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The discursive articulation of the concept of the "rising power": perceptions, stances and interests in Brazil, Russia and Turkey

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Executive summary

The international perception of Brazil, Russia and Turkey as rising (or resurgent) powers was sparked initially by their impressive economic achievements over the past decade and optimistic future prospects. This identity as rising stars on the international scene has been increasingly championed by these countries' leaderships and welcomed by their domestic constituencies. The realisation that their respective abilities to shape international affairs have lagged behind their economic promise has accelerated these countries' revisionist agendas. In each case the discourse surrounding the concept of the "rising power" and its attendant identity has been deployed instrumentally to question the undemocratic nature of the established global governance system and support a change in the status quo that is more favourable to the interests and values of the rising powers. This report considers not only the economic potential of Brazil, Russia and Turkey, but also analyses their current endeavours and future prospects for greater geopolitical influence. It argues that the imaginary of the so-called rising power has played a significant role, both internally and internationally, in facilitating and legitimating these countries' ascendance to world relevance, while also opening up space for political contestation.

Introduction

The idea of rising powers has long gripped the popular imagination, from China's emergence as an economic power in the 1980s through the growth of today's new economies such as those of Brazil and India. The image and discursive construction of the "rising power" suggests not only growing economic might, but also greater political influence and the ability to increasingly shape global affairs far beyond the respective countries' own borders. Attendant on this emerging influence and geopolitical reach is the rising powers' symbolic status today as posing an alternative to the current Western hegemonic order. A growing voice in multilateral, yet Western-dominated, international institutions poses an implicit challenge to – and questions the legitimacy of – the established order. If China began to play this role in the post-cold war era, it has been joined in the past decade by a new group of states positioning themselves as rising powers. This report considers three such states – Brazil, Russia and Turkey – and explores how the discursive articulation of their newfound status has impacted their changing domestic and foreign policies.

In all three cases international perceptions of these countries as emerging powers were initially sparked by their impressive economic achievements and prospects. For the past decade Brazil, Russia and Turkey have enjoyed consistently high economic growth, and prospects for their future economic potential were promising. Indeed, the emergence of the now-popular labels of "BRICS" – including Brazil and Russia (together with China, India and South Africa) – and the "Next Eleven" – including Turkey – was based on economic analyses by the U.S. investment bank Goldman Sachs, which estimated that these countries were well on their way to becoming some of the world's largest economies. This identity as rising stars on the international scene was increasingly championed by these countries' leaderships and welcomed by their domestic constituencies.

Economic growth has been followed by a tentative increase in geopolitical influence. All three countries have gradually realised that their respective abilities to shape international affairs should accompany their new economic status and the political influence implied by the rising-power identity. In each case elites have used the discourse of rising (or resurgent) power to question the undemocratic nature of established global governance regimes and support a change in the status quo that is more favourable to their countries' own interests and values. However, this discourse has also served to legitimate internal and international opposition to the paths chosen by these governments.

The report considers not only the economic potential of Brazil, Russia and Turkey, but also analyses these countries' current endeavours and future prospects for greater geopolitical influence. It argues that the imaginary of the so-called rising power has played a significant role, both internally and internationally, in facilitating and legitimating this ascendance to world relevance, while also opening up space for political contestation.

Brazil

Brazilians have traditionally referred to Brazil as the "country of the future". In this sense, in the imaginary of its population Brazil has been a "rising" power – with all the caveats that the present-continuous form of the verb suggests – for some time. This perception seems natural for a country that is surrounded by neighbours who possess far less geopolitical resources and therefore pursue far less ambitious foreign policies. Nevertheless, it was only after the dawn of the 21st century that both the domestic and international perceptions that Brazil had finally risen came about. In a widely celebrated cover from November 2009, the British magazine *The Economist* pictured the famous Rio de Janeiro statue of Christ the Redeemer, a Brazilian landmark, ascending like a rocket under the title: "Brazil Takes Off". The 14-page report in the magazine argued that by taming inflation and opening up the economy to foreign trade and investment in the 1990s, Brazil created the conditions for sustained economic growth that, contrary to the Chinese experience, happened through democratic consensus. Brazil was then governed by the popular president Lula da Silva, who had expanded social policies and was leading an economy with an annual growth of 5% in 2009 (rising to 7.5% in the following year, the highest economic growth rate in 25 years), while the country had been chosen to host both the FIFA Football World Cup in 2014 and the Summer Olympics in 2016.

The Economist cover story was the culmination of a process of successful discursive articulation of the notion of Brazil as a true rising power, a country that would finally participate in the intricate making of world politics. A central component of this discourse was the 2001 inclusion by Goldman Sachs economists of Brazil as one of the "BRIC" countries in a predominantly economic report that soon took on a political character. By placing Brazil, which is the only BRIC country without the nuclear bomb, together with Russia, China and India, Goldman Sachs inadvertently helped to crystallise the notion of Brazil as one of the world's large powers. What began as a savvy acronym from a paper written by economists from a U.S. investment bank took the form of an actual grouping that has been meeting annually since 2009. The term became so popular that South Africa requested to join the grouping, which was done in 2010 and the BRIC became the BRICS. Yet in spite of the public discourse, the actual political practices of the BRICS countries have remained fairly conservative, and they have not brought about any meaningful change to the current global economic and political order. Perhaps the boldest proposal of the group was the agreement in March of 2013 to create a development bank intended to rival Western-dominated institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, which came to fruition in July 2014.

One of the direct benefits to Brazil of the popularisation of the BRICS acronym was the consolidation of the perception of the country as a rising country on a par with China, which ultimately was the real outlier of the BRICS. For example, according to data provided by the IMF, Brazil's gross domestic product (GDP) based on purchasing power parity (ppp) reached $2.5 trillion in 2013, up from $1.3 trillion in 2001, therefore practically doubling in a little more than a decade. However, Brazil's share of world GDP (ppp) today is roughly the same as it was in 2001 (2.8%) and less than it was in 1990 (3.3%). On the other hand, China's share of world GDP went from 3.8% in 1990 to 7.5% in 2001, and today is around 15.6%. This means that in relative terms Brazil's economy currently has about the same weight in global terms as it had 20 years ago. While Brazil's exports have grown more than 340% from 2001 to 2011, this is less than the growth of each of the other BRIC countries. Brazil's total exports in 2012 were about half of Russia's and almost a tenth of China's and India's. In fact, in two months China exports far more than Brazil does in a year (IMF, 2013). These figures seem to imply that Brazil's economic growth has happened in tandem with general global economic growth that was highly favourable to less-developed economies, particularly those with the commodities that China was interested in acquiring.

In spite of what the hard numbers may suggest, the combination of economic growth and stability, successful domestic policies aimed at reducing inequalities, and the political ability and charisma of Lula da Silva created the perfect conditions for taking full advantage of the gradual increasing global acceptance of Brazil as a world power. This process gave the country the opportunity, for example, to voice more loudly its long-standing concern about asymmetries in the world trade system, particularly regarding the liberalisation of the agricultural trade. The Da Silva administration made the case for agricultural trade liberalisation not only by employing the language of commercial benefits, but by linking it to questions of social justice and poverty reduction (Amorin, 2010). The same discourse was used to refer to other issues such as environmental degradation, when President da Silva argued that "social equality is the best weapon against environmental degradation" (Da Silva, 2007). In other words, Brazil attempted to articulate its international projection by means of the active defence of the need for a reduction in inequality around the world, which is obviously a concern of other developing economies. However, what distinguishes Brazil from other emerging countries in this particular way is the centrality of this topic in the country's international discourse. For the Da Silva administration the term "emerging power" was linked more to the idea of overcoming its own domestic inequalities than to international considerations – as a matter of fact, when he was re-elected in 2006, Lula himself said that "we are tired of being an emerging power", meaning that the time had arrived for Brazil to achieve sustainable economic growth (Da Silva, 2006). Incidentally, because of Brazil's position in South America, the explicit use of the term "emerging power" in official discourse has been avoided, since, in Da Silva's words, Brazil did not want to be seen as a "hegemonic power" (Da Silva, 2009).

Another aspect of Brazil's discursive articulation as a rising power is the broader view of a changing international system and the need for change in the structures of global governance. In a world that seems to become increasingly less unipolar, Brazilian policymakers see an opportunity to influence the making of a new international order that is less centred on the U.S. and of which the constitution of the BRICS as a permanent forum is the most noticeable case in point. However, other examples could be mentioned. Both during the recent climate change talks[1] and the World Trade Organisation Doha Round, Brazilian positions have been much closer to those of China than to those of the U.S. In 2010 Brazil and Turkey came together to propose a deal regarding Iran's uranium enrichment programme. This proposal was not implemented because ultimately the U.S. rejected it, but it demonstrated a willingness to provide alternative answers to international problems without the full participation of major established powers. It is worth noting that Brazil's strategy of consolidating a changing global order has not been openly confrontational vis-à-vis the U.S., but neither has it been fully supportive of the status quo, even though it has clearly become less supportive as time has passed. In fact, the challenge for Brazilian diplomacy in the next years will be to balance the desire for gradual changes in the international system with a deep-seated tradition of not being overly provoking towards the U.S.

However, it is not absolutely clear whether these initiatives are bound to be short lived or whether they are the first signs of radically new potential structural reconfigurations. Lula's successor, Dilma Rousseff, faces a far less auspicious global economic climate and lacks both the political ability and the charisma of her mentor. With a Brazilian economic growth rate below 1% in 2012, declining exports, and increasing domestic difficulties, the discourse of a rising power that has finally "taken off" runs the risk of gradually losing its sustainability. On the cover of its October 2013 edition *The Economist*, which had lauded Brazil four years earlier, now used the same "rocket Christ" on its cover, but one that is now heading downwards, with the headline "Has Brazil Blown It?"

Russia

Post-Soviet Russian foreign policy has developed in a multifaceted way, bringing together geopolitical and geo-economic concerns, but also a new articulation of normativity in the international context, which is perceived as fundamental to the country's security and to its ability to act as a significant international player. This importance attached to norms and their discursive articulation is partly explained by their centrality during the cold war, when communism presented the competing articulation of norms of political, economic and social progress to those of the capitalist system. This vision facilitated the Soviet Union's foreign policy expansion on a global scale, which a resurgent Russia is seeking to revive and capitalise on. Whereas the first years following the collapse of the Soviet Union dictated a reassessment of Russia's global outreach, including in its near abroad, often at the expense of Western (U.S. and European) expansion, the coming to power of President Vladimir Putin in 1999 inaugurated a new, more assertive and strategic approach to Russian foreign policy guided by the pragmatic desire to reposition the country in the global system. Thus, Russia's self-perception is rather one of returning to its rightful place in international affairs as a resurgent rather than a rising power.

This view has important consequences for the way Russian leaders have articulated and pursued the country's global reaffirmation. One of these consequences is the trend of relying on Soviet connections, structures and approaches for this process of repositioning. This is visible, for instance, in Russia's return to Africa and Latin America, where it articulates its presence as a "return" to closer relations with old allies, offering political relations based on the principle of equality, rather than the Western conditionality-infused and colonial-shaped development policies (see Patel, 2013). President Medvedev's visit to Africa in 2009 was a milestone in Russia's African policy, repositioning the country in terms of peace and conflict mediation processes, energy and economic cooperation, and political engagement with African affairs.[2]

Latin America has also become more central to Russian foreign policy, with important new economic links in the energy sector and in terms of arms sales. Venezuela and Cuba are the two most important entry points for Russia in Latin America, with Moscow instrumentalising the region's marked leftist (and anti-U.S.) turn in the last decade. Russia is also concerned with keeping track of China's increased presence in the region. Thus, Russian engagement is mainly driven by economic interests, even if the region's challenge to a unipolar world fits neatly with the country's views and priorities (Blank, 2011: 14). The high-profile case of Edward Snowden's escape to Russia and his asylum request to Latin American countries, including Ecuador, Bolivia and Venezuela, further

1 In 2009, during the Copenhagen climate summit, Brazil, South Africa, India, and China formed the "BASIC" bloc to act jointly.
2 See President Medvedev's blog on his visit to Africa, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYPnPFl5nFg>.

illustrates how Russia is willing to tap into the discontent with U.S. policies (both at home and in its vicinity) to reposition itself globally, effectively levelling the playing field with the U.S. Thus, the contestation of dominant Western discourses is a fundamental aspect of Russia's self-perception as a resurgent power; e.g. see Putin's (2007; 2008) contestation of the West's decision to recognise Kosovo.

This is linked to Russia's active role in the construction of a multipolar world – a central aspect of the cooperative efforts among the BRICS countries. Denouncing the current unipolar world is a discursive tactic reminiscent of the cold war, manifested in calls for the enlargement of existing governance structures, including the United Nations (UN) Security Council, to include, for instance, India and Brazil (although the issue of veto power has not yet been addressed); e.g. see Putin's (2013) statements on the IMF or Foreign Minister Lavrov's (2012) statements on the UN Security Council. In this sense the 2009 BRIC Summit, hosted by Russia, was perceived as a major milestone in the institutionalisation of this group of players. Together with the G20 meetings, both are a symbolic part of Russia's newfound status and reinstated centrality in international affairs. In fact, whereas during the first mandates of President Putin and during President Medvedev's term, modernisation through closer cooperation with Western allies was a major aspect of this new repositioning of Russia in the global context, gradually the contestation of the existing status quo has pitted Russia against these former allies in many circumstances.
The limited results in the reset policy with the U.S. administration and, since 2007, the lack of agreement on a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the European Union (EU) are symbolic failures of substantive cooperation, especially when compared to important new agreements among the BRICS group. The current fall-out in Russia's relations with its former Western partners due to the crisis in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation is a further illustration of the dilemma Russian foreign policy faces, i.e. of being simultaneously a beneficiary of the existing order and one of its challengers.

Besides the normative contradictions of Russian foreign policy, the domestic context is fundamental to explaining why Russian leaders are so heavily invested in the rebranding and repositioning of Russia as a(n) (re)emergent power alongside countries like Brazil or India. The Sochi Winter Olympics and the forthcoming 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia are seen by the president as demonstrations of Russia's post-Soviet potential and achievements as much as a means to gather domestic support and prestige (Markedonov, 2014). The Russian domestic context has become increasingly volatile, creating new demands on the administration in terms of the redistribution of wealth and power. Corruption in the administration remains endemic (modernisation discourses often underline the need for more efficient bureaucracies), the development of a sizeable middle class has led to demands for more political participation (visible in popular demonstrations in November 2011 against President Putin's return to the Kremlin), and the maintenance of a clique of oligarchs closely associated with political power requires that important flows of capital be secured. The Magnitsky and Khodorkovsky affairs are two illustrations of the Kremlin's management of the oligarchs and of the problems raised internationally by these issues, including the imposition of sanctions on Russian business elites. The international sanctions being applied to Russia due to the Ukrainian crisis further reinforce pressures on the country's financial and economic processes. Thus, Russian interest in the emerging markets of Africa, Latin America and Asia also serves a more fundamental need: to feed the corrupt system sustaining the current leadership in power and to circumvent Western pressures on Russia.

As the international system displays signs of important shifts in terms of economic and political power, Russia is positioning itself more competitively in this new context. Making use of its old ideological tools, now rebranded in new clothes, and looking to be perceived as an important partner for emerging powers, Moscow is also pragmatically benefitting from the process, gradually placing itself at the heart of some of the most fundamental international economic and security dynamics. This is the case of the conflict in Syria, the issue of Iranian nuclear proliferation, the Middle East peace process, and Europe's energy security, to name a few. Fundamentally, Russia is making sure that it does not continue losing ground to its competitors, i.e. the U.S. and China. Thus, the discursive articulation of Russia's "re-emergence" serves both ideological and pragmatic purposes, which are today at the core of the country's wider foreign policy.

Turkey

Whether the "new indispensable nation" (Erdogan, 2010), a "virtuous power" (Gul, 2012) or simply a "supra-regional power" (quoted in Kardas, 2010: 128), Turkey has certainly become one of the most visible actors on the international scene in the last decade. Its history, associated with both its geopolitical positioning and economic success, means that Turkey has a stake in a large number of regions and issues, mostly in its vicinity, but also progressively outside its potential zone of influence, such as in Africa and Latin America. As Turkey's foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu (2010), has argued:

> In this new world, Turkey is playing an increasingly central role in promoting international security and prosperity. The new dynamics of Turkish foreign policy ensure that Turkey can act with the vision, determination, and confidence that the historical moment demands.

Davutoglu's Strategic Depth doctrine provided the initial script for Turkey's international ascent in the last decade. With it, Turkey's foreign policy acquired a refurbished vocabulary and was given a new sense of purpose. From "rhythmic diplomacy" to the crucial "zero-problems with the neighbourhood" policy, Turkey's international behaviour has been framed according to a set of principles and concepts that, according to Davutoglu, are central to enhancing Turkey's history and geography, i.e. to explore its untapped potential.

In order to fulfil its "destiny", Turkey has adopted a multidimensional foreign policy that puts as much weight on the multilateral as on the bilateral level, understanding them as complementary in the country's (active) international involvement (Yesiltas & Balci, 2013: 13-14). This discourse has been accompanied by Turkey's concrete interest in myriad regional and international organisations. In the last decade the country has managed to have a Turkish national (Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu) elected (and re-elected) as secretary general of the Organisation for the Islamic Cooperation; has, together with Spain, promoted the creation of the Alliance of Civilisations in the context of the UN; was elected as non-permanent member of the UN Security Council between 2009 and 2010 and is now officially a candidate for the 2015-16 period;[3] was given observer status at the African Union and Arab League; and has established the High Level Strategic Dialogue Mechanism with the Gulf Cooperation Council. To this could also be added the innumerable international events that Turkey has organised – from NATO's 2004 Summit to the 2011 Fourth UN Conference on the Least Developed Countries.

Although Turkey's international visibility has been most strongly acknowledged regarding its involvement in the Middle East both before and after the Arab uprisings, its interests and discourse both reveal a much more ambitious foreign policy agenda that, on the one hand, attempts to place Turkey in a favourable position to shape the contemporary international order and, on the other, allows it to expand its economic and commercial networks at the global level.

Regarding its global political presence, Turkey has put forward a strong normative discourse that is based on the ideas of "justice, equality and transparency" (Erdogan, 2010), deployed within a narrative of the necessary rebalance between North and South. Relations between Turkey and Brazil, for instance, could be seen as part of this rebalancing act favoured by Ankara.

As for the economic agenda, Turkey wants to build on its rapidly growing GDP – which tripled in the last decade (Gul, 2012) – by entering into trade agreements with countries ranging from South American to Asian, while intensifying its trade relations with its main economic partners – the EU, Russia, China, Iran and the U.S. In order to bridge both dimensions (political and economic), and also as a combination of the global and regional levels of its policy, Turkey is actively seeking a more prominent role in the energy sector. Benefitting from its geostrategic position linking Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Middle East and Europe, Turkey wants to become a global energy hub, a safe transit route for the gas and oil that flow among these four regions. By 2020 Turkey wants to have 3-4% of global gas flows and 5-6% of global oil flows travelling through its territory (Yildiz, 2010: 38). Domestically, these ambitions seem to be hampered by the significant political polarisation in the country that might result in tense presidential elections in August 2014 and slower economic growth. According to the IMF, Turkey will grow by 2.3% in 2014, instead of the initially forecast 3.5% (Candemir, 2014).

Externally, Ankara is well aware that the success of its foreign policy is as dependent on its global strategy as it is on Turkey's regional context. According to Davutoglu (2010), in addition to the country's economic and diplomatic goals at the global level (see above), Turkey also aims to become a member of the EU, to be a key actor in the resolution of regional conflicts, and to further promote regional security and economic integration. In that sense, the Middle East and relations with Europe assume a particularly central position.

Given that an isolationist position vis-à-vis its south-eastern neighbours is no longer a viable option in terms of the broad strategic guidelines of Turkey's current foreign policy, the question is how the country will engage with a rapidly changing Middle East with its multiplicity of problems, alliances and conflicts. Furthermore, Turkey faces the difficult position of being both an insider and an outsider (Barrinha, 2013). It wants to be involved in without being engulfed by regional political problems, but as the situation in Libya and relations with Israel, Syria and now, more recently, Egypt have shown, this balance often cannot be achieved. Turkey is now surrounded by conflict and violence on two of its major borders – those with Syria and Iraq – and it is possible that a bordering Kurdish state might emerge from these conflicts. According to some views, the vision of Turkey as an example for the region "is now all but dead" (Bechev, 2014: 1).

Also, when looking westwards, Turkey is faced with the internal dilemma of European integration. In January 2013 Erdogan suggested that maybe Turkey should rather turn towards a Shanghai Cooperation Organisation membership (Cengiz, 2013), something quickly dismissed by the Turkish president, Abdullah Gul. This was shortly followed by Turkey's difficult summer, when clashes between the police and demonstrators across the country led to over 7,500 people being injured. The EU's reaction was strongly worded, and once again Ankara reacted harshly to Brussels' criticism. More recently, one of Erdogan's top advisors, Yigit Bulut, suggested that Turkey should quit its EU accession process and focus on expanding its ties in the Middle East (*Today's Zaman*, 2013).

3 For a more detailed reading of Turkey's candidacy, see <http://www.turkey4unsc.org/icerik.php?no=14>.

Even though relations are tense, the EU decided to resume Turkey's accession process, opening the possibility for the negotiation of new chapters in 2014. It is unclear at this point whether Ankara and Brussels are on a path to improve their ties or whether these developments are just another episode in what is a very unstable (political) relationship.

Regardless of the outcome of Turkey's interaction with both its western and south-eastern neighbours in the next few years, it is clear that without solid ties in its vicinity it will be very difficult for the country to assert itself on the international stage, and vice versa. On the other hand, it is the country's emerging power status that gives it a more prominent role both in the Middle East and in terms of it being potentially more attractive for EU leaders to open their doors to Ankara. There is therefore a necessary link between Turkey's rising-power status and the handling of its regional relations that moves in both directions. This articulation is at the basis of Davutoglu's theory-turned-policy known as Strategic Depth. It is still unclear whether it will be sustainable in the near future: the Middle East might engulf Turkey in the complexity of its dynamics or, alternatively, Turkey might, by fully embracing the EU, become too distant from the region's problems. For the moment, the first scenario seems more likely.

Conclusion

The recent trajectories of Brazil, Russia and Turkey point to the need to distinguish between image and imaginary, and reality and future prospects. All three countries analysed here share the myth of the rising (or resurgent) power – one that points to the promise of a bright future marked by both economic and political power (or a return to a lost, but rightful past). Such potential is not yet matched by the current reality. Claims to entitlement to a greater role in world affairs and these countries' revisionist agendas aimed at furthering such a role have therefore rested on and mobilised internal and external acceptance of these countries' *identities* as ascending world powers. With the search for – and acceptance of – this supposed new status comes a renewed responsibility to engage in world affairs both in and beyond traditional spheres of influence. These three countries have indeed moved from more inward-looking moments in their history to adopt a more proactive role in regional and international affairs, albeit not without contestation. Their interests as rising powers have grown, and so have their stances on regional and global issues, on occasion attempting to offer concrete alternatives to Western-dominated global governance and pro-interventionist policies.

Expectations regarding these rising powers have remained high over the last decade. Yet, while clearly rising in this period in terms of a growing political role in international affairs, Brazil's, Russia's and Turkey's outward appearances have begun to run up against internal and international opposition. In all three countries often-dramatic domestic transformations have led to increasing demands for transparency, participation and justice – and particularly in the case of Brazil have been accompanied by anxiety over the country's economic slowdown. The image of steadily rising powers has met with protests over specific domestic and foreign policies, thus revealing a less consensual, more apprehensive and altogether less certain reality.

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