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Article

Rising Powers, Global Governance, and the United Nations

Thomas G. Weiss

The Graduate Center, The City University of New York

tweiss@gc.cuny.edu

Abstract

The category of "rising powers"—along with other groupings of developing and industrialized countries—should be interrogated and not uncritically applied and assumed to make analytical sense. This article teases out why as well as probes two other topics, global governance and the United Nations, that mean many things to many people. The article pushes readers to question several convenient narratives: that the Global South has had little impact on universal normative developments, and that it was largely absent from the founding of the United Nations whose values came only from the West; that "rising powers" is a meaningful analytical category; that "global governance" is a synonym for international organization and law with some non-state actors now in the mix. Finally, the article challenges readers to move beyond the ahistorical character of much contemporary social science.

Keywords

Rising Powers, Global Governance, United Nations, Global South

The three topics in the title of this essay often generate more heat than light, accompanied by a customary "dialogue of the deaf" between representatives¬—governmental or academic—of the North and the Global South. The launching of this journal, *Rising Powers Quarterly*, provides a most welcome and necessary, refereed analytical space to interrogate honestly geopolitical developments rather than regurgitate familiar ideological tropes.

Let's begin with long-held positions about the Global South's role in the normative structures that circumscribe both global governance and the United Nations (Weiss & Abdenur 2014). Recent research shows the extent to which Southern agency has been a genuine but essentially ignored source of global norms (Helleiner 2014). The inputs consist not only of efforts to resist the imposition of western values but also to articulate genuine southern voices and perspectives. Whether or not the phenomenon of rising powers reinforces the North-South

divide or increases the diversity of plausible policies and alignments within the international system, however, remains open to debate.

As such and equally important for this journal's readers is the need to set aside the traditional and convenient narrative that the current UN system in particular and post-World War II international society in general were imposed by the West on the Rest. This is another topic that requires revisiting according to other recent research (Weiss & Plesch 2015; Weiss & Roy 2016). To be sure, deliberations occurred before rapid subsequent decolonization—50 states participated in San Francisco whereas today's UN membership is 193—and so it is tempting to simplify the founding narrative as the West without the Rest. However, the details of Imperial India's and China's contributions to early efforts to pursue war criminals and determine the post-war direction of assistance to refugees and displaced persons and of trade and finance, for example, complicate considerably this facile story-line.

More powerful countries, and especially the United States, had more say during international negotiations; that reality is always the case and hardly destroys the argument that multilateralism and international cooperation and perspectives mattered. Indeed, the wartime United Nations may have represented the "pinnacle" of global governance to date (Plesch & Weiss 2015). Other voices from countries in what is now called the "Global South" were on stage and not merely in the wings, including 19 independent states from Latin America and others whose independence was more recent: 3 from Africa (Ethiopia, Liberia, and South Africa); 3 from Asia (China, the Philippines, and Imperial India); and 7 from the Middle East (Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Turkey).

By the 1970s decolonization had proceeded apace, and two-thirds of UN member states were in the limelight as erstwhile colonies; but the stage was set in 1942-45. Throughout the war and the drafting and adoption of the UN Charter in San Francisco, less powerful states influenced the agenda and advanced their own interests and ideals. The Latin American emphasis on regional arrangements in Charter Chapter VIII was one such result; and Chapters XI and XII regarding non-self-governing territories and trusteeship reflected the widespread views of recently decolonized states and other advocates of self-determination (See for example (Raghavan 2014).

The shape and values of the wartime and immediate post-war United Nations were not simply dictated by the West even a generation before decolonization, although that view is conveniently trotted out when regimes in the Global South would prefer not to be bound by many universal human rights or security agreements. Indeed, rapid decolonization is hard to imagine in the form and with the speed that it took place without multilateralism during and immediately after

World War II.

Twenty-first century discourse in many rising powers as well as in poorer developing countries accepts the Anglo-American mythology, often as a facile justification for distancing themselves from uncomfortable aspects of the "old order" and its 1945 institutions. However, a clearer appreciation of liberation in the context of wartime deliberations might provide the basis for a new "internationalist"—perhaps even a "post-national"—approach in which the definition of narrowly defined vital interests would expand to include consideration of a perspective that went beyond borders. Certainly such an approach to global affairs is more suited to problem-solving than the us-versus-them template and predictable performances that characterize what customarily passes for international negotiations in various UN theaters (Weiss 2016).

Next, to what extent does the notion of "rising"—or "emerging"—powers actually make sense? Many analysts assume that it does. It may but also may not, depending on the context. Developing countries have joined forces at different stages in the international arena—including the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Group of 77 (G77)—to increase their voices. Over the past decade, a new twist has been added, the visibility of rising powers. This reality reflects their growing role as providers of development cooperation and their criticism of the existing architecture of global economic governance. Both individually and through new alignments such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), emerging powers are engaging more directly in key normative debates about how major institutions could and should contribute to today's world order.

It is unnecessary to exaggerate either the shadow cast by the West, or what Amitav Acharya calls the "hype of the rest," to see that the role of rising powers in global governance is changing the landscape. Whether or not we choose to toss aside the host of labels—including multipolar, a-polar, G-zero, and the list goes on—it is clear that his depiction of a "multiplex cinema" is an apt image with a choice of plots (ideas), directors (powers), and action (leadership) available to observers under one roof (Acharya 2014, pp.5, 6–11, 59–78).

The label of "rising powers" is neither carved in stone nor uncontroversial. The term refers to countries whose policy elites are able to draw on economic and other sources of power to project influence both within and outside their immediate neighborhoods, and that play a substantial role in the call for global governance reforms. This label and others—including "Global South" and earlier "Third World" as well as "North"—are problematic and should be contested. They reflect specific perspectives on development and historical experiences at specific moments in time. Despite their analytical flaws and misleading connotations, however, they matter in international politics and in essays in journals like this

one because they are assumed to make sense.

But rising powers encompass not only the BRICS but also a host of others including at least Indonesia, Mexico, Chile, Argentina, South Korea, Turkey, the Philippines, Thailand, and Nigeria. Andrew Cooper aptly comments that "No one acronym has the field to itself" (Cooper 2010, p.76). The BRICS seem an especially puzzling conglomeration that contains two permanent members of the UN Security Council, one a former superpower, and the world's second largest economy. Other mouthfuls include: BRIICS (BRICS plus Indonesia); BASIC (the BRICS minus Russia); IBSA (BRICS minus Russia and China); BRICSAM (BRICS plus Indonesia and Mexico); and MIST (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, and Turkey). And we should not forget the membership of several rising powers in the G20 (South Africa, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, China, South Korea, India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey) (Cooper & Thakur 2013) or the 3G Coalition that exists as part of an informal variable geometry to get the G20 to be more inclusive of non-member views (Cooper & Momani 2014). These structures lend new weight to long-standing critiques of Western dominance over the global governance of economic and financial affairs including development, and perhaps provide a way to bridge the North-South chasm or the West-versus-the-Rest divide. But they also provide a confusing array of labels that confound as much as clarify, which allow many who brandish them to hide behind a convenient ideological mask rather than to ask and answer tough questions.

In focusing on the fluid category of rising powers, this journal seeks to single out mainly the more powerful countries that were once part of the conglomerate of the Global South—the "R" in BRICS is certainly the most puzzling inclusion. Indeed for other purposes, analysts and diplomats argue that these countries still are members of the grouping of over 130 developing countries, even if they have graduated from (or are close to doing so) from being recipients of official development assistance (ODA) to being net donors. Setting aside for the moment the questionable cohesiveness of any category, rising powers have been important players on the international stage. During the Cold War, configurations such as the G77 worked to address what all developing countries perceived to be an unjust global economic system, a view that continues to characterize their position, however anomalous. For instance, the New Economic International Order (NIEO) and other proposals in a variety of contexts that were supposed to address asymmetries now appear especially hollow as Chad and China are mentioned in the same breath. Earlier, the space available for the G77 was constrained by resistance from industrialized economies and bipolarity; those elements have been altered but now exist side-by-side with the vast disparities and any strained but remaining solidarity within the Global South.

While it has been the case for some time, it has become increasingly obvious—in

whatever label we eventually give to the post–Cold War period—that it is hard to generalize about the role rising powers for at least two reasons. First, the deep structural changes within the configuration of the international arena, and especially the reality of a more multipolar order, has renewed debates about the need to update the architecture of global economic and financial governance. Second, some rising powers have become sources of finance for South-South cooperation, which they insist is distinct in principle and practice from more traditional development cooperation. But is it really? While the relevance of rising powers to international development clearly has increased, their efforts occur mainly outside of the United Nations, the place that nurtured decolonization and advocated for policies to address the grievances of developing countries. The world organization risks becoming more and more marginal as a result of the effort to pretend that all developing countries are in the same post-colonial boat.

To state the obvious, the roles and positions of rising powers are anything except homogenous—their political regimes, levels of development, ideologies, and geopolitical interests vary and diverge. They point to differing motivations even when they manage to articulate shared rhetorical claims in press releases. Rather than treating them as an undifferentiated block, it is necessary to parse how their policies and interests vary, as well as how their approaches and strategies change over time and for concrete issues. We clearly require differentiation when we are speaking about small islands and climate change; or about the programs for least developed countries by the over 30 agencies, funds, and programmes of UN development system; or about the decision-making procedures in the Security Council or the Washington-based international financial institutions. In addition, contemporary thinking about global governance and the multi-stakeholders that has animated debates at the United Nations and elsewhere requires modification to reflect another analytical lens. It is necessary to consider the system of international organizations not only in terms of intergovernmental relations – the "First UN" of member states and the "Second UN" of international civil servants – but also the "Third UN" of non-state actors such as civil society organisations and private-sector firms (Weiss, Carayannis & Jolly 2009).

There have been other periods when many of what we now label "rising powers" played visible roles within the international system; and for broader structural reasons, these windows of opportunity narrowed or even closed. The G77-led NIEO resulted in proposals that floundered not only due to resistance by the industrialized countries, but also because the oil crisis and ensuing indebtedness and structural adjustment programs of the Washington-Consensus era constrained the policy autonomy of non-oil-exporting developing countries. They shifted agency away from the UN and towards the Bretton Woods institutions. The salience of the BRICS and other groupings of rising powers must be under-

stood in light of the specific historical circumstances of the post–Cold War period rather than treated as a phenomenon not subject to oscillations and reversals. Indeed, research suggests that in some instances – e.g., China in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Curtis 2013) – there may not be as clear a break as commonly thought from previous Western patterns of investment and exploitation. The interests of all investors converge around stabilization and market-driven economic activities. More truth-in-packaging is in order.

Rising powers have long desired to expand their participation in the rule-setting processes of global governance, unwilling to be mere "rule-takers" but aspiring to be "rule-makers." However, "emerging economies appear to have preferred the status quo and working within existing institutions created by Western states," write David Held and Charles Roger. "Yet, as they grown in power and seek to ensure that their needs and values are reflected at the global level, their assertiveness and dissatisfaction with existing institutions may rise" (Held & Rogers 2013, p.6). Robert Wade argues that "the standard narrative about an emerging new global political order shaped by 'the rise of the South' is misleading…the primary responsibility for mobilizing cooperation around those global commons problems remains with the Western states, which continue to hold the commanding heights" (Wade 2013, p.81). The participation by rising powers in normative debates can take a variety of forms, from blocking proposals viewed as promoted by developed countries – illustrated by the BRICS's resistance to the effectiveness agenda of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) – to altering existing norms and proposing new frameworks altogether.

In short, we should be interrogating and not taking at face value the representativeness, objectives, and impact of various groupings of rising powers—indeed of other groupings across the Global South as well. Although a coalition such as the BRICS is the parent of a strong rhetorical call to reform global economic governance, including making development cooperation more just and effective, the member states are also interested in opening up more space for themselves within the system. Their positions, even where they succeed in finding common ground, do not necessarily correspond to those of other developing countries, nor are they always willing or able to take on responsibility for claims by regional or sub-regional groups of developing countries. Other rising powers or emerging economies also may be more inclined to enter into a dialogue with traditional western donors, even if such actions mean participating in the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation led by the OECD and the UN Development Programme. More significantly, poorer countries may not perceive BRICS's positions to be aligned with their own interests. In addition, there is considerable political contestation of their claims to leadership roles, even within their own regions, suggesting that there are limits to which the grouping can mobilize sup-

port for its positions among other members, be they rising or falling, across the Global South.

Finally, and in addition to the problematic character of the accepted narratives about the nature of the international system and the impact as well as composition of the club of rising powers, it is also worth interrogating the meaning of "global governance" for this new journal. The term itself was born from a marriage between academic theory and practical policy in the 1990s and became entwined with that other meta-phenomenon of the last two decades, globalization. James Rosenau and Ernst Czempiel's theoretical *Governance without Government* was published in 1992, (Rosenau & Czempiel 1992) just about the same time that the Swedish government launched the policy-oriented Commission on Global Governance under the chairmanship of Sonny Ramphal and Ingmar Carlsson. Both set in motion explorations of what was dubbed "global governance." The 1995 publication of the commission's report, *Our Global Neighbourhood*, (The Commission on Global Governance 1995) coincided with the first issue of the Academic Council on the United Nations System (ACUNS) journal *Global Governance*. This newly-minted quarterly sought to return to the global problem-solving origins of the leading journal in the field, which seemed to have lost its way. As Timothy Sinclair reminds us "From the late 1960s, the idea of international organization fell into disuse … *International Organization*, the journal which carried this name founded in the 1940s, increasingly drew back from matters of international policy and instead became a vehicle for the development of rigorous academic theorizing." (Sinclair 2012, p.16)

These developments paved the way for a raft of works about growing global complexity, the management of globalization, and the challenges confronting international institutions (Cox 1994; Hart & Prakash 2000; Held & McGrew 2002)—all topics that will appear with regularity in these pages. In part, global governance replaced an immediate predecessor as a normative endeavor, "world order studies," which was viewed as overly top-down and static, although many of the fathers and mothers of that period undoubtedly support the emergence of a multipolar world and rising powers. Having grown from the World Peace through World Law movement, world order failed to capture the variety of actors, networks, and relationships that characterized contemporary international relations (Falk & Mendlovitz 1966; Sohn & Grenville 1958). It did, however, force us to think more expansively about how—as John Ruggie puts it—the world "hangs together" (Ruggie 1998, p.1) even if we overlook the lessons world order studies taught us about patterns of continuity and change, and of coherence and interconnectivity.

When the perspectives from world-order scholars started to look a trifle old-fashioned, the stage was set for a new analytical cottage industry. After his archi-

val labors to write a two-volume history of world federalism, Joseph Barrata aptly observed that in the 1990s "the new expression, 'global governance,' emerged as an acceptable term in debate on international organization for the desired and practical goal of progressive efforts, in place of 'world government.'" He continued, scholars "wished to avoid using a term that would harken back to the thinking about world government in the 1940s, which was largely based on fear of atomic bombs and too often had no practical proposals for the transition short of a revolutionary act of the united peoples of the world" (Baratta 2004, pp.534–535).

The term "global governance" is not only ubiquitous but also is used and abused by academics, pundits, and policymakers. While two decades ago it was almost unknown, Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall quipped that a decade later it suddenly had "attained near-celebrity status… [having] gone from the ranks of the unknown to one of the central orienting themes in the practice and study of international affairs." (Barnett & Duvall 2005, p.1) Its omnipresence and marquee status means that global governance has become an alternative moniker for international organizations, a descriptor for a world stage packed with ever more actors, a call to arms for a better world, an attempt to control the pernicious aspects of accelerating economic and social change, and a synonym for world government. This imprecision also has undermined its utility as an academic endeavor, which more recent work has sought to overcome.

My own analytical quest—in cooperation with Rorden Wilkinson in a number of publications (Weiss & Wilkinson 2013, 2016, 2015, 2014a, 2014b)—has meant moving beyond rescuing the concept from a simple association with international organization and law, multilateralism, and what states do in concert with insufficient attention paid to the kinds of world order in which their interactions take place, and without reference to a host of other actors, principles, norms, networks, and mechanisms. In brief, our effort aims to understand better global complexity and the way that the world is governed. It also means that we take seriously the idea that global governance actors are not merely involved in the creation and preservation of the status quo; they are also agents of change. And getting a better understanding of the drivers of change is an essential, forthcoming analytical challenge along with how global governance is experienced.

Global governance sprouted and took root among academics and policy wonks in the 1990s to reflect the interdependence and rapid technological advances as well as the sheer expansion in numbers and importance of non-state actors, both civil society and for-profit corporations, which coincided with the end of the Cold War. The term came to refer to collective efforts to identify, understand, and address worldwide problems and processes that went beyond the capacities of individual states. It reflected a capacity of the international system at any moment in time to provide government-like services in the absence of world government.

Global governance encompassed a wide variety of cooperative problem-solving arrangements that were visible but informal (e.g., practices or guidelines) or were temporary formations (e.g., coalitions of the willing). Such arrangements could also be more formal, taking the shape of hard rules (laws and treaties) or else institutions with administrative structures and established practices to manage collective affairs by a variety of actors—including state authorities, intergovernmental organizations, nongovernmental organizations, private sector entities, and other civil society actors. Weaving persuasively together the various threads of global governance and the geopolitics of rising powers is a task before us.

A final word of counsel to future contributors to the journal is to move away from the largely ahistorical quality of much of contemporary thinking about rising powers and global governance. Thus, it is essential to jettison some of the "gee-whiz" character of contemporary theorizing. The ahistorical quality of too much social science and international relations is remarkable (Exceptions include; (Buzan & Lawson 2013; Buzan & Little 2000)).One reason may be the premium international relations scholarship places on parsimonious theories and simple causal explanations. History can appear to complicate this pursuit of parsimony and causality; but dealing with the messiness of history is preferable to achieving elegant theory at the expense of understanding. Done well, history should make fundamentals clearer (Williams, Hadfield & Rofe 2012). Andrew Hurrell reminds us to eschew the "relentless presentism" that afflicts political science and international relations, (Hurrell 2002, p.xiii) a sort of inverse Alzheimer's disease: short-term memory is retained while the contexts that crafted these memories have slipped away. Coming to grips with what constitutes continuities or changes requires the longest possible historical perspective.

"History" is something that we introduce to students in the opening lectures of an introductory international relations class, but we tend to carefully cite or circumscribe it (Weiss & Wilkinson 2015, pp.391–395, 397–406). We either cherry-pick illustrations to treat history as an empirical treasure trove wherein we can find examples that fit our theories and models, or can be made to fit the way that we choose to explain the world. Or else we concentrate so narrowly on concepts or particular issues that the lessons from studying broader historical phenomena are obscured.

As such, we need better to understand the dynamics of both inertia and movement. Debates about what drives change and what encourages continuity in global governance have typically been limited to privileging alterations in the distribution of relative power capabilities among states, identifying war and alternations in material power as markers of transitions, and perceiving intergovernmental organizations to be tenacious. We should not throw out the state baby with our global governance bath water, but we should conceptualize changes—large and

small, transformative and system-stabilizing—as a means to understand why systems endure or fade away, why they may change abruptly or not at all. Harnessing knowledge for thinking about more stable and just world orders is certainly my acknowledged objective.

Part of this exercise involves enlarging the boundaries of time and space. Global governance, if it makes sense at all, is not merely a descriptor for a post-Cold War pluralistic moment but rather a legitimate set of questions about how the world is governed and ordered at all levels and in every historical period.

A growing number of historians argue persuasively that the history of any epoch cannot be properly understood merely in terms of separate national or even regional narratives but necessarily must encompass a wider perspective and context even if the geographic coverage is less than planetary (Loth et al. 2014). It is time for social scientists to follow suit but with the same type of longer-term perspective and in-depth treatments that are prized by historians.

Elsewhere, Wilkinson and I have argued that analyzing global governance from the earliest of human systems to the present day has a utility in helping us understand how and why we have ended up with today's world order (Weiss & Wilkinson 2014b). This realization flows from the necessity of asking across time: "how is the world governed?" It is in seeking answers to this question that we could be positioned to understand how global governance has changed, and thus to situation the role of rising powers in context. Craig Murphy aptly notes that, "no social scientist or historian is yet able to give a credible account of global governance over those many millennia" (Murphy 2015, p.189).

It is, nonetheless, high time that we try. And thus, the impacts and possibilities—both positive and negative—of rising powers in global governance figure on the masthead of this journal. And hopefully the articles over the coming years will help clarify thinking—mine and everyone else's.

Bio

Thomas G. Weiss is Presidential Professor of Political Science at the City University of New York's Graduate Center and 2016 Andrew Carnegie Fellow. His latest authored books are What's Wrong with the United Nations and How to Fix It (2016); Humanitarian Intervention (2016); and Governing the Globe? Addressing "Problems without Passports" (2014).

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