



Rising powers, exaggerated hopes

The US and Europe still need to set (much of) the global agenda | By Volker Perthes

In today's globalized and multipolar world, major problems will no longer be solved, crises no longer managed, and rules no longer defined, let alone implemented, without the contribution of new or re-emergent great and middle powers. Not only China has become another indispensable power: Global governance, in order to be successful, also needs the active involvement of India and Brazil, Indonesia, South Korea and Mexico as well as Turkey, South Africa, Nigeria, Egypt or Vietnam.

Some of these countries are still emerging economies. Politically, however, most of them have crossed the threshold that has long limited their access to the kitchen of international decision-making. And it is these countries and some others that are likely to trigger and produce the growth that the world economy needs in the years to come.

The power and ability to impose order or to solve problems of global relevance is more widely distributed today than it ever was since the formation of the state system. The five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council still defend their veto right, and their military power is unmatched.

However, they no longer command sufficient resources, competence, and legitimacy to cope alone with global challenges or crises with worldwide impact. Bipolarity is a thing of the past and is unlikely to re-emerge in a new Sino-American G2-form.

It is also very unlikely for the foreseeable future that any one club of nations, such as the G7 or G8, could again assume a quasi-hegemonic position in the world economy or in world politics. Even the G20 in its current composition may not really represent the forces that can and will shape the international order in the 21st century.

The conceptual and practical challenge for leaders and pundits in the United States, Europe, Japan and other members of the

"Old West" is neither to ignore the demands of rising powers to have more influence in global politics, nor to be overly enthused by the fact that these powers are gaining weight. Relative shifts in global power relations are a reality, and they need to be accommodated politically and institutionally.

There is no doubt, for example, that the Security Council needs to become more representative if it is to preserve, or regain, its legitimacy in matters of international peace and security. And it will be impossible to retain the de-facto monopoly of the United States and the EU over the chief positions in the IMF and the World Bank.

At the same time, however, it should be clear that any accommodation of shifting power relations, and of rising-power interests, is at best a means to better integrate these powers into international efforts at managing global problems. It is not, by itself, a recipe to solve any of the world's vital issues.

Thus, while it may be impolite to say so, more voice and weight for emerging powers in global governance institutions does not automatically make these bodies

feel threatened, or marginalized by the rise of their neighbors.

Moreover, while rising powers rightly demand more voice in international rule-making, they do not necessarily want to subject themselves to binding rules and regulations. Or, as Patrick Stewart from the Council on Foreign Relations has put it, they are seeking "greater weight in global governance, but not necessarily more global governance."

Given the record of established powers, this is nothing to be astonished or morally indignant

permanent member of the Security Council.

The inability of the West to dominate the global agenda doesn't therefore imply that others would set this agenda or assume the responsibility to manage and resolve regional and international conflicts. The role of Western powers has not disappeared; it has just become more complicated. For the time being, the US and Europe will still have to provide most of the input – in terms of ideas, standards, and even resources – to shape the

of rising powers share our values yet still have different, but legitimate interests. The really good news for the West is that most powers positioning themselves for a more active role on the world stage are democracies.

Within the G20 only two states – China and Saudi Arabia – explicitly do not want to be liberal democracies, while a third one – Russia – has developed into an autocracy with a democratic façade. All the others may expose different shapes and forms of democracy, but they share the general principles of inclusive and competitive elections, responsible government, civil liberties, and human rights.

The not so good news is that even democratic rising powers often do not share the political agendas of established industrialized democracies. There are clear differences, for example, regarding the priorities of climate protection and economic development. Also, along with many other states in the global South, emerging democracies tend to defend the principle of non-interference, and they are generally reluctant to support any US or European attempts to project democracy or human rights into other countries.

Moreover, some of the most important of these states differ substantially with the US, and often also with the EU, about the right approach toward regional conflicts, especially in the Middle East. In 2010, Washington made a serious mistake when it disavowed a Turkish-Brazilian attempt to mediate in the conflict over Iran's nuclear program, rather than building upon those attempts.

Not too few policymakers in the United States and in Europe have been annoyed with the attempts of emerging democratic powers to pull their weight in world politics regardless of the approaches chosen by Washington, Paris, or Berlin. Partly, such reactions reflect old thinking, still rooted in the categories of the Cold War. In that era, it was clear

that democratic nations could differ over details, but would agree about the main questions of international politics. Those who pursued a different agenda on substantial matters were either not part of the "democratic camp" – or weren't important international players.

One of the realities of the globalized, multipolar world is that shared democratic values do not guarantee agreement about at least some of the burning questions of international politics. The more democracies there are, the more conflicts of interests and differences are likely to emerge between democratic states and powers.

There is little reason to be annoyed when states like India, Turkey, Brazil or South Africa are setting priorities different from those of Europe or the United States, or have different views about how to deal with the Arab-Israeli conflict, Iran, development aid, democracy promotion or environmental protection. Sometimes they may simply have a point. The world is going to be more pluralistic, not only with respect to the domestic structures of an increasing number of relevant states, but also with regard to the agendas that democratic powers follow on the international scene.

The task here for established Western democracies is twofold: they still have to take the lead in building pragmatic and variable coalitions of the relevant – of all countries, regardless of their political systems, that need to contribute to solving or at least managing global problems. And they should at the same time learn to appreciate that other democratic nations may have quite different views on questions of regional and world order. Unless such "democratic differences" are accepted, we will hardly be able to translate those common values which rising and established democracies share, into common approaches to international issues.

Most powers that are positioning themselves for a more active role on the world stage are democracies.

about. It is simply a fact that needs to be taken into consideration in any effort to build inclusive regional or global regimes.

More importantly still, rising powers do and will continue to seek common platforms to demonstrate their increased international weight, but this doesn't mean that they do have a common agenda. The most visible grouping, the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), clearly shows that well-marketed acronyms cannot paper over differences of interests.

Brazil, India and South Africa are using this format in a pragmatic way to pursue their interests. There is little agreement between them on the one, and Russia or China on the other hand, however, with regard to political values or to fundamental questions of international order. Consider the composition of the UN Security Council or the nuclear-arms privilege which the permanent members of the Security Council claim for themselves. China, after all, is the main opponent of India becoming a

agenda of cooperation, particularly with regard to international security and global sustainability. They will have to make this agenda both legitimate and inclusive in order to be effective, and they will have to work with variable coalitions.

Two general rules may apply here: First, to solve any problem of global relevance, the US and Europe need to work both with those who are causing these problems and those who can help to solve them, regardless of ideological differences. No one in their right mind would demand that we need to wait for China to become democratic in order to cooperate with it on such issues as climate change, international finance, development, the non-proliferation of WMD, or even international peacekeeping. Similarly, on a regional level, it would be self-defeating to condition the cooperation with Iran on matters of common concern such as the stabilization of Afghanistan or the emergence of a liberal regime in Tehran.

Second, we need to appreciate the fact that an increasing number



Volker Perthes is the Executive Chairman and Director of Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin.



more legitimate and effective. Increasing the number of players at the table will, while necessary, obviously also increase the difficulty of reaching decisions. And while the US or Europe may want to see certain rising powers represent their respective continents in global institutions, other regional countries tend not to see these powers as their representatives. On the contrary, in many cases smaller regional countries

