answers the question of why it matters for India to become a superpower. There is the immediate defensive motive of preventing any implicit or explicit coercion by its Asian rival in effecting its national interests in the current Asian balance of actual and (potential) great powers — which includes them and Japan, and the US as an offshore balancer. But more important in India’s long-term interest is the recognition that the continuance of its liberal, democratic, open economy also requires it to support and, if necessary, take over the imperial burden from the US. The Beijing consensus must not be allowed to replace the Washington consensus. This is a truth which both the US and India seem to have grasped at last.