

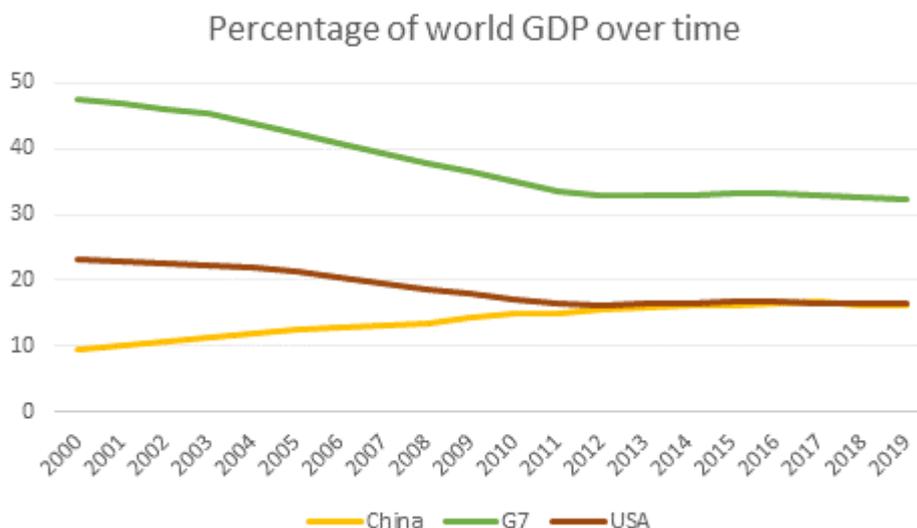
Happy Birthday Blog (or 21 years in the UK)

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Today I turn 51, and “come of age” at 21, that is, 21 years in the UK. So, rather than offer an immediate take on the G7 summit just wrapped up, I thought I would take a broader view on “the West” and the re-emergence of China, and its nascent challenge for global hegemony (noting of course that next year will mark 100 years since the publication of Oswald Spengler’s complete (second) volume of *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, more popularly known in English as *The Decline of the West*).

Whilst an extensive discussion of Spengler’s overly deterministic, almost teleological view of history as being characterised by a handful of ‘high’ cultures with a finite lifespan is beyond the scope of this piece, there is something academically seductive in pondering whether “the West” has had its day. If we consider the G7 as a group, as the East Asian economies have grown, their share of World GDP has fallen significantly since inception during the 1970s.

Since 2000, the G7 percentage of the global economy has fallen from nearly half of (Real) World GDP, to just above 30% in 2019, as shown in the chart below. Particularly striking is the first decade of this century (i.e., before the Global Financial Crisis), where the Real World GDP share of the G7 fell by almost *one-third*. At an individual country level, China was vying with the US for Real World GDP share by 2013 and in all probability will have overtaken it by now (the current impact of Covid-19 and the impact of China’s recent One Child policy acting as a break on population growth notwithstanding).



Source: Penn World Tables[\[1\]](#)

Of course, China’s re-emergence also poses fundamental challenges to western notions of freedom, human rights and democracy. In this sense, the dominant Western cultural-political model is seriously being challenged and China’s strong economic performance to date offers succour to authoritarian regimes across the globe – a far cry from the unabashed optimism (or indeed triumphalism) of the early post-Soviet period, as typified by publications such as Francis Fukuyama’s (1992) *The End of History and the Last Man*.

As such, these changes truly represents a seismic ‘global shift’ to coin the phrase (and book) of esteemed geographer Peter Dicken. Hence, it points to the diminished status of the G7 in world affairs, and indeed their ability to shape the international policy agenda. This is even more so for the non-US ‘G6’, who remain largely reliant on the US for their defence and security needs. The EU at least, by dint of its size as a collective of 27 nations, exerts significant economic clout, but remains a military minnow when compared to the US and China.

Brexit Britain in contrast, is a second-order economic power and a military minnow (despite its token nuclear capability, which could hardly be deployed in conventional battle). A comparison of selected defence indicators for the US, China, the UK and Australia (a country with around only 40% of the population of the UK) for 2021 throws into stark relief the significant lack of capacity of the UK’s defence forces:

	United States	China	United Kingdom
Annual Defence budget (USD)	\$740,500,000,000	\$178,200,000,000	\$56,042,000,000
Active Personnel	1,400,000	2,185,000	195,000
Fighter Aircraft	1,956	1,200	119
Attack Helicopters	904	327	38
Tank Strength	6,100	3,205	109
Armoured Vehicles	40,000	35,000	5,500
Fleet Strength	490	777	88
Aircraft Carriers	11	2	2
Destroyers	92	50	6
Frigates	0	46	13
Submarines	68	79	11

Source: <https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-comparison-detail.php?country1=australia&country2=united-kingdom>

<https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-comparison-detail.php?country1=china&country2=united-states-of-america>

It is in this context then, that the manifest political stunt by the Johnson Government to send an aircraft carrier group to the South China Sea as part of a joint mission with US forces^[2] must be

judged. To say that should conflict actually ensue – however unlikely – that these UK ships would literally be blown out of the water by Chinese missile strikes within minutes (and therefore take out a significant chunk of the UK defence forces), should go without saying. However, for Boris Johnson, the political optics of his “Indo-Pacific tilt”, as with much else, have always trumped the actual reality on the ground – as the Brexit saga has amply illustrated.

Lacking in ‘hard power’ and clearly inferior to the ‘Global Triad’ of the US, EU and China in terms of raw economic strength, the UK then should be seeking to bolster its ‘soft power’ and provide more support to bodies such as the BBC, the British Council and Higher Education Institutions, where it continues to enjoy marked advantages, despite cutbacks in recent years. Similarly, the cuts to overseas aid, which are particularly punitive on the most vulnerable in poor countries, should be reversed in order to try and salvage what had been hitherto an exemplary reputation.

As for the G7, it is little more than an echo chamber for the US and its supplicants and the failure of the summit in Cornwall to deliver meaningful action in tackling Covid-19 in poorer countries and climate change has been harshly noted by critics. That said, the significant strategic challenge posed by China to Western interests will under the leadership of Joe Biden force some coming together of the US and Europe.

What a pity that Brexit Britain has thrown away its key role as a bridge between Washington and Brussels in order to ‘go it alone’. However, by the time the dust settles on the ramifications of the UK’s decision to leave the EU, the UK itself may be no more as the Northern Ireland situation develops and pressures grow for Scottish independence. My mind can only boggle as to what the UK and world situation will be “when I’m 64” – if I live that long...

[1] See: Feenstra, Robert C., Robert Inklaar and Marcel P. Timmer (2015), “The Next Generation of the Penn World Table” *American Economic Review*, 105 (10): 3150-3182, available for download at www.ggdc.net/pwt

[2] <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2021/04/30/ukch-a30.html>