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Do rising powers still deserve their
name?

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Bonn, 31 October 2016. The emerging economies are weakening. The “new normal” state of China’s economy is significantly less dynamic and the country is notably regressing at political level. Brazil has been paralysed in domestic policy terms for months and has just experienced its most severe recession in a long time. The South African economy is stagnating and the nation’s democratic institutions are being undermined by nepotism. The coup in Turkey has rocked the country to the core in domestic-policy and economic terms, and the list could go on and on. And these are supposed to be “rising” powers?!

For a country to increase its influence in global policy, it requires two essential things: the will and the ability to act on the global stage. Emerging powers represent a social category and do not have an absolute size. It would be naive to think that their rise to global significance is an uninterrupted success story. Consequently, neither economic nor political crises are a direct “exclusion criterion”.

However, after the boom years, it became clear that there were different categories of emerging power. China and India will continue to be globally significant in future due to their size alone. This means that growth and slower economic development alike have an impact on the world economy. China and India are needed now and in future, be it for solving problems in the global economy, for addressing all sustainability issues affecting planetary boundaries, or for shaping peace and security processes beyond their own regions. Whether we always like it or not, the actions and inaction of these two nations have larger ramifications. China and India are established powers, and there is no going back to the 20th Century, for them or for us.

We only consider states smaller in size than China and India to be “rising powers” if they are becoming increasingly important in resolving global issues. The main need within international cooperation is for states to make national contributions to providing global public goods. Agenda 2030, with its universal Sustainable Development Goals, is striving to achieve this across a broad range of topics. But what does the reality look like? The discussion about changes in the balance of power must not be restricted to economic growth, but

should, for instance, also consider each country’s CO2 emissions and achievements in fighting poverty. Conversely, states may have great potential for conflict, thereby themselves constituting a significant global problem. But this does not automatically make them “rising powers”. Barely anyone would see the self-isolating North Korea in this category, even though it is an atomic power.

States such as Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico, Pakistan, Nigeria, Ethiopia and Egypt each have large populations, but we would not consider every one of these countries a “rising power”. When viewed individually, they are not necessarily indispensable when it comes to solving global problems. And this despite the significance they each have in their own regions, especially with regard to a range of issues such as regional security and biodiversity, as well as in relation to the (in some cases lack of) progress made in reducing absolute poverty within their own borders. Ethiopia, for instance, boasts impressive annual growth of over 10 per cent and is also influential in regional security policy. However, this has not (yet) given rise to a clear will or greater ability on its part to play a diplomatic or economic role beyond its own region.

South Africa illustrates this key difference in another way. While the country admittedly is barely experiencing any economic growth and has a growing number of political problems, it clearly also has a will to engage in global forums such as the World Trade Organization, the G20 and BRICS. And this will is also linked to ability: South Africa has an effective state capable of putting plans into effect.

It is true that the emerging economies, especially the BRICS countries, but Turkey as well for example, are becoming weaker and their rise is not without incident. But we should not make the mistake of believing that emerging powers will remain at that level. In actual fact, economic risks pose a risk to their recognition as rising powers, as their long-term ability to act globally will diminish without an economic basis and international networking. And yet we already need these emerging powers as key partners. As such, we should deal with them as equal partners rather than writing them off.