

## The magician's apprentice

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**Dividing lines are all around us, even when we prefer not to see them. The reality of the United Nations contradicts its name, the politicisation of migrants and refugees erects divisions in the mind just as it does in physical terms, and the rising disparity between the rich and the poor (both at individual and national level) draws a clear black mark across the oft-made assertion that 'we are all in this together'. But nowhere are these dividing lines**



**better seen, or more import, than in the rising tide between the two great polarities of the world. 'East vs West' is perhaps an oversimplification these days. What might be more appropriate, would be the 'old guard' versus the 'new developers', a division that is far more nuanced than any seen before, far more dangerous – and potentially, far more irreversible.**

The Cold War was a simpler time, even if the threat of nuclear war was more readily apparent than is now remembered. The USA and Russia eyeballing each other as the two undoubted superpowers, never coming to open conflict (whether traditional or nuclear) but using states such as Afghanistan and Vietnam as proxy wars. It was assumed, once the Soviet Union had fallen, that the world would move to a state of unipolarity, with the United States serving as a benevolent global policeman and the threats to world peace coming from asymmetrical, decentralised terrorist groups far more than other nation-states.

This was not to be. America's stock has fallen considerably since the Cold War days, with its shift from unipolarity to unilateralism (for instance, the much-opposed invasion of Iraq) drawing international ire, and a succession of Presidents either incapable of meeting the world's problems in a calm and measured way (Biden) or uncaring about doing so (Trump). It might still be a superpower, but this is by default. Meanwhile, although Russia's military prowess might have been utterly shown up by the comparative failure to take all of Ukraine, Moscow has, over the past thirty years, moved more towards a strategy of building alliances and debts through economic support and political interference. This full-scale invasion remains the outlier in post-Soviet history. Russia is far more interested in working behind-the-scenes and in manipulating the existing world order. As indeed, are its fellows.

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The BRICS grouping has long been heralded as proof positive that globalism and capitalism have a positive effect. Brazil, Russia, India, and China – for so long nations in the economic doldrums – now account for between 60–70% of the world’s GDP, and the latter three, at least, all play a central role in oil, technology, and manufacturing, respectively. As Europe is now finding out as the ‘gas war’ grinds on, ignoring these countries is done at your peril. South Africa has been considered a nominal member for the past ten years, and now there is talk of Saudi Arabia joining a renamed ‘BRICS+’. While the global importance of the former may be more of a tip of the hat towards acknowledging that Africa needs more of a role on the global stage, and that South Africa is in the best position to achieve this, Saudi Arabia is a much more interesting case. It is already of immense economic importance through oil, and likely to resolutely swing the BRICS nations – and their power and influence – even further away from aligning with Western interests.

This is a key point as, if the BRICS nations are to shape the economic future of the world, to do so with at least four of the six candidates being broadly opposed to the West, does not put America, Europe *et al* in a very strong position. Such groupings can successfully isolate the West economically, and ultimately, politically. It need not be through BRICS either. For instance, Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, is currently on a tour of the Middle East and Africa drumming up support for Russia’s position. Although he might not ultimately need to try very hard, it is still telling that he is pitching his discussions at both national and supranational level.

While Egypt, Uganda, Saudi Arabia, and the like, are all on the itinerary, Lavrov also made representation to the Arab League and is also scheduled to visit Ethiopia, where the African Union is based and where Russia plans to host a second Russia-Africa summit (covering Russia’s relationship with the entire continent), later this year. If Lavrov can win approval and support from entire regional bodies rather than just individual countries, then this puts Russia in a much stronger position to swing international acceptance its way – even if there is something of an irony in Russia’s charming of the very African nations to whose famine they may be contributing, given that the wheat and grain blockaded in Russian ports would largely have gone to these.

After all, it is not as if the existing bodies are fit for purpose. The United Nations can do nothing substantial all the while Russia and China exercise an absolute veto on the Security Council. The EU is riven by internal debate, not only on how quickly Europe should divest itself of Russian oil but whether harsh sanctions should even be applied in the first place (with Orban’s Hungary being a voice of dissent). And the G20 cannot decide whether to expel Russia or not, or even whether this would really matter. These Western-focused bodies thus exist in a state of frozen indecision, while the ‘new development’ nations empower and enrich themselves (in both a financial- and political-capital case).

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It is worth noting that China has followed much the same path as Russia. KCS Group Europe has it on expert intelligence authority that, had the invasion of Ukraine not been met with the unified and committed response that came from the West, Beijing would have likely considered a military invasion of Taiwan before the end of the year as eminently achievable, on the basis that Russia had gotten away with theirs. In the event of a military occupation of Taipei, it is likely that China could have brushed off any political and economic concerns (giving up on Chinese manufacturing is, after all, far more difficult than giving up on Russian oil). But why risk losing face when you can bide your time and simply pursue the objectives in a different manner? This is what China has been doing through its Pacific diplomacy: not only pressing nations on an individual level to give diplomatic recognition to Beijing rather than Taipei (and refusing all trade with those that do not) but actively attempting to disrupt regional institutions such as the Pacific Island Forum, that run contrary to its desires (such as being behind the withdrawal of Kiribati earlier in July).

We are also seeing greater unity between countries that once might have been considered hostile to each other. For instance, Russia and Iran have recently concluded a US \$40bn trade deal which will see Gazprom helping to develop Iranian oil fields – but the two have been historical competitors rather than partners in political terms. Now though, the fallout from the Ukrainian invasion seems to have united them against a common foe: Western liberal democracy. Turkey is also getting in on the action (solidified recently by Putin and Erdogan travelling to a three-powers summit in Iran) of this unofficial coalition on several fronts: the three are discussing breaking the hegemony of the US currency in global transactions to make the ‘petrodollar’ a thing of the past, building new transport corridors to better link the Asian and Middle East markets and circumvent Europe entirely, and – perhaps, most dangerously of all – increase a military alliance that would extend through the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea to the very shores of Europe.

This is the creation of a new world order before our eyes. Discussion of this phrase is generally found within the corners of the Internet that pride themselves on having alternative facts, and is characterised by black helicopters, a faceless World Government enslaving everybody through smartphones, and a total divorcing from reality. But this hyperbole and fantasy, glosses over the reality of what the ‘new world order’ actually involves. This does not need deep-state conspiracies or ‘truthers’ to inspire consternation. Companies need to be wary: this is not a simple case of Saudi Arabia openly attempting to force all regional businesses to have their headquarters in Riyadh rather than Dubai, or China bluntly refusing to trade with businesses that recognise Taiwan. This is a concerted effort by powers that, whether rightly or wrongly, are considered broadly ‘hostile’ to Western interests, taking serious, long-term, and effective states to rewrite the rules of global trade and politics in their favour.

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An argument therefore might be made that the invasion of Ukraine by Russia was a magician's card trick: getting the global audience to look at what the left hand is doing, while not paying attention to whatever is being held in the right. While the humanitarian crisis and unfolding war crimes cannot, and should not, be ignored, this invasion does not represent Russia's standard practice anymore, nor is it likely to bear the biggest fruit. Certainly, a lightning strike on Kyiv that had resulted in taking the entire country would have been appreciated by the Kremlin, but the inevitable sanctions and opprobrium would have followed in either case. But with the eyes of the world's politicians and media on the horrors in Ukraine, Russia can quietly get on with building its economic defences behind the scenes and bringing more nations even deeper into its orbit. Just as China is doing with the Pacific nations over Taiwan, diplomacy and soft power often achieve more than the threat of blunt force can, and it is on these building blocks that a new world order will be established. One that actively shuns the West and does so in confidence that the dilution of American power has not been counterbalanced by the rise of anything substantial to replace it. And even if you can see how the magician is doing his trick, he will still only leave the stage of his own accord.

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