



Inheritance, 2012 by Justine Smith  
11cm x 6.5cm x 6.5cm, Chinese 100 Yuan notes

# The rise of a new world order

Political writer **Mark Seddon** explores how the world has been quietly changing under our noses with what he calls a “tectonic plates shift” of power away from the US and over to China and the other BRICS countries. And so, we must conclude, any talk of saving the planet will have to recognise this quiet revolution

**W**hen in 1972 the then Chinese premier Zhou Enlai was asked about the influence of the French Revolution, he reportedly replied: “It is too early to say.” For many years, Zhou’s answer was interpreted as being evidence of China’s long-term view of history, as opposed to the short-termism of western politicians obliged always to think in terms of the electoral cycle. Much later it was understood that there had been a misunderstanding: Zhou wasn’t referring to the French Revolution of 1789, but to the students’ and workers’ revolt that had spread across France in 1968. Less well known is Zhou’s longer-term gambit on a visit to Somalia in 1964, that “Revolutionary prospects throughout the African continent are excellent!” Within a decade, Portuguese colonial rule had collapsed in Angola and Mozambique. Rhodesia teetered and fell five years later, while South African apartheid collapsed altogether in 1990.

At which point the question might be asked, what was the effect of China’s emergence in the 21st century as the leading global power?

China’s leaders have a habit of making predictions. Take for instance China’s president Xi Jinping’s visit to Moscow in March this year, and his departing words to the Russian leader, Vladimir Putin, at the doors of the Kremlin: “Change is coming that hasn’t happened in 100 years, and we are driving this change together...”

Change, in terms of the relative strengths and influence of what can broadly be described as west and east, has of course been taking place, often unremarked and unreported, since the millennium. While the United States in particular and western allies such as Britain got caught up and bogged down in a series of military adventures from Iraq to Libya, Syria and now Ukraine, China quietly got on with expanding its economic and political influence, particularly in Africa, but also in the Indo-Pacific region. Instead of throwing its military weight around building military bases – the US

is believed to have around a thousand foreign sites and installations that can be activated – China instead gained influence through offering developing states glorified public finance initiatives aimed at building infrastructure projects from railways to hospitals. China benefits from supplying the labour and the materials, and for all of those countries that have fallen into the new Chinese trade orbit there is of course no such thing as a free lunch. From Malawi to the Maldives, Djibouti to the Solomon Islands, critical new infrastructure, new railways, new ministries – and in the case of Zimbabwe even a new parliament – come courtesy of the country that takes the long view but will want to be paid back for all of this outlay.

Perhaps the Chinese can afford to take the long view: the Han Chinese empires have been around for thousands of years. The United States may still be the pre-eminent superpower, but this comparatively new, loud, clumsy kid on the block has only been about for just a over a couple of hundred years. Ironically, in the immediate aftermath of the second world war, the US veered towards supporting those in countries such as Indonesia and Vietnam who wanted to see an end to European colonialism. Ho Chi Minh initially looked to Washington in his battle against the French; in 1956, it was the United States that pulled the rug from under the attempts by Britain and France to wrest the Suez Canal back from Egypt’s strong man, Gamal Abdel Nasser. Back then the United States still remembered that it had itself thrown off the colonial yoke and could be a friend to the newly emerging nations. But this proved to be just a passing phase. US involvement in the Vietnam war and against Ho Chi Minh’s Viet Cong was the turning point.

When in 1989 the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet Union subsequently disintegrated, voices began to be heard in the US demanding that the 21st century be ‘America’s century’. The American political economist and political scientist Francis Fukuyama famously

## “Change is coming that hasn’t happened in 100 years, and we are driving this change together...” – *China’s president Xi Jinping*

predicted the end of history, and a unipolar world – a world where there would be one superpower, the United States.

### Incurious and complacent

The collapse of the old eastern bloc sent shock waves across the global south and the developing world. That old surety of being able to play the west off against the east, and the power that lay potentially with the non-aligned – or, as it was known, the Non-Aligned Movement – was enormously weakened. And yet, quietly and surely a new world order was coming together, and it was taking place right under the noses of an increasingly incurious and complacent United States and Europe.

China’s record growth is largely credited by the United Nations for helping to reach the Millennium Development Goals. And China has been one of the driving forces behind this change, bringing major developing countries together, and particularly those whose combination together could begin to challenge US economic hegemony. Given that the first meeting of a group of countries that came to be known as BRICS took place as recently as 2009, progress has been extremely rapid.

During March 2023, the GDP PPP (purchasing power parity) share of the BRICS nations (Brazil, Russia, China, India and South Africa) was for the first time higher than that of the G7 countries (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States). The share of growth is predicted to keep on growing, and while the original aim of BRICS was “the establishment of an equitable, democratic and multi-polar world order”, increasingly member states have taken steps to increase their political – and more recently (as with the visit of Russian naval warships to South African ports) their military – cooperation.

BRICS is also expanding. Bangladesh, Egypt and the UAE have recently joined the New Development Bank established by BRICS, with a number of other countries poised to do the same. A thesis proposed by Jim O’Neill, global economist at Goldman Sachs and originator of the BRICS idea, is that the economic potential of the BRICS countries is such that they could become among the four most dominant economies by 2050. At this rate, it could be somewhat earlier.

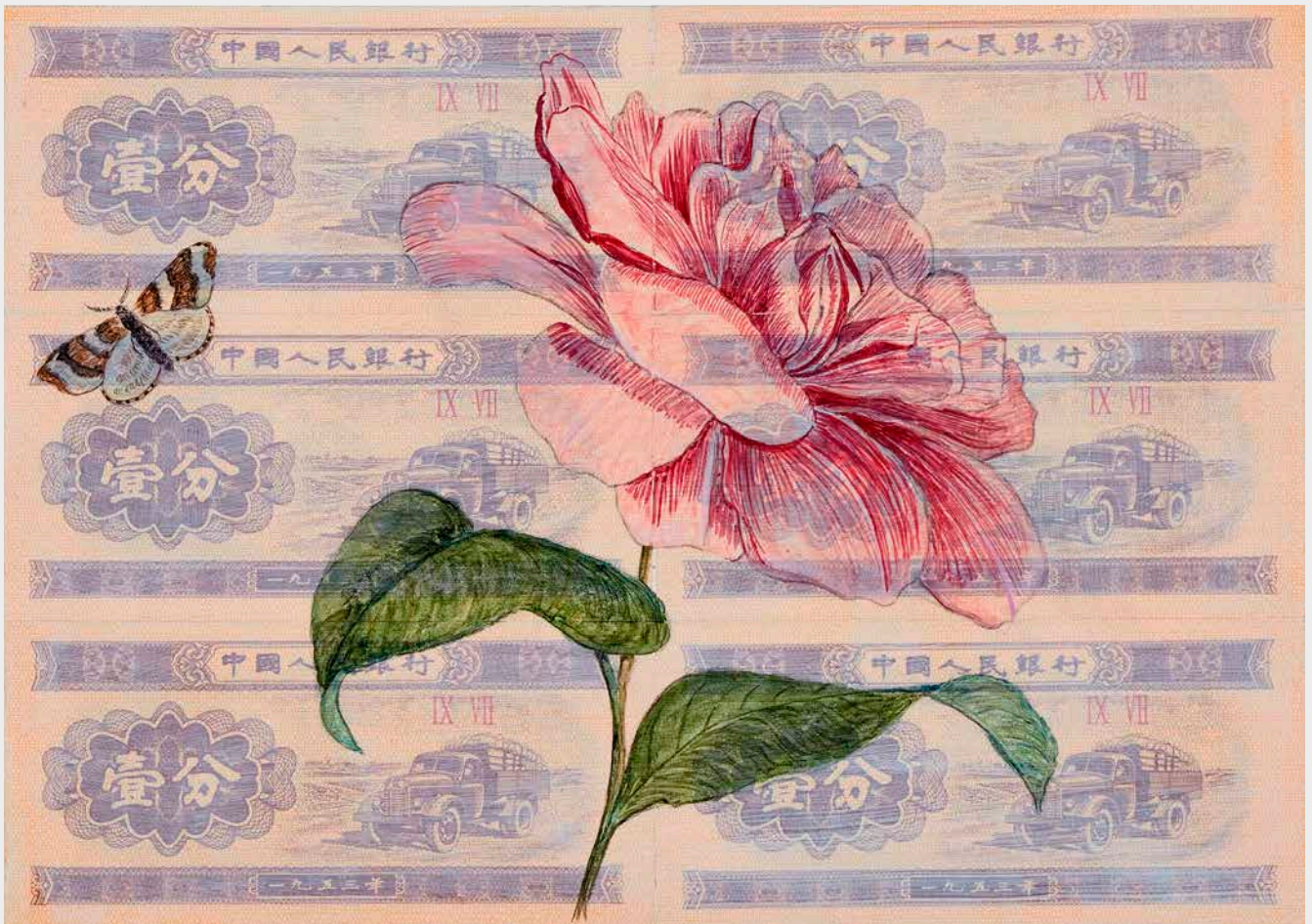
Earlier this year, President da Silva of Brazil urged

developing nations to find an alternative currency to the dollar. He made his comments during a state trip to China. “Why can’t we do trade based on our own currencies?” he asked. “Who was it that decided that the dollar was the currency after the disappearance of the gold standard?” While the world may still be some way from de-dollarisation, it is important to recognise the direction of travel.

Ironically, it could be argued that Putin’s wild gamble of sending columns of tanks and soldiers to invade Ukraine has speeded up the endgame of the unipolar world of Pax Americana. The Americans and the Europeans expected the whole world to stand in a glorified coalition of the willing against Putin. Much of the world did condemn Russia, but it is noticeable that the BRICS states largely did not. They pointed to the hypocrisy of the west in condemning Russia for what the Americans and their partners did in Iraq. They pointed to the arms flowing to the Ukrainians resisting occupation and wondered openly why Palestinians resisting Israeli occupation were, in the same breath, termed ‘terrorists’.

This then, was the real significance of Xi’s remarks to Putin on the steps of the Kremlin. And while China would likely have preferred that Putin had not sent his tanks across the Ukrainian borders and brought to a head the process of divergence between east and global south and west, Russia, with all of its resources and empty lands, has landed firmly in the arms of China. With the severing of all legal economic ties with Russia and the destruction of the Nord Stream gas pipelines, most likely at the behest of the US, Western Europe now stands reliant principally on the US for its gas supplies. And not only is Europe pouring its limited defence resources into Ukraine – as it has into other regional and out-of-region conflicts, it is Europe, rather than the US, that is getting the blowback in terms of large population movements away from those same conflict zones.

For a small, relatively declining country such as Britain, which could probably fit the sum total of its armed services personnel into Villa Park football ground, there is a profound question that needs to be addressed. Does Britain want to continue to perform a series of diminishing, often unpopular and usually counter-productive acts as the US’s sepoys in conflicts, whether they be in Iraq, Ukraine or, heaven forbid, Taiwan? Or, in a century that



“Money as a conduit of power has been an ongoing theme in my work, exploring political power, greed, conflict and its consequences. ‘Inheritance’ (page 22) looks like a solid object but is in fact hollow, made from just two layers of banknotes, carefully constructed to give an illusion of solidity. It explores the idea of the transience of power – that however powerful a given nation can be, no state or individual can hold supreme power forever.” – *Justine Smith*

Landscape China by Justine Smith,  
38cm x 28cm  
watercolour, acrylic, Chinese Fen on  
638gsm Saunders Waterford paper  
[www.justinesmith.net](http://www.justinesmith.net)

is more and more likely to be defined by China and the BRICS countries, does it want to ease itself away from this mercenary role and address itself to soft power projects around democracy and development that actually stand some kind of chance?

The Commonwealth, that voluntary body of 56 sovereign states, is an organisation that could begin to straddle the divide between west and east, yet it seems highly doubtful that any current British political leader has the imagination or foresight to anchor Britain with the global south and the majority of Commonwealth member states.

The fast-emerging prospect of a new Chinese-led BRICS century is a vision of fear and trepidation for some, in the same way that a declining America, giving the impression of hovering on the brink of a second civil war, is for others. And yet, even if China may be the driving economic force of the 21st century, India,

Brazil and South Africa are all democracies.

There seems to be a degree of inevitability to the decline of empires and the rise and fall of great spheres of political and economic influence. There is also much to be written about the strength and resilience of the international architecture created usually by the military and economic victors and giants at any given time, such as the United Nations or indeed NATO.

The big question, as always, and as the tectonic plates shift under our feet, is whether humankind can avoid the kind of global conflict that it has often come to expect when those plates move. We must hope that, this time, it can. R

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