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Publisher: Routledge

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South African Journal of International Affairs

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rsaj20>

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Published online: 11 Nov 2009.

To cite this article: Daniel Flemes & Adam Habib (2009) Introduction: Regional powers in contest and engagement: making sense of international relations in a globalised world, South African Journal of International Affairs, 16:2, 137-142, DOI: [10.1080/10220460903265832](https://doi.org/10.1080/10220460903265832)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10220460903265832>

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INTRODUCTION

Regional powers in contest and engagement: making sense of international relations in a globalised world

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The global order is yet again in the throes of a fundamental transformation. Not many would have imagined that this would be the case a mere 20 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. In those heady days following the collapse of the Soviet Union, many scholars imagined that the world was at ‘the end of history’, and that the arrival of the unipolar world with the United States at its helm would continue for decades if not centuries.

But after a mere decade there were already signs that the United States may have overstretched itself. By 2008, the credit binge of US citizens and the ideological fundamentalism of its political leadership had greatly eroded the fiscal foundation of its economy and its standing in the world arena. Two wars, in Iraq and Afghanistan, its militarist posture, and the diplomatic ineptitude of the Bush administration had overstretched the superpower’s military capabilities and depleted its international political capital, prompting the rise of multiple competitors.

The relative and perceived decline of American hegemony has prompted a flurry of studies on Russia, India and China, on regional blocs like the EU, on middle powers, and more recently on regional powers. Thus the question arises, is it necessary to study regional powers as a specific category of states? After all, there have been many studies of the foreign policies of these and other countries. Moreover, there have been studies of the category of states that has come to be referred to as middle powers which include not only industrialised countries like Canada and Norway, but also many of the states now referred to as regional powers — Brazil, India, Mexico, and South Africa, among others. Is specific study of these countries as regional powers necessary?

Why study regional powers?

Before addressing this question, it may be prudent to define the terms ‘middle’ and ‘regional’ powers. Middle power describes a state that has influence internationally and which has systemic impact either through the alliance of a small group of states or an international institution. Middle powers have an interest in a stable and orderly environment, and as a consequence support the building of international organisations to achieve this end. As such, middle power leadership is, in essence, multilateralist in approach. Middle powers seek to build consensus on the resolution

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of global problems. In contrast, regional powers are defined as states in the global system that are part of a geographically delimited region of which they are ready to assume leadership; they display the necessary capabilities for regional power projection and are highly influential in regional affairs. Further distinguishing features of a regional power are the economic, political and cultural interconnectedness of the state to its region; its provision of collective goods to members of the region; its demonstration of an ideational leadership (here defined as the ability to bring about reforms based on regional values and normative perspectives); and the acceptance of its leadership among potential followers.

Countries like Brazil, India, Mexico and South Africa are both middle and regional powers. Unlike traditional middle powers from the developed world, such as Canada and Norway who are losing influence on the global plane, the emerging middle powers identified here also as regional powers are beginning to have a dramatic impact on the global order. For a deeper understanding of the likely evolution of the global order, one is compelled to take a closer look at these regional powers.

Further study of regional powers is motivated by additional factors. For instance, foreign policy studies of these states have been largely descriptive, focused on the national setting and how developments on the domestic front have configured policy options and behaviour. Whereas the international arena, with its global problems and the proposed solutions thereof, has been investigated from the perspective of great powers' interests and behaviour, what of the regional powers' perspective? The dearth of analysis in this regard has the result that contestation over proposed solutions to global problems from developing countries, and in particular certain regional powers, is perceived as errant behaviour, irrational and counter to global collective interests.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the debate on nuclear non-proliferation. The hegemonic perspective in the global academy, multilateral institutions, and Western political circles is that nuclear proliferation arises purely from the ill intent of rogue powers whose only motivation in acquiring nuclear capability is to threaten international stability. Where is the serious attempt to understand the rationale of a nation like Iran in this regard, or Brazil or South Africa? The net effect is that mistakes in addressing the standoff over nuclear testing are repeated, and military nuclear capability continues to proliferate.

A more fruitful approach may be to recognise that, with the economic and political rise of new powers in the South, the more established powers of the world would do well to accommodate their views. Some of these Southern powers, such as Brazil and South Africa, share the view of the developed middle powers that the majority of the globe would be better served by a multipolar system, for instance. Leaders in these countries believe that this multipolar world can be the result of the emergence of new regional unipolarities, centres of power within a region that build coalitions with one another to pursue their interests and balance the traditionally established power poles.

It is true, and recognised as such by these countries, that a crucial factor in continued US hegemony in international relations is the country's military supremacy. They note that in conventional military terms, the United States will remain the dominant global power for a long time and that it is not feasible to expect emerging powers, even collectively, to 'hard balance' Washington.

But global unipolarity does not depend on military might alone. It requires the domination of two additional arenas: that of the global economy and that of transnational challenges such as terrorism, crime, global warming, and disease pandemics. These are the arenas in which emerging powers can stand up against the United States, and the Southern regional powers are increasingly doing so.

Thus, the necessity of studying new regional powers as a separate category emanates from the fact that they are increasingly becoming actors in their own right in global affairs. Neither the current financial woes of the global economy, nor the challenge of meeting energy requisites and at the same time dealing with the exigencies of climate change can be fundamentally addressed without their full participation. Bypassing these countries in fashioning a solution as was often the case in the past is no longer perceived as an option. Without their cooperation these global problems are likely to escalate, impacting on all, including the United States and other established powers.

The importance of rising regional powers to global affairs does not only have to be established in the negative, however. They are also actors in the positive sense.

The most dramatic example of this in recent years was the establishment, during the World Trade Organisation (WTO) 2003 ministerial meetings in Cancun, of the Group of Twenty (G20). Following the formation of the IBSA Forum by India, Brazil and South Africa via the Brasilia Declaration of June that year, these three worked with other regional powers to fashion the G20 as a counterweight to the United States and Europe. The G20 effectively allowed the developing world to bring about a stalemate in the trade talks until their views are accommodated, throwing the global trade talks, and with it the WTO, into crisis.

Understanding why and how they did this is important for fashioning a progressive global agenda and understanding the evolution of the international political system in the coming decades.

Challenging the hierarchy through 'soft balancing'

Brazil and South Africa, both featured in the regional power study that follows in the special section of this issue, are among the regional powers beginning to challenge the current international hierarchy. Their aim is to transform themselves into power poles of a future global order through 'soft balancing' strategies. Soft balancing does not directly challenge the military preponderance of the established powers, but rather uses non-military tools to thwart policies which exclude the developing world. It involves institutional strategies such as the formation of limited diplomatic coalitions or ententes, especially at the level of the United Nations, to delay, frustrate and undermine the plans of established powers. Soft balancing also involves strengthening economic ties between emerging middle powers through trade agreements and sector collaboration. The Southern powers also strive for discursive hegemony by questioning the legitimacy of discriminatory policies, and by increasing the costs of using unilateral or oligarchic power through public criticism on the global stage of diplomacy.

The diplomatic efficacy of these actors is increasingly apparent. They are active and innovative in developing new cooperative processes. In addition to the IBSA Forum (sometimes referred to as the G3), a proliferation of flexible alliances, all characterised by low degrees of institutionalisation, now populate the global lexicon, the G20, G33, G77, and BRIC among them. It is interesting that BRIC, comprised

of Brazil, Russia, India and China, was the focus of a Goldman Sachs study of emerging economies in 2001, and has not only retained the acronym but become a formidable grouping with a voice in the media. In the wake of the first presidential summit of the BRIC states in Jekaterinburg in May 2009, it is seen by many as a competitor to the *Heiligendamm* Process (whereby the G8 invited Brazil, Mexico, India, China and South Africa to form the O5, or Outreach 5, in 2007 for consultation with the developed nations in areas ranging from energy efficiency and development in Africa to innovation and freedom of investment). In short, the Least Developed Countries (LDC) initiatives are creating their own forums for discussion as a counterweight to those designed and initiated by the established great powers.

In summary, soft balancing by way of a combination of middle-power discourse and collective action through informal groupings seems to be a promising strategy in a future global order that will be shaped through international institutions. This strategy protects the regional powers' national sovereignty and maximises their flexibility and independence of action, and yet allows them effective participation in global institutions. This participation has already left its footprint on the global order of recent years, and might impact on the character of multilateralism and, in particular, its procedural values in the long term. Those players who effectively operate within these groupings as innovators, coalition builders and spokesmen have the potential to substantially influence the outcomes of future global politics.

Regional powers in context: regionally, globally, and bilaterally

It is true that Brazil and South Africa, like Canada and Norway, have medium level or second tier capability in the global system. All of them tend to display similar patterns of behaviour in some areas. All, for instance, have a preference for resolving issues through multilateral institutions. The relatively equitable playing field in certain multilateral institutions provides middle powers with the potential to constrain big power behaviour. Nevertheless, in particular Brazil and South Africa are also regional powers in their own right. In the regional context, these countries exhibit great power capabilities, especially where the big global powers stay out of the game. This great power capability in regional settings imparts to them a distinct set of responsibilities, obligations and even aspirations. But it also provides these countries with a different set of levers, enabling them to transform their environment into regional power bases from which to project power globally.

The regional power characteristics of Brazil and South Africa not only conditions their behaviour on the regional and global planes, but also influences their bilateral relationships with big powers. In this regard, the behaviour of the United States and its potential positioning in the future global order is of great relevance to this discussion. The complete decline of the superpower cannot be expected any time soon. Rather, the global distribution of military, economic, and research and development capabilities suggests that its hegemony — though tempered — may last for many decades to come. In particular, the military superiority of the United States is highly pronounced and the US defence industry is currently benefiting from increasing returns in this regard. Moreover, the result of the US presidential elections of 2008 and subsequent change of government could regenerate the international legitimacy that dwindled away during the years of the Bush administration, as Barack Obama sets about restoring the moral authority of the United States.

But emerging powers such as Brazil and South Africa are not only confronted with one status quo power. Many established great powers are also struggling to advance their agendas and defend their interests. These established powers are shielded by a dense system of economic, political and security relationships including a security community among the leading powers in North America and Europe. This prospective development of a concert of great powers, involving a superpower, other traditionally established powers and newly emerging Southern powers, calls for scrutiny.

According to mainstream realist international relations theorists, such an arrangement should be expected to be conflict prone. However, there are three reasons why major conflict among the world's established and rising powers is unlikely. First, as commonly recognised, great-power wars as mechanisms to transform the global order are not realistic because of the possession and potential use of nuclear weapons by both sides, which could result in a zero-zero outcome. Second, the existing international order is much more open, institutionalised, consensual, and rule-based than past international orders. Certainly, from the perspective of rising powers, it is easier to join and harder to overturn because it provides some protections for them (for example, the anti-discriminatory rules of the WTO) and they can, theoretically, rise up through the hierarchies of international institutions. Finally, the United States has an incentive to foster effective global institutions that would minimise conflict, considering that its hegemonic role is likely to continue to decline, even if at an unpredictable rate. The value of rules and institutions may increase for the United States as its own relative power decreases, because those rules can help to lock in a preferred international order. One can therefore expect the United States to push for the reform and consolidation of international institutions in the coming years, thereby enabling the persistence of American interests and values, if not prolonged hegemony as well.

Dynamic mix in global order

The common point of departure of all the articles in this special edition is that the current global order reflects a dynamic mix of established great powers, newly emerging regional powers, and multiple regional structures. This global order consists, on the one hand, of the EU as a relatively functional region and, on the other hand, of many great powers without functional regions, such as the United States and Russia. Brazil and South Africa are now at a crossroads because they can actively pursue global strategies with or without their regions. The choices and strategies of Brazilian and South African foreign-policy makers will dramatically impact on the global order. The challenges confronted by these Southern powers, located as they are between the centre and periphery of the current global order and at the nexus of international and regional politics, demand particularly complex foreign policy strategies that can be contradictory and may even seem to be inconsistent at times.

If we want to understand their decisions and strategies, why they adopted the positions they did on global trade negotiations, climate change or nuclear non-proliferation, or their actions in continental affairs like the establishment of a regional institutional architecture, or their protection of 'rogue' powers like Cuba, Libya, Venezuela and Zimbabwe, or even their stance on internationally controversial national conflicts like Darfur and Zimbabwe, then it is imperative to understand the

origins of the foreign policy perspectives of regional powers. This requires an investigation of domestic political elites and other stakeholders of regional powers. It requires an explanation of their political motivations, and an understanding of the power of their aspirations. But political aspirations do not enable political behaviour. Behaviour is also conditioned by the capabilities of actors. There is therefore a need to investigate the sources of the leverage of regional powers, why their efforts have not been thwarted by big powers, and how it is that this leverage has manifested itself now and not in earlier periods. In this regard, it would be important to investigate both the nature of the current post Cold War global order and the responses of global powers to regional power assertion.

These are then the research themes explored in the pages that follow. Two articles investigate these issues in relation to the rising powers of Brazil and South Africa. Two other articles detail the responses of established powers in Europe and North America to the international engagements by the rising regional powers. The authors presented and discussed the preliminary versions of their articles at the 1st Regional Powers Network Conference¹ at the German Institute of Global and Area Studies in Hamburg in September 2008. Collectively the articles of this special section contribute to a growing corpus of studies being developed by the global academy on regional powers and their influence on the international political system. They are offered as a contribution to the diverse worldwide endeavours to try to understand global problems, the solutions thereof, and the likely evolution of the international political system in the decades to come.

Note

1. For further information about the Regional Powers Network (RPN), see: www.giga-hamburg.de/rpn. Additional contributions to the 1st RPN Conference will be published in book form in 2010 (Flemes, 2010).

Reference

- Flemes D, (ed.), *Regional Leadership in the Global System: Ideas, Interests and Strategies of Regional Powers*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2010.