

South Africa as an emerging power: from label to ‘status consistency’?

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Abstract

South Africa proudly wears the label ‘emerging power’, with its membership of the BRICS and G20 probably the most visible signs of this conferred status. This paper explores the concept of the emerging powers within the context of current global power shifts and locates South Africa within this group. It discusses the criteria for and characteristics of emerging powers, and then turns to some of the constraints and challenges faced by these states. Specific attention is paid to the ‘how’ of these states’ recognition and inclusion in global institutions and to the impact of domestic conditions and regional politics on their positions, focusing particularly on South Africa. It concludes that these factors will continue to challenge South Africa’s ability to rise above the semblance of importance conferred by its inclusion in the category of emerging powers to a position in which it exercises this status to its own advantage, including its idealistic objectives of promoting greater global equality and recognition for Africa and the global South. Although other emerging powers face similar challenges, South Africa’s domestic constraints and related lack of regional and global reach, politically and economically, threatens its ‘status consistency’ as an emerging power

Introduction

The *Twenty Year Review: South Africa 1994-2014*, issued by the Presidency,² claims that ‘South Africa’s standing in BRICS and other groupings indicates that the country is regarded as a significant emerging power, worthy of attention in

global decision-making.’ Internationally, too, South Africa is generally perceived, and referred to, as an emerging power – a description and classification, as far as these typologies go, that denotes something closer to a future big power than to the more traditional second tier of powers in the international system classified as ‘middle powers’. As will be demonstrated below, the label of emerging power rather than middle power conveys more overt status and potential for influence internationally, and is therefore a more attractive and prestigious role conception. Such a description is but one side of the coin, though: within the harsh realities of a current ‘age of disorder’³ in which space is opening up for new powers at the high table of international politics and global governance, the key question from the perspective of a ‘rising’ great power (or ‘emerging power’), such as South Africa has been deemed, is how to utilise the space afforded by this status in a way that would serve the interests of the state. And further, what are the constraints, domestically and internationally, that hamper the ‘exercising’ of South Africa’s emerging power status? Are these of such a nature that the prefix ‘emerging’ will remain the operative word within the term, reminiscent of the expression ‘Brazil is the country of the future... and it always will be’?⁴

The purpose of this article is to explore whether South Africa’s inclusion in the group of emerging powers and its self-identification as an emerging power has remained largely a mere ascribed position in the global hierarchy of power with little substance in terms of the country’s role in the international system, or whether it actually reflects a greater degree of influence for South Africa’s foreign policy in terms of the country’s conduct and the achievement of its goals and objectives.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first section serves to set the scene by describing the way in which the structure of the international system is changing in terms of a power shift that allows for the rise of new powers with an impact on global governance. The second section explores the criteria and characteristics that identify emerging powers as a category of states operating with increasing confidence and influence in the international system, and assesses the extent to which South Africa meets these. Section three turns to the constraints and challenges faced by emerging powers, focusing specifically on South Africa's domestic concerns and its efforts to represent the continent internationally.

The analysis will aim to provide a means of distinguishing between mere description or flat categorisation ('South Africa is an emerging power') on the one hand, and the ways in which the country's foreign policy reflects, at a deeper level, the expectations implied by this categorisation. For the purpose of this article, 'label' refers to the ascribed status that South Africa enjoys on the basis of its inclusion in various international and global governance institutions, such as BRICS and the Group of 20 (G20), and the recognition that it enjoys as a regional power. The discussion will consider the extent to which the country's conduct internationally exhibits growing great power conduct, in accord with what authors such as Volgy et al⁵ refer to as 'status inconsistency' – the state may enjoy 'ascribed' status as a (rising) major power, but this may not be warranted, as opposed to 'status consistency', in which the status attribution is 'in sync with the capabilities and/or foreign policy pursuits of the state in question'.⁶

Setting the scene: Shifting power relations and the rise of new powers

The current shift in global power relations is analysed and explained broadly from two perspectives in contemporary scholarship. The first is liberal internationalism which tends to theorise the shift in a top-down manner by focusing mainly on the international system and the extent to which global governance – the networks of rules, standards and acceptable conduct internationally⁷ – is affected by this shift. The second is a perspective relying more on a political economy approach embedded in a macro-sociological analysis of the globalising capitalist system that understands global shifts from, simplistically put, the bottom up, by focusing on state-society complexes, usually from a ‘long historical’ perspective.⁸ Both perspectives provide important insights and allow for explaining state behaviour and the opportunities and challenges facing those states ascending to leadership positions in the global system. Both view the power shift as part of the expansion of capitalism that has become a thoroughly globalised system in the aftermath of the Cold War.

For liberal internationalists the power shift is not so much a ‘shift’ as a process of expansion where the opportunity, as well as the need, arises for ‘new powers’ to participate in setting the rules within which the system functions. The purpose is to sustain what Ikenberry⁹ refers to as the ‘liberal international project’ in an era which sees the relative decline of the United States’ ability to act unilaterally in the global arena. The central question, or uncertainty, for liberal internationalists is whether the rising powers will support and sustain this project or whether they will opt for different values and rules. Already in 1997 Jeffrey Garten¹⁰ identified ten ‘big emerging markets’ holding ‘pivotal positions’ in the post-Cold War era. In contrast to Jim O’Neill’s BRICs concept¹¹

which focused exclusively on economic theft, Garten also emphasised the growing political influence of these countries.¹² From a global perspective therefore, the reproduction of the liberal order is dependent on the inclusion of powers that have the ability or potential to influence outcomes and the behaviour of weaker states.¹³

Scholars working broadly in a world systems approach, such as Matthew Stephen who uses a historical materialist approach to what he terms the 'BRICs challenge',¹⁴ do not necessarily theorise the power shift as such but are more interested in accounting for the behaviour of rising powers in the liberal global governance order and particularly within the changing nature of global capitalism and the extent to which such change impacts the type of state operating in this system and its ability to control and guide socio-economic relations'.¹⁵ For Golub¹⁶ the 'systemic shift' allows the major global South actors to realise their objectives of 'upward mobility and greater international equality through a redistribution of world power at economic and political levels'. But, he points out, it also endangers the emancipatory ideals of the global South as encapsulated in the 1970s quest for a 'new international economic order' in that the rising states are driving a 'new phase of capitalist globalisation', thereby becoming part of this system, rather than agents of change.

Within this changing landscape, there is general agreement among scholars that the global power shift that is ushering in a multipolar world order is affording space for new powers, alongside 'older' or traditional powers, to participate meaningfully and in leadership positions in global governance. Specifically, these rising powers are from the global South (confirming the 'full'

globalisation of capitalism as one of the most salient features of the post-Cold War era¹⁷). It is in this regard that the rising powers differ markedly from middle powers – those traditional powers, such as Australia, Canada and South Korea (accepted, as is Japan, as part of the ‘West’ in terms of ideological and economic orientation) that served in positions of support of the global system dominated by the United States and its great power allies, such as France and the United Kingdom. The rising powers were not incorporated into the post-Second World War international system to the extent and in the way that the middle powers had been included. Middle powers, according to Alden and Vieira,¹⁸ are ‘situated ideologically and materially within the dominant hegemonic paradigm’; in contrast, the emerging powers come to the high table with different objectives, chief amongst which is to engender a ‘flatter and less hierarchical international order’, to borrow a phrase from Ikenberry.¹⁹ In sharp contrast to the traditional middle powers, the emerging powers carry the potential to act as rule-makers and to set new norms and patterns of what is considered ‘acceptable behaviour’. Their role, therefore, is fundamentally different from that of the traditional middle powers, though this opens up the question of whether emerging powers are co-opted and therefore become part of the status quo or whether these powers will use this status in order to promote alternative governance structures and practices, as will be discussed below.

Emerging powers: characteristics and expectations

The potential power capabilities of emerging powers are relatively obvious: To refer to China as an emerging (super) power is not merely the product of imagination or wishful thinking. The country’s phenomenal rise, over a period of two decades, to become the world’s second largest economy, together with

its territorial and population size and its position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, provides plenty of evidence and justification for its status as an emerging power. Much the same goes for Brazil and India. They are aspiring big powers in terms of tangible aspects (size of population, territory and economy and military strength and capabilities). In the case of South Africa, its status as an emerging power is not as clear-cut in comparison to its BRICS partners, though one could argue that its *relative* size within Africa (economically and militarily), and the kudos gained through its remarkable transition away from apartheid, does lend some credibility to its elevation to the group of 'eminent' emerging powers. Clearly, though, other aspects and considerations also count – after all, Nigeria is now the biggest economy in Africa;²⁰ its economic growth is much more vibrant than that of South Africa, its population size far overshadows that of South Africa (177 million as opposed to South Africa's approximately 50 million) and it is the undisputed leader of West Africa. Yet, it is South Africa that wears the label 'emerging power', not Nigeria. Being an emerging power in the eyes of the world seems to entail more than adding up traditional hard power resources and capabilities. Part of the explanation for South Africa's inclusion in this group can be ascribed to its 'moral authority',²¹ political stability, its democratic character and (at least domestic) commitment to human rights. In terms of global responsibilities as a hallmark of big power status, South Africa, though not the biggest African troop-contributing country to UN peace missions, does contribute significantly more to the regular UN budget than Nigeria (0.29% compared to Nigeria's 0.048%) and 0.06% to the UN peacekeeping budget, compared to Nigeria's 0.0096%.²²

Andrew Hurrell²³ identifies three core criteria that characterise emerging powers, viz. expanding economic dominance and prowess, a high level of political power and military potential and, thirdly, the capability to exert influence in global politics. South Africa, on the face of things, complies with these criteria, although, as already alluded to, more in relative than absolute terms. There is little doubt that the country dominates its region, Southern Africa, and to some extent, the continent, economically, due largely to the fact that it is the most advanced and industrialised economy in Africa. Over the past two decades it has increased its economic footprint on the continent significantly, be this through increased volumes of exports – mainly manufactured products – or the presence of big South African corporations across the continent and in terms of direct investment.²⁴ Compared to most African countries it does possess a high level of political power and military potential. The country's role in the founding of the African Union and its continued support to the organisation, its intellectual leadership in the creation of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), its active involvement in peace operations (peacekeeping, peacemaking and peacebuilding) and its quest to redefine the relationship between the UN Security Council and the African Union, especially during its two terms as an elected member of the council (2007/8 and 2011/12) all point to its regional eminence. South Africa's membership of the BRICS and G20, its co-hosting, with China, of the 2015 Forum on China–Africa Cooperation, its chairing of the G77 + China (also in 2015), its involvement in the BASIC – Brazil, South Africa, India, and China – group during the COP meetings of United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change negotiations (particularly in Copenhagen in 2009 and Durban in 2011) and a host of other leadership positions in international organisations point, at the very least, to a potential

for exerting influence in global politics.²⁵ Add to this its track record as a donor²⁶ on the continent and its extensive bilateral reach as far as diplomatic ties are concerned²⁷ and one could make an argument that it complies loosely with Hurrell's criteria.

Of course, a strong counter-argument could be made on each of these criteria. The country compares rather poorly to some of its BRICS partners when it comes to economic growth and the level of diversity of its economy. Its export basket to Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries may consist of 65% manufactured goods, but in world export terms 57% of its total exports are minerals and raw materials, and 79% of its exports to Asia are minerals and raw materials,²⁸ indicating, still, a rather limited economic power base that is highly dependent on international price fluctuations and an export profile that does not compare well with that of other BRICS economies. Its African footprint, with reference to exports, is also largely limited to its immediate neighbourhood, with 86% of its exports going to SADC and only 14% to the rest of the continent.²⁹

Aside from Hurrell's criteria of what constitutes an emerging power, there are a number of characteristics that also come into play in the identification and definition of emerging powers. A first is that these powers are from the global South, thereby distinguishing them from the traditional middle or second tier powers, as discussed in the previous section. The emergence of global South powers is an indication of a trend towards a global diffusion of power that balances power or attempts to balance power vis-à-vis the US and its big power allies. In fact, this diffusion of power is as much a product of the relative economic decline of the US as of its loss of legitimacy in the wake of the

financial meltdown of 2008, the US military incursions in Afghanistan and Iraq in support of regime change, and its propensity for unilateralism during the George W Bush era.³⁰ This (relative) loss of economic power and the erosion of US, and more broadly Western, political legitimacy, created space and voice for new and aspiring big powers to manoeuvre on the basis of their own agendas. A key characteristic of emerging powers is therefore that although they can fulfil some of the traditional middle power functions in the international system, the emphasis is on their aspiration to 'first tier' status.³¹ At the same time, they do not necessarily support the status quo; they are emerging powers exactly because they bring reformist/revisionist ideas and values, and the ability to project and promote these. Examples would be these powers' commitment to what Cooper and Femes³² refer to as a 'Neo-Westphalian commitment to state sovereignty and non-intervention' and their calls for a restructuring of the UN Security Council and other global institutions (a reformist approach to global governance).

A further characteristic is that emerging powers are regional powers, though their leadership is often contested.³³ Not all regional powers, though, are perceived to be emerging powers. Nigeria is not part of the G20, nor of the BRICS. The Goldman Sachs-identified 'Next 11'³⁴ includes the Philippines, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Nigeria and Egypt, but in contrast to the BRICS, these states are perceived to be emerging *economies*, not emerging powers; i.e. the scope of their (potential) influence globally does not include a marked political dimension.³⁵ Emerging powers, in short, are states that are rising to global political prominence largely, but not solely, on the basis of their position and status within their neighbourhoods. It is this decidedly political character of their power that explains the interest in these states (on the part of scholars

and practitioners): what kind of global order will emerge with them (also) at the helm? What distinguishes regional powers such as the BRICS from other regional powers (in the case of South Africa from Kenya, Egypt and Nigeria), is the recognition that these states enjoy as being influential *beyond* their neighbourhoods, possessing the capability, even if largely ascribed, to influence the global agenda or, at the very least, to sit at the high table of global politics. South Africa's position within the international power hierarchy as a regional power has never been in doubt, despite, at times, a lack of evidence that it could turn this label into status (as will be discussed below). It has also used this position as one of the means to elevate itself into an emerging power, emphasising its role as a spokesperson for and representative of Africa, a bridge into the continent and a regional institution builder.

A last characteristic that needs mention is *acceptance* of the label, and *self-definition* as an emerging power, based both on external ascription and an element of national identity. South Africa enjoys emerging power recognition, as described above, largely on the basis of the 'normative legitimacy' that grew from its anti-apartheid history and its peaceful transition to democracy under the leadership of Nelson Mandela. Early post-apartheid South Africa was everything to everyone. To those who had steadfastly supported the liberation struggle, the transition was one to freedom and a victory over colonialism ('of a special type'³⁶). To Western states – the big powers in particular – the transition was one to democracy and the reign of human rights, values that coincided perfectly with the elevation of Western values into global values. The recognition of South Africa as an emerging power, included in the slowly evolving global power transition, found its clearest expression during the presidency of Thabo Mbeki, with Mbeki's role in the African Renaissance and

his 'outreach activities' aimed at positioning South Africa as continental leader in the global arena. The country's lobbying for membership of BRICS sent a clear message of an identity as a regional powerhouse with global ambitions.

South Africa: Reaching for 'status consistency'?

The very criteria and characteristics of emerging powers also account for the constraints and challenges that these states experience and the opportunities that they have for living up to this status. Emerging powers are expected to prove their worth in shouldering at least some of the responsibilities that big powers carry in the international system in providing global public goods, while navigating a course through the rather choppy waters of the changing global order. In 'exercising' the role of an emerging power, these states face a number of challenges and constraints, be these at home or in their external environment.

Add-in, add-on or alternative?

The first challenge has to do with the manoeuvring space for these powers to exert influence through agenda setting and rule-making – the hallmarks of great power status. There is an inherent tension in the label 'emerging power': the history of how these powers came to be recognised as important or potentially important power players in the global arena, as recounted by Cooper and Thakur,³⁷ highlights a growing apprehension among traditional big powers about the future global order and anxiety that non-inclusion of other role players could see the establishment of alternative institutions with different rules.

Initially, through what by 2007 had become known as the Heiligendamm process, the 'old' powers (G7/8) tried through 'outreach' to draw rising powers into their regular meetings for the purpose of dialogue,³⁸ but over time it became clear that 'G reform' was required - global problems had to be tackled from within in a more egalitarian and representative structure to ensure cooperation and action. In essence therefore, 'recognition' of a number of global South states as emerging powers is an attempt on the part of the established big powers to co-opt in order to prevent competing power bases which could, in the long term, alter the global order. On the part of the emerging powers, there seems to be uncertainty: will co-optation in the longer term turn out to be little more than a strategy on the part of the established powers to shore up their privileged positions and reproduce the existing rules, or does it offer an opportunity for reform of the global governance institutions in order to reflect the concerns and values of these states and their followers? This question is crucial as it denotes the difference between merely being *labelled* as an emerging power and the actual status of *being* an influential global player – a status that implies power diffusion (opportunities for agenda setting) rather than 'merely' joining the club and supporting the agenda/s of those who hold real power (in which case 'emerging powers' would be little more than traditional 'middle powers').

At its core, the position of emerging powers in the international system has to do with whether the existing great powers (the G7/8) perceive the emerging powers' involvement at the highest levels of global governance as being an 'add on, or an 'add in', ie, an attempt to get buy-in and support from these countries through some form of association with the 'old' powers, or full incorporation into this system in order to prevent a third outcome, viz, the

creation of alternative governance institutions, which could undermine the reigning global normative framework developed and dominated by the traditional, Western great powers.³⁹ Initially the 'add on' approach was used, with some countries – emerging powers, but also some of the emerging markets - being invited to join parts of the G8 summits, starting with the 2000 Okinawa summit at which Mbeki and his Nigerian and Algerian counterparts (Olusegun Obasanjo and Abdelaziz Bouteflika) argued the case for debt relief for highly indebted South countries. Two years later, at the Kananaskis Summit, the G8 African Action Plan was adopted in support of NEPAD, again with Mbeki having played a leading role. By this time the inclusion of a number of global South countries as summit guests had become a regular occasion, with Mbeki using these opportunities to further promote various strategies for Africa's development, entrenching, no doubt, the view of South Africa as a continental leader.

It turned out in practice that the 'add on' option was not acceptable to the emerging powers and it was Mbeki who made this clear when he commented, according to Heine,⁴⁰ that the Outreach Five (O5 – Brazil, India, China, South Africa and Mexico) had 'only been asked to join in the dessert and miss the main meal.' At the level of the so-called informals, such as the G20, the result was full inclusion of the O5 and a number of other developing/global South countries when the organisation was changed from a meeting of finance ministers to one of national leaders. The fear or apprehension, though, of what the result of an add-in approach could be and the aim (hope?) of building legitimacy through expansion are deeply ingrained in the Western big powers, especially the United States.⁴¹ In this regard, it is useful to quote rather

extensively from a 2010 report of the Council on Foreign Relations on the restructuring of the UN Security Council:⁴²

Will such countries [new permanent members] embrace global responsibilities and adopt policies broadly consistent with the US worldview, or will they import bloc agendas and pursue narrow national interests? An optimistic view imagines that the most likely candidates – Germany, Japan, Brazil, India and perhaps South Africa – would tend to align with the United States as democracies, inclining the UNSC’s balance of power in Washington’s direction. A more sceptical assessment predicts that India, Brazil, and South Africa – three leaders of the nonaligned and G77 voting bloc – would use their newfound status to ramp up anti-U.S. discourse in the UNSC, diverging from Western ideals on critical issues like human rights and non-proliferation.... Today, India, like Brazil and South Africa, has the opportunity to criticize without real global responsibilities.

But neither, it seems, is it a choice between the ‘add in’ and ‘alternative’ options. Rather, and following the South African approach to the issue of global governance, a complex two-level game of involvement in both ‘traditional’ governance structures and in the establishment of alternative structures is being played. Mandela, as first president of the ‘new’ South Africa, made it clear that South Africa would fully cooperate and participate in the international system, accepting and recognising the primacy of the United Nations (and this has remained a firm principle of the country’s foreign policy

as is evident in all its foreign policy documents over the past two decades). Mandela, however, noted that:⁴³

... the United Nations has a pivotal role to play in fostering global security and order. But to achieve this, serious attention must be paid to a restructuring of the organization. South Africa intends to play a vigorous role in the debate on this issue.

And so it has, and continues to do so. Restructuring of the UN Security Council remains central to the country's foreign policy objectives,⁴⁴ and it has formally expressed its interest in becoming a permanent member of the council.⁴⁵ If the Mandela era was one in which support for rule-based global governance with an emphasis on the need for 'fairness and justice' was the focus of South Africa's foreign policy, the Mbeki era saw a growing involvement in advocacy for reform and inclusion. Mbeki built African structures and used South Africa's emerging power status to promote the continent's interests globally: for him it was a case of building the continent with the support of the traditional Western powers, while also demanding a seat for the developing world at the centre of global politics.

Simultaneously, and especially through its leadership position in the Non-Aligned Movement and the Group of 77, and its membership of BRICS, there is a thrust towards the creation of alternative forums and institutions – an approach increasingly characterising the Zuma era. Participation in the UN system is still important, as is membership of the G20, but increasingly South Africa seems to be leaning towards the creation of, at the very least, parallel global South governance institutions, of which the BRICS New Development

Bank is a good example. In an interview at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2015, Zuma commented, with reference to the new bank: 'For the first time the developing countries are beginning to say there is a bank that is going to be doing things differently.'⁴⁶ The creation of the bank, though it will be rather small compared to the resources at the disposal of existing international financial institutions, is an important indication that the emerging powers, including South Africa, are searching for 'genuine' power in the international system, and not only for inclusion in existing structures which are resistant to changes that would reflect the aims and objectives of the newcomers. The creation of alternative institutions may be their choice in dealing with what they perceive to be an international order that is not conducive to their interests.

Regional politics... and national interests

Emerging powers are expected to be regional powers and to act as regional stabilisers.⁴⁷ Much of the scholarship dealing with emerging powers argues that one of the main challenges to these powers is the fact that they do not enjoy undisputed regional leadership positions, though one should be careful not to equate 'regional power' with 'regional leadership' if the latter carries the meaning of *acceptance* as a leader, rather than *recognition*. Geopolitics and strategic concerns tend to show that several emerging powers, and specifically Russia, China and India, do not fulfil the role of 'accepted leader' in their regions. Apart from the fact that these countries (Russia-China and India-China) have competing geostrategic aims and objectives, one must consider China's role in East Asia, particularly its maritime ambitions, India's tense relationship with Pakistan and Russia's aggressive behaviour in parts of the former Soviet Union (most notably Georgia and the Ukraine). When one adds

the fear that these policies engender in their respective regions, it would not be accurate to term these countries accepted 'regional leaders'. Yet, these countries are *recognised* regional powers, clearly able to dominate their regions economically and militarily. They do not have to rely on 'leadership' positions in the sense of acceptance in order to shore up their status as emerging powers and they do not hesitate to use their emerging power status in pursuit of their national interests.

South Africa, on the other hand, is not in the same position as these countries and to a large extent this is its own doing. As is the case with Russia, India and China, South Africa is not readily accepted as a leader by its continental peers, as is evidenced in its rather fraught relationship with Nigeria and even Zimbabwe, and the controversial way in which Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma was elected to the position of chairperson of the African Union Commission in 2012.⁴⁸ In addition, the continuing xenophobia in the country has deeply undermined the country's relations with the rest of the continent.⁴⁹ Yet it stakes its claim on emerging power status mainly on the 'fact' that it represents Africa and that it 'speaks on behalf of' the continent, and its foreign policy conduct over the past two decades shows a very strong commitment in this sphere. There is little doubt that the emerging powers' claims to big power status are first and foremost based on the tangible indices of size and the fact that the size of their economies and militaries in many instances surpasses that of the traditional big powers. South Africa's initial inclusion in the group of emerging powers (the O5) was largely based on its normative legitimacy, as argued earlier, yet increasingly, in its own role conception, it relies on its representative role in order to cement its emerging power status. Apart from its draft foreign policy document of 2011⁵⁰ which is suffused with references to

its leadership role on the African continent, its efforts during the hosting of the 2013 BRICS Summit in Durban to include its African peers in deliberations point to this conception of a regional leader and representative. This does not mean that South Africa does not promote international justice, but it promotes it on behalf of Africa and on the basis of an unjust international governance order.⁵¹ Little wonder then that scholars such as Olivier⁵² criticise the country's foreign policy as being driven by a revisionist ideology rather than by careful attention to its national interests.

The fact of the matter is that the country's emerging power status may be too dependent on the claims of African solidarity with very little else to strengthen these claims. To some extent this is understandable. South Africa does not have the geopolitical fears and ambitions of a China or a Russia or an India who use their status to pursue their national interests, yet national interests are not only related to the realm of security and territorial ambitions, but also to economic needs and ambitions. And this is where South Africa often finds it difficult to move from the *label* of emerging power to the actual *status* of being an emerging power. It promotes the values of fairness and justice in global governance, it contributes solidly to the promotion and maintenance of peace and security on the continent and to continental institution building, yet it fails through its foreign policy to address its domestic vulnerabilities. Not a single big power has attained this status without also being able to utilise it to its own advantage, and very often this started with greater economic interaction within its own region.⁵³ South Africa has not reached this point yet, despite an impressive increase in exports (especially service and manufactures) to the rest of the continent. It suffers the drawback of competition within Africa from other emerging powers like China, Brazil and India, but it may also

be a case of not exploiting opportunities sufficiently. In this sense South Africa may have to seriously re-think the role and the training of its diplomatic corps.

Domestic constraints

In his analysis of the Heiligendamm process,⁵⁴ Vickers argues that costs, capacity and external constraints play a key role in the extent to which South Africa can participate in global governance. Schweller⁵⁵ notes that the 'key to realizing their [emerging powers'] potential power will be internal growth and consolidation'. If 'emerging power' points to a trajectory towards 'great power' status, resources are required: great powers have duties and responsibilities transcending their narrow national interests which routinely inform and determine foreign policy. As discussed earlier, the very reach and scope of an emerging power's foreign policy go beyond those of 'lesser' powers. Niblett⁵⁶ asks the question, 'how powerful are the emerging powers?' and refers to the 'major domestic challenges' facing each of these powers. These challenges seriously constrain the ability of the emerging powers to utilise resources in the service of their quest for great power status. A distinction should be drawn, though, between 'resources', 'capabilities' and 'instruments'. Resources refer to those advantages and disadvantages derived from a country's location, climate, geography, size (of population and of its economy), education, tradition and level of development, and which form a critical factor in foreign policy choices. Yet, as pointed out by Brighi and Hill,⁵⁷ resources alone do not account for options and decisions. Rather, it is capabilities – 'resources made operational' – that are crucial to a country's ability to implement policy and exercise influence. The challenge to policy makers is therefore to continuously strive to improve capabilities in order to ensure the credibility and viability (including the appropriateness) of those instruments

available to them in the implementation of policy. And it is in this realm of resources and capabilities that South Africa finds it difficult to act, in a sustainable manner, as an emerging power.

Domestically, after more than two decades of freedom and democracy, the country is battling deep divisions within its society, especially along racial lines. These divisions are exacerbated by the triple challenge of addressing poverty, inequality and unemployment in the face of lacklustre economic growth. During the period 1994 to 2014 unemployment (narrowly defined) increased from 20% to 26% (a broad definition of unemployment indicates a 36% unemployment rate),⁵⁸ with the proportion of unemployed youth (15-34 years in age) at almost 50%.⁵⁹ The percentage of black Africans living in poverty increased by 10% between 1994 and 2014,⁶⁰ while the wage share of gross domestic product decreased from 56% in 1994 to 50,6% by 2010.⁶¹ In 1996 the ratio of white per capita income to that of other races was 3.9 to 1; by 2012 it had increased to 4.5 to 1,⁶² resulting in frustration and tension along racial lines. Poverty remains pervasive. About 16m South Africans are dependent on social grants – this out of a total population of more than 50m, while the country is faced with a dwindling tax base: in 2013 the country had 15,4m registered taxpayers (this number increased to 16,8m in 2014) with approximately 6,5m of these submitting tax returns.⁶³ As is the case for Brazil, India and China, these challenges will increasingly inhibit the country's ability to play a leading role internationally, as leadership attention, resources and energy will have to be expended at home, and not abroad. At least part of the Zuma administration's courting of Russia and China can be explained as attempts to access resources for local development in what is perceived by many to be an increasingly harsh battle for the governing party to retain its

position in the face of a disintegrating tripartite alliance and the rise of radical opposition, such as the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and new trade union movements.

Of equally serious concern is the deterioration of the country's defence force and its military capabilities – crucial building blocks in the projection of power and status and fulfilling the responsibilities that come with emerging power status. The result is described as follows in the country's 2014 Defence Review:⁶⁴

The Defence Force is in a critical state of decline, characterised by: force imbalance between capabilities; block obsolescence and unaffordability of many of its main operating systems; a disproportionate tooth-to-tail ratio; the inability to meet current standing defence commitments; and the lack of critical mobility. The current balance of expenditure between personnel, operating and capital is both severely dispirited and institutionally crippling.

Analysts and commentators have for a considerable time been pointing to the lack of sufficient resources for the defence force (specifically for the army which bears the brunt of peacekeeping deployments) and point to the 'total mismatch between operational commitments and funding.'⁶⁵ Esterhuysen⁶⁶ asserts that current SANDF peacekeeping deployments are 'almost three times' of what had originally been envisaged in the 1990s. One needs only to read through recent defence budget vote speeches to get a sense of the extent of the resource and capacity problems confronting the SANDF in the face of the demands of the military as a 'leading foreign policy instrument'. Such

shortcomings indicate that South Africa's comprehensive involvement in peace operations is not sustainable. Using the military as an instrument of foreign policy in a credible and efficient manner demands a rethinking on the part of the government as to resource allocations. Yet, whether the necessary resources can be found is doubtful: the country's domestic needs preclude a rapid and drastic increase in defence spending. In turn, this might in the longer term force foreign policy makers to rethink the way in which the military can serve as a 'leading' foreign policy instrument.

Added to the woes of the SANDF is the rather harsh critique of South Africa's diplomatic service (a vital instrument of the country's quest for power status in the international arena) in the National Development Plan (NDP).⁶⁷ The NDP comments that the country's foreign relations are becoming 'ineffective and the country is sliding down the scale of global competitiveness and overall normative standing'. Gerrit Olivier, long-standing critic of what he believes to be an inept foreign policy bureaucracy – 'an elaborate façade but lacking in substance',⁶⁸ is how he puts it – places much of the blame on the government's tendency to use senior diplomatic postings as a reward for party cadres who have little, if any, understanding of the field, rather than focusing on specialist training of highly professional senior people to fill the upper echelons of DIRCO. In addition, he points to an inability to implement plans, strategies and agreements – again ascribing this failure to a lack of professionalism, training, knowledge and initiative on the part of the country's most senior (but non-career) appointees.⁶⁹ In the tough world of international negotiations, the country's tendency to fill senior positions with 'generalists' may in the long run exact the price of being side-lined: in the current international environment ideational leadership is a strong requirement⁷⁰ and

those who bring leading ideas and vision to the evolving global governance architecture will be the great powers of the future order.

Encompassing the above problems is a widely perceived deterioration in the quality and fabric of South Africa's democracy. A recent collection of essays and articles on the 'state of the nation' by veteran anti-apartheid activist Raymond Suttner⁷¹ chronicles the loss of trust in key state institutions, the lack of good leadership (especially so in the Zuma era) exacerbated by the vast powers of appointment vested in the central executive authority,⁷² pervasive corruption and a 'violent displacement of politics through reasoning,'⁷³ all of which may over the longer term result in the erosion of confidence in and acceptance of South Africa as an international leader. Great powers, whether emerging or established, come and go: South Africa's domestic challenges – the toughest of all in the search and struggle for international status and recognition – may see the country's international prestige not surviving its third decade of freedom and democracy.

Conclusion

How to serve South Africa's national interests by turning its emerging power label into status consistency, both in the international arena and at home, remains the biggest challenge to the country. The Zuma government seems to believe that the answer lies in ever closer ties with other emerging powers, especially the BRICs, and the creation of alternative institutions that might generate the much needed investment to grow the country's economy. A cursory glance at the BRICs shows that none of them built their power bases solely on relations with other developing countries. To become a big power requires that the global reach that the status implies be utilised to generate

benefits for the country. This is not mere selfishness, but a way of reproducing and growing in status as a big power and ensuring that resources and capabilities for undertaking global responsibilities are continuously available.

In some respects South Africa does not fit the label 'emerging power', especially if measured in traditional 'hard power' terms. But in relative terms, when compared to the rest of the continent, and given the increasing need for and acceptance of the principle of representivity in global governance⁷⁴ in order to address the high level of interdependence so starkly illustrated by the global financial crisis of 2008, and given its normative legitimacy, the country clearly belongs in this category and the label fits. To the extent that emerging powers are expected to share the burden of global responsibilities, South Africa is not a 'shirker', but has invested greatly in promoting international values and norms, not least, as already mentioned, in contributing to peace and security on the continent and also through its efforts to strengthen the relationship between the UN Security Council and the African Union.

The next several years will be crucial for South Africa and for other emerging powers from the global South as they grapple with the two-level game of attempting to reform global governance institutions, whether formal (the UN and the Bretton Woods institutions) or informal (the G20), and attempting to build alternative institutions (such as the BRICS New Development Bank) to reflect their own preferences and priorities. Whether they will become 'status quo' big powers or big powers in an order characterised by new or alternative norms and values remains to be seen, but for South Africa an added uncertainty will be whether it can turn this label into a status that will reflect

an ability to follow policies that will go beyond responsibility to the continent and the global South to address its own pressing socio-economic needs.

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² The Presidency. 2014. *Twenty Year Review: South Africa: 1994-2014*, Pretoria: The Presidency, p153. <http://www.thepresidency-dpme.gov.za/news/Documents/20%20Year%20Review.pdf>, accessed on 3 July 2015.

³ 'An age of disorder' is how Randall Schweller describes the current international system; it is, according to him, a time during which world politics needs 'a fundamental rethinking' in efforts to answer the question, '(w)hat sort of global order will emerge on the other side of the transition from unipolarity to multipolarity?' See Schweller, R, 2011. 'Emerging powers in an age of disorder', *Global Governance* 17, pp285-297.

⁴ 'Brazil – An economic superpower, and now oil too', *The Economist*, 17 April 2008.

<http://www.economist.com/node/11052873>, accessed on 12 February 2015.

⁵ Volgy, T, Corbetta, R, Grant, K and Baird, R. 2011. 'Major power status in international politics' in Volgy, T, Corbetta, R, Grant, K and Baird, R. (eds), *Major Powers and the Quest for Status in International Politics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p7.

⁶ Volgy, T, Corbetta, R, Grant, K and Baird, R. 2011. 'Major power status in international politics' in Volgy, T, Corbetta, R, Grant, K and Baird, R. (eds), *Major Powers and the Quest for Status in International Politics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p10-11.

- ⁷ Keohane, R. 2002. *Power and Governance in a Partially Globalized World*. New York and London: Routledge, p258.
- ⁸ See e.g. Abu-Lughod, J. 1991. *Before European Hegemony: The World System AD 1250-1350*. New York: Oxford University Press; Vanaik, A. 2013. 'Capitalist globalisation and the problem of stability: enter the new quintet and other emerging powers', *Third World Quarterly* 34 (2), pp194-213. It should be pointed out that both perspectives adopt a type of 'longue duree' approach with periodisation of the development of capitalism.
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- ¹⁰ Garten, J. 1997. *The Big Ten: The Big Emerging Markets and How They Will Change Our Lives*. New York: Basic Books, p ix. Garten's list includes Brazil, China, India and South Africa, but excludes Russia.
- ¹¹ O'Neill, J. 2001. 'Building better global economic BRICs', Global Economics Paper, No. 66. London: Goldman Sachs: <http://www.goldmansachs.com/our-thinking/archive/archive-pdfs/build-better-brics.pdf>. Accessed 10 September 2015.
- ¹² Garten, J. 1997. *The Big Ten: The Big Emerging Markets and How They Will Change Our Lives*. New York: Basic Books, p x.
- ¹³ See Hart, F and Jones, B. 2010. 'How do rising powers rise?', *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, 52 (6), pp63-88. The authors use as example the case of the failure internationally to deal with the Zimbabwe crisis in the early 2000s: 'The effort was largely confounded by South Africa's unwillingness to take a tough stance' (p74).
- ¹⁴ Stephen, M. 2014. 'Rising powers, global capitalism and liberal global governance: A historical materialist account of the BRICs challenge', *European Journal of International Relations*, 20 (4), pp912-938.
- ¹⁵ Stephen, M. 2014. 'Rising powers, global capitalism and liberal global governance: A historical materialist account of the BRICs challenge', *European Journal of International Relations*, 20 (4), p 919.
- ¹⁶ Golub, P. 2013. 'From the New International Economic Order to the G20: how the "global South" is restructuring world capitalism from within', *Third World Quarterly* 34 (6) p1002.
- ¹⁷ Vanaik, 2013, op. cit. p197.
- ¹⁸ Alden, C and Vieira, M. 2005. 'The new diplomacy of the South: South Africa, Brazil, India and trilateralism'. *Third World Quarterly* 26 (7), p1079.
- ¹⁹ Ikenberry, G. John. 2010. 'The three faces of Liberal Internationalism' in Alexandroff, A. and Cooper, A. (eds.), *Rising States, Rising Institutions: Challenges for Global Governance*. Waterloo and Washington: The Centre for International Governance Innovation and Brookings Institution Press, p36.
- ²⁰ Declining oil prices in the period 2014/2015 may impact the size of the economy as Nigeria is heavily dependent on oil exports. https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/print/country/countrypdf_ni.pdf. Accessed on 12 February 2015.
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- ²² Servais, J-M. 2011. *International Labour Organisations (ILO)*. Alpehn and den Rhyn: Wolters Kluwer, p89.
- ²³ See Hurrell, A, 'Hegemony, liberalism and global order: what space for would-be great powers?', *International Affairs* 82 (1) pp1-19.
- ²⁴ For more details, see Vickers, B. 2008. 'South Africa: Global reformism, global apartheid, and the Heiligendamm Process' in Cooper, A and Antkiewicz, A. (eds.) *Emerging Powers in Global Governance: Lessons from the Heiligendamm Process*. Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press. See also Berkowitz, B, Ramkolowan, Y., Stern, M., Venter, F. and Webb, M. 2012. 'The role of South African Business in Africa: South African outward investment', NEDLAC. 12 November. http://www.safpi.org/sites/default/files/publications/regional_investment_development_report.pdf, accessed 18 September 2015.
- ²⁵ See 'South Africa in the global arena' <http://www.thepresidency-dpme.gov.za/news/Pages/20-Year-Review.aspx> for an overview of the country's international achievements/contributions since 1994. Accessed on 3 February 2015. See also Shaw, T., Cooper, A. and Chin, G. 2009. 'Emerging powers and Africa: Implications for/from global governance?', *Politikon* 36 (1) p37.
- ²⁶ See Vickers, B. 2012. 'Towards a new aid paradigm: South Africa as a development partner'. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 25 (4), pp535-556.
- ²⁷ South Africa has 104 embassies and high commissions abroad, as well as permanent missions with nine international organisations; conversely, it hosts 123 embassies and high commissions and 35 international organisations. <http://www.dirco.gov.za/foreign/index.html>, accessed on 10 February 2015.

²⁸ This information is based on 2013 figures, obtained from Ms Cleo Rose-Innis, Chief Director in Treasury, on 3 December 2014.

²⁹ This information is based on 2013 figures, obtained from Ms Cleo Rose-Innis, Chief Director in Treasury, on 3 December 2014.

³⁰ See e.g. the contributions in MacDonald D, Patman R and Mason-Parker B (eds.). 2007. *The Ethics of Foreign Policy*. Aldershot: Ashgate; as well as Niblett, R. 2012. 'The economic crisis and the emerging powers: towards a New International Order?', Real Instituto Elcano, p3.

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³⁴ Goldman Sachs. 2007. 'The N-11: More than an acronym'. March. <http://www.goldmansachs.com/our-thinking/archive/archive-pdfs/brics-book/brics-chap-11.pdf>, accessed 1 February 2015.

³⁵ See Shaw, T., Cooper, A. and Chin, G. 2009. 'Emerging powers and Africa: Implications for/from global governance?', *Politikon* 36 (1) p29.

³⁶ For a discussion of the term 'colonialism of a special type' see SACP 1989. 'The Path to Power: Programme of the South African Communist Party Adopted at the Seventh Conference 1989.

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³⁷ Cooper A and Thakur R. 2013. *The Group of Twenty (G20)*. London and New York: Routledge, pp19-32.

³⁸ It was the Heiligendamm Process that elevated South Africa's status 'up to a level on par with the BRICs'.

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³⁹ In this regard, Hurrell refers to 'Western claims to technocratic and normative legitimacy'. Hurrell, A. 2013. 'Power transitions, global justice, and the virtues of pluralism'. *Ethics and International Affairs* 27 (2), p193.

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⁴² McDonald, K and Patrick, S. 2010. 'UN Security Council enlargement and U.S. interests'. New York: Council on Foreign Relations pp19-20.

⁴³ Mandela, N. 1993. 'South Africa's future foreign policy'. *Foreign Affairs* 72 (5) p19.

⁴⁴ A permanent seat on the Security Council will arguably be the ultimate evidence of the much-touted global power shift.

⁴⁵ Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO), 2011. 'Building a better world: The diplomacy of ubuntu', White Paper on South Africa's foreign policy. Pretoria: DIRCO. www.dirco.gov.za, accessed on 12 February 2015.

⁴⁶ 'BRICS plans not at risk, says Zuma'. 23 January 2015. <http://mobi.iafrica.com/business/2015/01/23/brics-plans-not-at-risk-says-zuma/>. Accessed on 1 March 2015.

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⁴⁸ See Alden, C. and Schoeman, M. 2013. 'South Africa in the company of giants: the search for leadership in a transforming global order', *International Affairs*, 89:1, pp122-123.

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⁵⁴ Vickers, B. 2008. 'South Africa: Global reformism, global apartheid and the Heiligendamm process' in Cooper, A and Antkiewicz, A. (eds.) *Emerging Powers in Global Governance: Lessons from the Heiligendamm Process*. Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, p187. See also Andreasson, S. 2011. 'Africa's prospects and South Africa's leadership potential in the emerging markets century', *Third World Quarterly* 32 (6), pp1165-1181.

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⁵⁸ 'Reflecting on Twenty Years', *Fast Facts* No 4/2014/Issue 272, Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, pp3.

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