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Change, power, and responsibility: Emerging powers as new partners for global structural policy

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Change, power, and responsibility: Emerging powers as new partners for global structural policy

Bonn, 9 February 2009. “Better at the table than on the menu” – is where Mexico would, in the words of a Mexican ambassador, prefer to see itself in future international negotiations. The statement was cited on the occasion of a conference of sixty young professionals from Germany and the seven emerging powers China, India, Indonesia, Egypt, South Africa, Brazil, and Mexico held in December 2008 at the German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE) in Bonn. Against the background of ongoing “tectonic shifts” in the global power structure, the participants, from the fields of politics, administration, and science, engaged in a discussion on what shape a redefined division of tasks might taken on in a new world order.

The emerging powers are calling increasingly for a role in international organisations that reflects their actual political and economic status. These countries have three features in common: (1) their impressive economic growth; (2) the growing political influence they wield in their own regions; (3) their increasing sense of self-confidence at the global level.

Both the structure of UN organisations and the way in which voting rights are apportioned in them follow a post-war logic, one that has long been *passé*. The emerging powers are also questioning the traditional arrangements in place in international trade: In the current WTO trade round the G20, led by India and Brazil, has for the first time made use of its bargaining power to demand that agricultural products be granted facilitated access to Western markets. And finally, the present financial crisis has shown that the circle of world powers is no longer conceivable without a country like China, which holds the world’s largest currency reserves.

The process of change has not gone unnoticed in the industrialised Western countries. And their aim now is to induce the rising powers to assume more global responsibility. In view of climate change, the emerging economies, some of which are among the world’s largest CO_2 emitters, are coming under growing international pressure. While these countries are often criticised for blocking efforts aimed at improving international cooperation – be it on climate protection, international trade talks, or human rights – the decision taken at the Heiligendamm Summit in June 2007 to place the relations between the G5 (Brazil, Mexico, South Africa, India, and China) and the G8 on an institutionalised footing must be seen as reflecting a realisation on the part of the industrialised countries that there will be no reorganisation of the global financial and economic structures without the active involvement of this group of countries.

It would, though, be premature to take the step of assuming that this implies a clearly defined new role for emerging powers. The interest situation of this country group is simply too diverse. At the economic level, China and India are crowding other producers – including emerging powers like Mexico – out of the world market. In political terms, China continues to hold a sceptical view on the issue of a permanent seat for India on the UN Security Council. In addition, the potential the rising powers have to influence approaches designed to solve global problems tend to vary considerably: China is far ahead of the other rising powers in areas like trade or finances, while Brazil’s biosphere has made the country an important international partner in the field of resource protection, even though it lacks the impressive growth figures posted by China and India.

Another factor just as important is that these countries sometime pursue aims in various multilateral forums that are not necessarily consistent with those favoured by the traditional industrialised countries. In the course of the last G8 summit these rising powers formulated a decalra-

tion that diverges in some important points from the views of the G8 countries on the issues of financial crisis and international cooperation. When it come to environmental and climate protection, countries like China and India have thus far refused to accept regulatory commitments that would oblige them to reduce their CO_2 emissions, claiming that such commitments would fail to do justice to their own, comparatively low per capita emissions and serve to restrict their right to development.

Finally, a partnership with the emerging powers designed to tackle global problems is inconceivable without a shared basic understanding of these problems. However, this often proves problematic, and occasionally efforts are obstructed by differences in the way concepts like human rights, democracy, or national security are interpreted. Countries like China, India, or Mexico often fear having "Western" concepts, perspectives, and priorities imposed on them or being forced to relinquish their national sovereignty.

But one thing is certain: a global partnership between the traditional industrialised countries and rising powers will require all sides involved to show a good measure of political will and commitment. The EU, for instance, will have to prove that it is capable of coordinating national interests and action strategies and developing an appropriate set of foreign-policy tools. The community of Western industrialised nations will also have to be prepared to surrender a measure of the privileged status it has traditionally enjoyed in international institutions in favour of a broader representation for the emerging actors. The rising powers will only be willing to assume responsibility if they are accorded a role that goes beyond any mere alibi-style representation. Actors expected to play no more than walk-on parts in shaping the international system are unlikely to have much interest in engaging constructively in further developing the system.

The greatest challenge facing the emerging powers must be seen in their need to mobilise sufficient capacities for their international engagement in a situation marked by devastating poverty and grave social inequalities at home. This they can achieve only if they succeed in giving a sustainable and socially acceptable shape to their rise as economic powers. These countries will also have to perform the feat of developing global leadership without at the same time creating the impression that they are merely acting as figureheads of the West. This would cast considerable doubt on their legitimacy in the "global South," whose advocates it is their explicit will to be.

Even today it is becoming perfectly clear that the new world order will be a pluralistic one. What is needed for the purpose is an earnest and far-reaching reform process geared to creating a *global* partnership for a *global* structural policy – that is, a reform process that goes further than the aphorism spoken by Tancredi, the young nobleman in Lampedusa's novel *The Leopard*: "Things will have to change if we want them to stay as they are."

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