

NOREF Policy Brief

The concept of “rising powers”

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Executive summary

The end of the cold war and the demise of the bipolar world order heralded an era of transition for global governance. Twenty years on, there remains a lack of consensus on the status of the distribution and exercise of power in today's multipolar world. What is clear, however, is the rise of new powers seeking a global political role comparable with their increased economic clout. Often referred to as the BRICS – Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa – to which second-tier powers such as Indonesia, Turkey and Mexico can be added, these states are called “rising powers” or “new powers” because of their rapid economic development, and expanding political and cultural influence.

Based on two seminars hosted by PRIO/NOREF in 2011 and 2012, this policy brief reflects on the term “rising powers”, illustrating some of their

common traits and different approaches to their role as emerging powers. How do new powers as diverse as Brazil and Turkey aspire to rising power status? How important is regional leadership? How do they project soft power? And finally, what challenges do established powers face in their relations with rising powers?

Rising powers are changing the dynamics of power in the international system by seeking a greater voice in international institutions and building political bonds through regional organisations. This article reflects on rising powers conceptually by trying to identify their common traits and different approaches to global governance, and outlines some of the challenges they present for established powers.

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Introduction

Rising powers are changing the dynamics of power in the international system by seeking a greater voice in international institutions and building political bonds through regional organisations. This process of transition in the global order at a time when established powers face both economic and political challenges deserves greater attention.

In a series of two seminars in 2011 and 2012 held in Oslo, the Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre and the Peace Research Institute Oslo brought together panels of experts – academics, policymakers and journalists – to debate the rise of new powers and their global impact. An implicit aspect of our discussions was an understanding of the term "rising powers". This short paper takes a step back to reflect on the term conceptually. It is in fact tempting to assert that the differences among rising powers are more profound than their commonalities, and yet they do share certain common features that serve as a basis for comparative analysis. That being said, the definitional discussion is ongoing and likely to evolve as we engage empirically with the research agenda.

Economic power and global responsibility



Source: Reproduced from *The Economist Online*, "Power shift", August 4th 2011

The first and most significant feature of rising powers is their economic stature, depicted in

the graph above in comparison to developed economies. Indeed, the historical reference point is the 2003 Goldman-Sachs report from which the term BRIC (referring to Brazil, Russia, India and China) originated (with South Africa added in 2010, to make BRICS). While the term "BRICS" is quite often used interchangeably with that of "rising powers", the concept of rising powers has evolved to encompass a wider range of countries that includes second-tier powers such as Indonesia, Turkey and Mexico. Discussions on rising powers have been dominated by the role of these countries in the global marketplace, but increasingly the question is being asked: How will economic power translate into political power on the international stage? By way of an answer, the first official summit of the four BRIC countries in Yekaterinburg, Russia, in June 2009 culminated in the announcement of "a more democratic and just multipolar world order".¹

Rising powers and the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring has illustrated the challenges of multipolarity. Both seminars were held under the shadow of the efforts of the United Nations (UN) to respond to the crises in Libya and Syria. The first seminar, in April 2011, took place less than a month after UN Security Council Resolution 1973 authorised a NATO intervention to establish a no-fly zone over Libya and take "all necessary measures" to protect Libyan civilians. The Libya intervention challenged the fiction of the "international community" as four (Brazil, India, China, Russia) of the five emerging powers on the Security Council abstained from the vote (although Nigeria and South Africa endorsed it). Thus, there was a fragile consensus on the legal basis for military intervention. Libya was a test case, not only for the "Responsibility to Protect" doctrine, but also for the multilateral power system.

The second seminar was held in April 2012, a month after the UN Security Council was finally able to bring China and Russia onboard in a non-binding peace plan for Syria. While the Libya

1 Thomas Renard, "A BRIC in the world: emerging powers, Europe and the coming order, Egmont Paper no. 21, Brussels, Egmont - Royal Institute for International Relations, October 2009.

military intervention has been hailed as a military success, the cost of this success in Libya has been paid by Syria. The translation of economic power into global engagement will continue to highlight the tension between state sovereignty and human security.

Recognition as a rising power

A second common factor is recognition as a rising power, with the status this imparts. While size and economic stature set China and India in a category of their own, other up-and-coming powers are eager to join the club.² For middle powers such as Brazil, Mexico, South Africa and Turkey, the aspiration to be recognised as a rising power is a shared commonality. One of the stepping stones to this status can be recognition as a regional leader, particularly as the general relevance of regions in geopolitics increases. Important in this respect is that each country's engagement with its respective region also varies. For example, Turkey projects itself as a reference point – a "model" – for the Arab Spring; South Africa as a voice for sub-Saharan Africa. In claiming leadership of its region, Turkey has actively entered the international stage as a mediator in Syria and Iran, as well as a voice for the Palestinian cause. In comparison, Brazil is a more reluctant leader, which throughout the 1990s sought to develop a regional South American identity that would give the countries of the continent a stronger voice in international affairs.³ An example was its efforts in the establishment of MERCOSUR (the Southern Common Market) in 1985, and in 2008 its key role in the establishment of the Union of South American Nations. However, the challenges faced by Brazil in regional leadership have convinced the country to turn instead towards multilateral coalitions such as the BRICS, the World Trade Organisation and the G20 to make its voice heard.⁴

2 In fact, the question may be asked to what extent China frames itself as a rising, rather than an established, power in order to avoid global responsibility.

3 Monica Hirst, "An overview of Brazilian foreign policy in the 21st century", South African Institute of International Affairs, http://www.saiia.org.za/images/stories/pubs/briefings/saia_spb_06_hirst_20091130.pdf.

4 Alcides Costa Vaz, "Multipolarity of states or regions", Society for International Development Lecture Series, January 16th 2012, http://sidnl.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/summary-report_vaz_16jan2012.pdf.

Soft power projection

Another means for achieving recognition as a rising power is through the projection of soft power. Briefly defined, soft power is the ability of an actor's values, culture, policies and institutions to attract other actors to "want what you want".⁵ Turkey's engagement in the Middle East is built on the discourse of Turkey as a soft power that utilises its history, culture and strengthened democracy to secure its position in the global arena. While contextually different, Brazil's soft power is also culturally founded on the reform of its democracy after military rule, and the current strength of its democratic institutions and values. Both Turkey and Brazil seek to raise their international status by engaging with the humanitarian agenda. Turkey is increasingly active in Africa – particularly in Somalia and Sudan – thus raising the country's profile from a regional to a rising power. Brazil has abandoned the strictly non-interventionist position it held throughout the 1990, with its involvement in Haiti in 2004 being a significant turning point.

One of the dilemmas faced by established powers in their relations with rising powers is of a normative nature. How can negative domestic developments impact a country's soft power? As rising powers rise, will established powers remain silent on issues of democracy and human rights? If so, the power of attraction may be the economic model at the expense of the political so long as criticism of internal shortcomings is absent.

Challenging the status quo

Finally, the phenomenon of the redistribution of economic power toward rising powers has resulted in an assessment of their potential for international instability brought on by their rise and the challenges they will present to established powers, particularly as the economic downturn in the U.S. and Europe that began in 2008 continues to impact established economies. By comparison, rising powers have on the whole survived the crisis. While rising powers now argue for augmenting their political position based on their economic clout, they are also concerned

5 Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in Politics*, New York, Perseus Books, 2004, p 31.

over the impact that the decline of the established powers will have on them. Thus, the euro crisis was at the top of the agenda in the June 2012 G-20 meeting in Mexico.

To a certain degree all new powers are "non-status quo powers" as they react to the international hierarchy and question established approaches. However, it is neither the rise of new powers nor the decline of established ones that is in itself the challenge to the system, but rather the "persistence of uncertainty regarding the rising state's aims and intentions".⁶

Particularly illustrative of this uncertainty was the May 2010 deal that Brazil and Turkey negotiated with Iran on its stockpile of low-enriched uranium

6 Amrita Narlikar, *New Powers: How to Become One and How to Manage Them*, London, Hurst, 2010, p 2.

that openly collided with U.S. interests. Some months later, in an article entitled "Irresponsible stakeholders", the influential U.S. policy journal *Foreign Affairs* noted in an opening statement: "A major strategic challenge for the United States in the coming decades will be integrating emerging powers into international institutions."⁷ This is a reality that was reflected both in the Obama administration's National Security Strategy of May 2010, which rejected competitive multipolarity by stating that "[p]ower in an interconnected world is no longer a zero-sum game", and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's vision of a "multipartner" world. Nonetheless, behind the rhetoric, there is the implicit realisation that the era of multipolarity brought on by changes to the global order may not yield an era of multilateralism.

7 P. Stewart, "Irresponsible stakeholders: the difficulty of integrating rising powers", *Foreign Affairs*, Nov./Dec. 2010, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/66793/stewart-patrick/irresponsible-stakeholders>.