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Third World Quarterly (forthcoming)

Rising Powers and Order Contestation: Disaggregating the Normative from the Representational

Edward Newman and Benjamin Zala

Abstract

One of the central themes of the current literature on rising powers is that new aspirants to great power status pose a challenge to the underlying principles and norms that underpin the existing, Western-led order. However, in much of the literature, the nature and significance of rising powers for international order is imprecisely debated, in particular the concept and practice of ‘contestation’. In this article we aim to establish a distinction between normative contestation and what can be thought of as ‘contestation over representation’: that is, contestation over who is setting and overseeing the rules of the game rather than the content of the rules themselves and the kind of order that they underpin. This distinction is important for providing a more nuanced understanding of the nature of the current power transition and therefore for guiding attempts at accommodation on the part of the established powers. Theoretically, the paper engages with debates on international order and international society. Its empirical basis is provided by a thorough analysis of the discourse of rising power summitry, in particular at meetings of the BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organization groupings.

One of the central themes running through the current literature on rising powers is that the new aspirants to great power status pose a challenge to the underlying principles and norms that underpin the existing, Western-led order. This often takes the form of a discussion about normative contestation that is assumed to be taking place and is likely to characterise the current era of order transition. According to this, ‘rising powers are not only contesting their position in the international system, but the very rules that govern their rise.’¹

However, we argue that there is ample evidence that rising powers – such as China, Russia and India – do not necessarily seek to resist or challenge the underlying principles of international order in all instances, but rather they seek to gain greater access to, and representation in, the institutions and processes which define, administer and uphold international rules. From this perspective, much of the political conflict that is associated with the transitional international order may be better be defined not as normative contestation but rather as ‘contestation over representation’. This form of contestation reflects a demand by rising powers to have their material interests served through greater access to and representation in international regimes, but it is also a demand that respect and status are duly accorded to them. That is, contestation over who is setting and overseeing the rules of the game rather than the content of the rules themselves and the kind of order that they underpin. This distinction is important for providing a more nuanced understanding of the nature of the transition in power that currently defines international order. In pursuing this distinction, the paper seeks to address a number of questions: Is political conflict related to the transitional

international order fundamentally about contestation over norms, representation in regulatory regimes, or both? If it is normative, how can we disentangle this from conventional ‘great power’ rivalry around material, geopolitical interests? Where political conflict between existing and emerging ‘great powers’ is characterized as normative contestation, what precisely are the norms at issue, and what is being contested? It is often remarked that the ‘emerging’ and ‘rising’ powers do not represent a coherent normative community and that they are divided on many issues.² Does this mean that contestation around the ‘rules of the game’ cannot be characterized as normative or taken seriously? Drawing upon the ‘English School’ approach to International Relations, is it possible to distinguish between rising powers contesting the fundamental *primary* institutions of international society, and when they are challenging *secondary* institutions – such as the composition and operating principles of international organisations?³

This paper examines the words and actions of rising – or resurgent – powers in order to explore whether and to what extent they are contesting certain norms associated with international order and traditionally championed by the established powers. The objective is to differentiate between forms of contestation in the context of a transitional international order. Moreover, accommodating rising powers and negotiating a peaceful power transition is both ‘exceptionally complicated’⁴ and hugely important. Having an accurate understanding of the degree and nature of contestation between rising and established powers should be of interest and use to both scholars and practitioners alike. By paying particular attention to the discourse used in summits held by rising power groupings, the paper will attempt to clarify and add empirical depth to the debate around the sustainability or otherwise of the norms underpinning the current global order. Within a framework of International Relations scholarship which engages with contestation and international order, the empirical basis of this paper is provided by a thorough analysis of the discourse of rising power summitry.

Rising Powers and the Assumption of Normative Contestation

The ‘international order’ – as a coherent, unified set of practices – is a problematic idea. Nevertheless, it can be defined by the institutions which regulate international politics: the accepted rules, reflected in the behaviour of states and other actors. These primary institutions include fundamental norms related to state sovereignty, the rules governing the use of armed force, international law, and diplomatic practice, amongst others. Secondary institutions – such as multilateral arrangements – may be thought of as the means of managing international order. This order is often associated with the distribution or balance of material economic and military power, or the perception of such power, but it is importantly also a matter of norms which guide or proscribe action. It is broadly agreed (below) that the international norms and institutions which might be regarded as constituting international order are under transition and arguably under challenge. A changing international order might be a consequence of a sustained change in the perceived distribution of power, especially with a pattern of rising and falling powers that has an impact upon international norms. However, whilst it is relatively straightforward – but not uncontroversial

– to measure material changes in power and interests, the manner in which norms emerge, endure, or erode is more problematic.

According to many analysts, the relative rise in power of a number of non-Western states has resulted in a process of normative contestation and resistance in international politics, and questions relating to the creation, internalisation and institutionalisation of norms are increasingly controversial.⁵ From this perspective, rising powers are not necessarily willing to be socialised into existing global institutions as passive ‘norm takers’, and various forms of normative resistance can be seen in a range of international policy areas.⁶ Connected to this, the manner in which decisions are taken and implemented in support of international norms is also increasingly fractious.

Many ongoing international challenges occur against the background of this apparently changing international order, and appear to reflect a growing division between established, liberal states (such as the US, UK and France) and ‘rising’ powers, including China, Russia, India, Brazil, South Africa, Turkey and Indonesia. The manner in which this contestation is manifested often appears to reflect normative differences relating to – for example – the evolving nature of state sovereignty, human rights and humanitarian intervention, international criminal justice, development, and the use of force.

Some analysts have suggested that this constitutes a post-hegemonic, post-unipolar, or post-Western era, with significant challenges for the liberal international order.⁷ Others concede the relative decline of the US but argue that its soft and hard power will endure, will continue to transcend that of others, and it will continue to provide leadership and attract followers.⁸ Some scholars claim that the liberal international order led by the US is resilient and that it will be able to co-opt rising powers into its norms and institutions, even without making substantial concessions to those states.⁹ Many scholars argue that the normative power of emerging states – and their power of attraction – is severely limited, exaggerated, and unlikely to present a credible alternative to existing institutions of world order.¹⁰ Their willingness and capacity to play a global leadership role is also questioned.¹¹ Others argue that a ‘global grand bargain’ between the existing great powers and rising non-Western states will be necessary in order to avoid military conflict.¹² In turn, Kupchan envisages a new global order in which no single power or centre will dominate in material and ideological terms.¹³ Others suggest that the world faces a dangerous power vacuum which may last for decades, as the Western alliance declines and emerging powers are unable or unwilling to provide public goods.¹⁴ Yet, there is strong support for the idea that the material power of rising states has significant implications for the normative underpinning of international order, as a challenge to the ‘Western domination of ideas and norms in international society’, even if existing norms are not being rejected wholesale.¹⁵

Despite these varied conceptions of the transitional global order, the notion that the rise of new powers ‘represents a profound challenge to both the structure of the international system and the normative foundations of international society’¹⁶ has become widespread. Kahler has captured the general tone of this argument, suggesting that ‘[r]ising powers will aim to place

their imprint on reconstructed global institutions, and that stamp will differ markedly from a status quo supported by the incumbent powers.¹⁷ In some cases this argument is expressed in terms of a general challenge to the contours of the existing order *per se*¹⁸ and in other cases this is conceived specifically as being a challenge to the liberal underpinnings of this order. The latter is captured by the recent prediction that '[a]s the so-called rising powers take up their positions as major players in the international system, alternative conceptions of order and governance will challenge established power structures and existing visions of liberal order.'¹⁹ Schweller and Pu have put this more pointedly and in a structural context in claiming that 'a rising power must delegitimize the unipole's global authority and order through discursive and cost-imposing practices of resistance that pave the way for the next phase of full-fledged balancing and global contestation.'²⁰ Much debate focuses on whether the liberal or the Western-led international order has come to an end, and if we are entering a new phase. Yet these are not discrete or neat phases or models where one ends and another begins, and there can be multiple forms and understandings of international order operating in parallel. This debate, therefore, would benefit from a more precise analysis of the concept and practice of contestation as it relates to international order.

Contestation in World Politics

Despite its centrality to many understandings of world politics, contestation is a somewhat under defined concept in the International Relations scholarship. Finnemore has written that normative contestation is 'in large part what politics is all about; it is about competing values and understandings of what is good, desirable, and appropriate in our collective communal life.'²¹ Yet the body of work that seeks to establish definitions and specifically to distinguish between different types of contestation is relatively small.

In a recent article tracing debates in this literature, Wolff and Zimmermann have very few authors to choose from to explore the concept of contestation, all of whom have approached the topic from very different theoretical perspectives. Perhaps unsurprisingly, each approached the concept in ways that have little to unite them conceptually beyond a common purpose in tracking and highlighting empirically the contestation they see as already present, particularly in relation to global governance norms that are ignored by the mainstream liberal literature.²²

Elements of this relatively small literature do, however, attempt to categorise and define contestation to some degree. Wolff and Zimmerman, and Wiener, approach contestation as an interactive practice which reflects resistance but which can also generate adapted or modified norms.²³ Contessi defines normative contestation as 'an instance of strategic social construction that aims at undermining or displacing an accepted or emerging intersubjective meaning through the formulation by actors of competing discursive interventions that challenge the meaning of norms that embody conflictive interpretations of values.'²⁴ This raises the definitional threshold relatively high in terms of requiring a direct challenge to the meaning of a norm but in so doing holds the promise of allowing for a greater level of analytical precision. It is this precision that is missing in much of the literature that presumes

that all rising powers, by virtue of their relative rise, will necessarily reject status quo conceptions of ‘appropriate behaviour’ promoted by the established powers and the ethics that underpin them.

Much of the work that focuses on the issue of legitimacy and its contestation by rising powers²⁵ also conflates the rising power challenge to the (largely) Western dominance of international organisations and forums, and that which relates to challenging the deeper ‘collective expectations about proper behaviour for a given identity.’²⁶ Only the latter refers to genuine normative contestation in relation to primary institutions. In other words, critiquing the existing order by virtue of the membership of its metaphorical ‘top table’ is not the same as criticizing the content of the decisions made at that top table. Without questioning the special rights claimed by the great powers or the practice of ‘great power management’ itself, critiques of the Western-led order made by rising powers cannot be said to be necessarily normative in nature. Instead, contestation aimed only at highlighting the disproportionate role that Western states play in this regard should be characterised as representational. The latter tells us much more about the status aspirations of rising powers than it does about clashing worldviews or a fundamental breakdown in the ‘primary institutions’ of international society.²⁷ The critical distinction is, therefore, between contestation of substantive and procedural norms, or between primary and secondary institutions.²⁸

The conflation of normative and representational issues in much of the literature is of course partly explained by the way that they are tied together in some of the rhetoric of the rising powers themselves. As Hurrell warns us, this blurring of the distinction on the part of the rising powers between genuine normative contestation and efforts to increase their own representation in institutions – as a matter of prestige as well as interest – should not come as a surprise.²⁹ Nevertheless, it is still important, analytically, to attempt to unravel and differentiate the two types of contestation and this is possible by looking at the actual discourse and actions of rising powers more closely from this perspective. To understand the nature of a power transition is to be able to assess the potential for conflict driven by underlying grievances and competing interests. This means that gaining a better appreciation of the types of contestation – normative, representational or something else – that are likely to characterise the continued period of order transition in the years ahead has become an important task.

Rising Powers and Contestation: Normative or Representational?

The section will explore the discourse of rising powers: how they individually and collectively define their place in the transitional order through elite discourse, in particular as it relates to the norms which underpin international order, and their policy objectives and demands. Surprisingly little attention is given to the discourse of rising powers – presumably because it is regarded as diplomatic camouflage intended for public consumption – but a close reading demonstrates some valuable insights into the aspirations of rising powers in relation to the evolving international order. For this reason, the speeches and statements

issued by rising and resurgent powers at forums such as the BRICS summits – despite an obvious element of propaganda – are a valuable source which should be taken seriously. This section draws upon a thorough analysis of the discourse of collective groupings or rising powers, and in particular the seven BRICS summits between 2009 and 2015.

Some analysts point to the creation of alternative, including informal, multilateral institutions such as the BRICS grouping as being in and of themselves a form of contestation. Prantl, for example, has argued that informal institutions such as the BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and even the G20 ‘provide a vital space to contest and to renegotiate the terms and conditions of US hegemony.’³⁰ This makes the study of the discourse emanating from such alternative platforms a useful way of attempting to disaggregate the normative from the representational in the degree of contestation posed by the current assemblage of rising powers. Indeed, while a power is rising – when their material strength is still growing – discourse is arguably their most potent diplomatic ‘weapon’, and thus needs to be taken seriously.

Representational Contestation

The discourse of summitry points to a number of themes related to the norm of state sovereignty, global governance (in particular the management of international finance and trade), and development. Firstly, in terms of how rising powers – particularly within the BRICS group – project their collective presence in international relations, the 2013 Durban declaration provided an explicit statement of intent:

We aim at progressively developing BRICS into a full-fledged mechanism of current and long-term coordination on a wide range of key issues of the world economy and politics. The prevailing global governance architecture is regulated by institutions which were conceived in circumstances when the international landscape in all its aspects was characterised by very different challenges and opportunities. As the global economy is being reshaped, we are committed to exploring new models and approaches towards more equitable development and inclusive global growth by emphasising complementarities and building on our respective economic strengths.³¹

Russia has been particularly assertive about the systemic impact of the changing power balance and the implications this holds for international order. It conceived of the BRICS as ‘a symbol of a growing trend towards a multipolar world and the main driver of this trend... an important element of the global governance system in the 21st century...[and] an influential collective participant in global politics, with its own voice on some key issues of international peace and security.’³² The BRICS countries ‘are powerful states with a strategic prospect of development. They are leaders – the future leaders of the world and the global economy’.³³ India’s prime minister similarly stated that BRICS ‘brings together a group of nations on the parameter of ‘future potential’.’³⁴

There is an explicit objective of collective solidarity, as President Xi Jinping stated, involving ‘upholding the common interest of emerging markets and developing countries’.³⁵ But this is clearly not inward-looking and it projects global aspirations: the BRICS wish to ‘build a partnership for world peace... a new approach of common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security.’³⁶ Similarly, going beyond economic cooperation amongst members of the group, under Russian leadership there has also been a specific objective to ‘further coordinate their foreign policies within BRICS’.³⁷

At the same time, the international order and the evolving balance of power is at the heart of the rising power vision, especially for Russia and China. This implies a direct challenge to existing hegemony. As Putin indicated, ‘Any attempts to create a model of international relations where all decisions are made within a single ‘pole’ are ineffective, malfunction regularly, and are ultimately set to fail.’³⁸ At the same time, President Medvedev predicted that ‘a gradual transformation of BRICS into a fully-developed mechanism of interaction on major issues in global economy and politics could become our strategic goal.’³⁹

It is also important to note the soft power aspect of the BRICS’ collective vision, because this underpins the desire to grow in influence with respect to broader normative and political goals. President Xi Jinping expressed this in terms of increasing the moral appeal of BRICS countries: ‘As advocates of fairness and justice, BRICS countries are committed to building a fair, just and beautiful world and represent positive energy in international relations. We need to...uphold justice and equality in the world.’⁴⁰ This is underpinned by considerable overseas development assistance and investment, particularly by China.

In terms of the relationship between greater representation and normative objectives, much can be read into the stated desire expressed at the second BRIC summit ‘for a multipolar, equitable and democratic world order, based on international law, equality, mutual respect, cooperation, coordinated action and collective decision-making of all States.’⁴¹ While the subtext of this is clear – it implies a resistance to a perceived erosion of state sovereignty – by framing this in terms of the desire to see a shift towards multipolarity, the normative argument is tied specifically to the representational one, that is, the lack of authority of rising powers in the institutions of global governance. This is underpinned by an assertiveness bolstered by material power: as the Indian Prime Minister noted, ‘BRICS has gained enough horizontal influence to compel the world to take notice.’⁴² The Ufa declaration similarly expressed the ‘importance they [BRICS] attach to the *status* and role’ of rising powers in international politics (*italics added*).⁴³

A recurring theme in BRICS summitry relates to international financial governance and the desire for reform in both the prevailing policies and the operating principles of international regimes. Yet this frustration is almost always tied closely to the manner in which decisions are made due to the constitutive nature of many of the global economic governance institutions, which challenges the legitimacy of these organizations – at least in their eyes. Voting rights and representation on international financial regimes has thus been a major

issue of contention. At the first BRIC summit – before South Africa’s membership in the group – President Hu Jintao stated:

‘A fair, just, inclusive and well-managed new international financial order serves as an institutional guarantee for sustained development of the world economy. It is consistent with the historical trend and meets the fundamental interests of all parties. We should work out programs to reform the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank and increase the representation and voice of developing countries so as to objectively reflect changes in the world economic pattern. We should improve the international financial regulatory regime and ensure that developing countries can effectively participate in the Financial Stability Board and other international financial regulatory bodies.’⁴⁴

There are, therefore, specific demands about the need to ‘improve’ the monetary system, strengthen the regulation of reserve currencies, and maintain stability in the exchange rates of major currencies, but this is couched in a broader narrative about equality.⁴⁵ In the words of the Russian presidency, the existing governance of international finance is ‘unjust’ in terms of its decision-making.⁴⁶ Specifically the BRICS are collectively frustrated by the failure of the US to ratify the 2010 IMF reform package relating to quota resources and voting rights ‘which continues to undermine the credibility, legitimacy and effectiveness of the IMF.’⁴⁷

China’s President Xi Jinping stated that ‘We have stood for international equity, justice and greater democracy in international relations, spoken with one voice for the emerging markets and developing countries’.⁴⁸ Equity, justice and democracy relate here not to domestic rights for citizens, but rather to the demand from rising powers that their status be appropriately recognized and respected in international relations, something that they clearly believe Western powers seek to obstruct or even undermine.

A further recurring theme in the discourse is that ‘the global economic governance system must reflect the profound changes in the global economic landscape, and the representation and voice of emerging markets and developing countries should be increased.’⁴⁹ In line with this, a fundamental theme of BRICS discourse has been the principle that, in issues of global governance, ‘all countries should enjoy due rights, equal opportunities and fair participation in global economic, financial and trade affairs.’⁵⁰ The implication here is that existing regimes – in terms of the interests they represent and serve, and their operating procedures – do not allow fair participation. At the sixth BRICS summit the Fortaleza Declaration stated that:

‘international governance structures designed within a different power configuration show increasingly evident signs of losing legitimacy and effectiveness, as transitional and ad hoc arrangements become increasingly prevalent, often at the expense of multilateralism. We believe the BRICS are an important force for incremental change and reform of current institutions towards more representative and equitable

governance, capable of generating more inclusive global growth and fostering a stable, peaceful and prosperous world.’⁵¹

Reform of international financial organizations is a pressing issue that goes beyond abstract principles; it is an objective to ‘enhance the stature and role of the BRICS countries in the global governance system, and help shape the international economic order in such a way that conforms to the historical trend of rising emerging markets and developing countries.’⁵² According to this, the objectives of the World Bank will only be achieved ‘if the institution and its membership effectively move towards more democratic governance structures, strengthen the Bank’s financial capacity and explore innovative ways to enhance development financing and knowledge sharing while pursuing a strong client orientation that recognizes each country’s development needs.’⁵³ A final recurring theme relates to internet governance, regarded amongst the rising powers as being dominated by Western countries and in particular the US. This, again, is couched as a call for ‘equal rights’.⁵⁴

The discourse clearly sets out a powerful demand for the regimes of global governance to better reflect the evolving balance of power, in terms of control of the agenda and decision-making. From this perspective, contestation over representation may be a better reflection of the significance of rising powers, with respect to secondary institutions of international order: a demand for greater access to, and power within, the collective management of international politics, and by extension greater prestige and due respect for status. Yet in challenging the primacy of established powers – in particular the US – the collective position of the BRICS, and in particular Russia and China, has systemic implications that seem to go beyond a simple demand for greater involvement in defining and implementing the rules of global governance.

Normative Contestation

The rhetoric that has emerged from rising power summits that squarely takes aim at the normative underpinnings of the current global order, while being less consistent than the theme of representational contestation, ranges across issues of development, peace and security and the centrality of state sovereignty.

In terms of development, the 2012 Delhi declaration expressed a collective desire amongst rising powers for what is described as ‘responsible macroeconomic and financial policies’. This involves the avoidance of ‘excessive global liquidity’ and new structural reforms to mitigate the risks of large and volatile cross-border capital flows which hit emerging and developing economies most adversely. Greater stability in the supply and prices of primary commodities, and a reorientation of the World Bank away from a hierarchical North-South cooperation model to an equal partnership, are also demanded.⁵⁵ Much of this is – at face value – at odds with the existing liberal, free-market orthodoxy which drives globalization under the supervision of powerful Western states. The Chinese President’s 2017 speech at the Davos meeting of financial leaders, for example, spoke of excessive and unregulated profit chasing: ‘we should adapt to and guide economic globalization, cushion its negative impact,

and deliver its benefits to all countries and all nations'.⁵⁶ It comes closer to a contestation of primary institutions, but it is clearly not a challenge to the liberal order. Indeed, the Davos speech made a plea for the maintenance of an open global economy and warned against protectionism.

On the management of peace and security, the discourse of the rising powers reflects a very clear collective desire to reinforce the traditional norm of state sovereignty and territorial integrity. As President Medvedev stated, this represents a collective commitment to the 'classical interpretation of international law principles'.⁵⁷ There is – at least in theory – consistent opposition to 'unilateral military interventions and economic sanctions'⁵⁸ and a commitment to counter 'attempts by individual countries to impose on the international community policies aimed at overthrowing 'undesirable' regimes and to advance unilateral solutions to conflicts by means of sanctions and military force'.⁵⁹ As President Xi Jinping suggested, 'the use or threat of sanctions in international relations at every turn will not help solve problems. Dialogue and negotiation should play a useful part in settling differences peacefully and politically.'⁶⁰ This reflects a deep aversion to externally driven regime change and a reassertion of the norms of territorial integrity and domestic jurisdiction.

A defining illustration of rising powers' views on the maintenance of international security relates to the Syria case. China and Russia vetoed a number of UN Security Council resolutions on this case and a recurring theme of BRICS discourse is the need for respect for 'the independence, unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic, in stark contrast to interventionist western approaches.'⁶¹ A similar sentiment has been expressed by the SCO membership.⁶² As Putin observed, 'without Russia's and China's principled position on Syria in the Security Council the events in that country would have followed the Libyan and Iraqi scenario.'⁶³ The BRICS narrative on international security reflects a consistent pluralist view of international order, emphasizing the importance of sovereignty and the norm of non-interference, and assuming the legitimacy of state authority. The inherent conservatism of the rising powers is also illustrated in the context of the SCO, as expressed by President Xi Jinping: 'The SCO has the responsibility to prevent instability, forestall the spread of terrorist and religious extremist ideologies and stop forces with hidden agendas from undermining peace and stability in our region.'⁶⁴

The norm of state sovereignty is the bedrock of a number of collective aspirations of the rising powers. It implies a resistance to the liberal evolution of sovereignty, which attaches conditions upon territorial integrity related to human rights and governance. The rising power narrative therefore implies a resistance to liberal norms – seen as interference into domestic governance in non-Western countries – and the attachment of liberal norms to issues such as investment and trade. It also implies a desire for sovereign equality and respect in terms of the constitutive principles and rules of procedure of global governance. This does reflect genuine normative contestation, but not a challenge to the legal basis of international order on the part of rising powers.

This is similarly reflected in the SCO call for the establishment of a ‘a fair and democratic international order.’⁶⁵ At the same time, the almost total absence of references to ‘human rights’ in SCO declarations illustrates the Westphalian and pluralist nature of cooperation by its members, and the assumption that rights are firmly in the ‘domestic’ sphere. This principle of ‘sovereign equality’⁶⁶ implies a greater role for rising powers in the UN and international financial organizations given their perceived domination by Western interests. It also involves a commitment by the BRICS to ‘counter trends leading to the erosion of fundamental principles of international law and the arbitrary interpretation of the UN Charter and UN Security Council resolutions’.⁶⁷ Formal UN reform – something particularly pressing for India and Brazil, as aspiring permanent Security Council members – is a part of this agenda.⁶⁸

The discourse of the BRICS certainly appears to reflect a vision of a changing international order; there is no other way to interpret India’s vision of the BRICS as a ‘quest to forge a new paradigm of global relations and cooperation’.⁶⁹ It is a vision which touches upon a wide range of policy areas – including the reform of international organizations, trade, development, peace and security – but it also reflects certain norms which are relevant to international politics, and in particular norms relevant to state sovereignty, exclusive domestic jurisdiction, and global governance. Does this narrative represent a challenge to the normative values which underpin international order? In fact, rather than challenging these norms, it reflects a pluralist adherence to Westphalian norms based upon sovereignty and a challenge to the liberal shift *away from* this conventional model of international politics. The idea of ‘respect for diverse civilizations’ pushes back against the liberal internationalist project and is a deliberate signal of a desire for an international order that, at least in terms of politics, remains embedded in the norm of territorial integrity.⁷⁰

A compelling framework that can be explored in connection with the transitional international order is the distinction between the pluralist and the liberal worldview. The key question that follows is whether emerging powers reflect a pluralist challenge to Western liberal norms, aside from the challenge to Western attempts to ‘control international politics’. Here we do see evidence of normative contestation. In this scenario, pluralism reflects a commitment (in theory) to conventional Westphalian norms of non-intervention and respect for state sovereignty, and the idea that values and rights are essentially domestic matters within national communities. From this perspective, international order is served by multilateralism, diplomacy, respect for sovereign equality, and preferably underpinned by a balance of power and multipolarity. This is also underpinned by a statist worldview, and an emphasis upon non-interference and exclusive territorial integrity. According to this, there is no basis for making judgments about the legitimacy of national governments in relation to domestic issues – on development, human rights, or governance – apart from in the most exceptional circumstances, and state legitimacy is assumed. This position is most explicitly illustrated in political friction around human rights, the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ principle and democracy promotion, but the idea can also be seen in the position of some emerging powers towards development policy and international climate change policy. There is an informal solidarity amongst rising powers around this worldview, reflected in the absence of

criticism towards Russia in connection with its activities in eastern Ukraine. This pluralism contrasts with a liberal internationalist worldview which gives greater emphasis to universal human rights principles, democracy, and the international rules which govern state behavior, and has a contingent view of sovereignty. According to this, state sovereignty is increasingly conditional, and issues such as economic and political governance, and human rights, can no longer be legitimately regarded as exclusively domestic issues.

From this point of view, normative contestation may be occurring even if rising powers are largely happy to participate in and abide by the rules of existing forms of global governance, since they are resisting certain liberal norms and asserting statist norms. As Stephen suggests, from this point of view ‘it is not the global governance order itself, but its most liberal features that are contested by rising powers’.⁷¹ As some scholars have observed, rising powers – for example the BRICS – do not share a common vision of world order.⁷² However, this sort of normative contestation does not necessarily require a coherent collective identity or agenda amongst rising powers. In other words, there is little evidence that the BRICS wish to overturn the existing international order – but this does not mean that they are not resisting or promoting fundamental normative ideas associated with the foundations and operation of this order.

Cooley therefore sees this contestation as part of a deliberate effort on the part of conservative states to resist pressure to democratize and to reinforce the principle of sovereign jurisdiction: an ‘international backlash against liberal democracy’.⁷³ For Laïdi, this is not a coherent vision, but a ‘coalition of sovereign state defenders’, resisting perceived incursions into the sovereignty norm brought by interdependence and interventionist political norms: ‘the BRICS – even the democratic ones – fundamentally diverge from the liberal vision of Western countries’.⁷⁴

From Rhetoric to Collective Action

It is beyond the scope of this paper to attempt a substantive description of the collective policy initiatives and concrete action of rising powers, but even a brief survey demonstrates the systemic ambition and breadth of rising powers, and that some of the discourse has been translated into concrete action. It also demonstrates the evolution from economic coordination to a broader range of political cooperation.⁷⁵ In terms of substantial action – and in particular interaction amongst themselves – few could deny that the BRICS collectively constitute a significant group with shared interests, as the 2015 Ufa plan of action suggests, involving meaningful joint initiatives in political, economic, trade, cultural, policing, health, agriculture, telecommunication, foreign policy, scientific, academic and economic policy areas.⁷⁶ Such plans for future collaboration of course sit alongside the degree of success that the grouping has achieved in relation to increasing their “shares and chairs” in the Bretton Woods institutions.⁷⁷

In the area of financial regulation and cooperation, the progress demonstrates the concrete nature of BRICS cooperation, but also the frustration of leading members towards the lack of

reform in existing economic infrastructure. Some of the new BRICS initiatives can therefore be seen as the establishment of parallel – or perhaps even competing – regimes. The New Development Bank and the Contingent Reserves Arrangement – with a total volume of \$200 billion – came into effect in 2015. This will fund joint large-scale projects in transport and energy infrastructure and in industrial development – thus providing an alternative to the Western-dominated World Bank and IMF. The BRICS Export Credit Agencies and the BRICS Interbank Cooperation Mechanism expand the BRICS countries financial cooperation and promote investment amongst BRICS members. The Strategy for the BRICS Economic Partnership – also established in 2015 – covers expanding trade and investment, manufacturing and minerals processing, energy, agricultural cooperation, science, technology and innovation, financial cooperation, connectivity and ICT cooperation between members.⁷⁸ This runs in parallel with the SCO ‘Development Strategy Towards 2025’. As Cooper has demonstrated, the New Development Bank has real significance for a number of reasons, including its commitment to a principle of equality across its core membership, and its promotion of sustainable development through renewable energy projects, as well as its financial underpinning.⁷⁹ The China-backed Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), although not a BRICS initiative, also demonstrates how aspirations have been translated into reality in a way that has structural implications for international finance. The announcement of a plan to establish a BRICS Local Currency Bond Fund at the 2017 BRICS Summit in Xiamen only adds to the picture of the group moving well beyond a yearly photo opportunity for the leaders of the five countries.

Alongside the New Development Bank and the Interbank Cooperation Mechanism, the BRICS Business Council, the BRICS Business Forum, and the BRICS Think Tanks Council are involved in the implementation of this Strategy. Moreover, a memorandum establishing the BRICS Network University was signed by the rectors of the 12 participating universities in 2016, and the Second General Conference of the BRICS Network University took place in Zhengzhou, China, in July 2017. The 2017 Xiamen summit also included the announcement of a new plan of cultural collaboration including the establishment of the BRICS Alliance of Libraries, Alliance of Museums, Alliance of Art Museums and National Galleries as well as an Alliance of Theatres for Children and Young People. The BRICS can no longer be dismissed as being merely a ‘talking shop’.

Conclusions

From this study we can see that while there are some areas of genuine normative contestation, much of the rhetoric of the major meetings of the currently rising or resurgent powers is geared more towards contestation over representation than it is about contesting the actual norms that underpin the existing order. It is therefore generally the secondary institutions of international society which are being contested. A greater degree of conceptual clarity on the dynamics and systemic significance of normative contestation and closer attention to the actual claims made by groupings such as the BRICS demonstrates that there may be less that distinguishes the current power transition from previous power shifts than is implied by the focus on the ‘Southern’ identities of rising powers and the idea of a ‘post-Western world.’

This may be due to the current group of rising powers having internalized, and directly benefitted from, the norms promoted by the established powers. Or it may be due to the institutions and norms associated with the contemporary order being less Western in nature than they might be traditionally thought to be. Yet no matter the cause, the implications for scholarship and policymaking alike are the same. The need for debates about the transitional international order to distinguish between normative and representational contestation is clear.

While the degree of actual normative contestation differs across issue areas, and more research can and should be directed towards comparative studies across different domains with this in mind, it also emerges that certain rising powers appear more focused than others on normative rather than merely representational contestation. Similarly, following this path in future work and analyzing the different approaches that various rising powers are currently taking in contesting the existing order will be an important analytical task in the years ahead, especially as more far-flung contenders for rising power status beyond the BRICS countries slowly grow in status. This deeper engagement with the nature of contestation on the part of different rising powers across different issue areas opens up further theoretical space to disentangle norm internalization from socialization and both of these from compliance.⁸⁰

Is there consistency between discourse and action in terms of a pluralist conservative, challenge to the liberal international order? Or, more likely, is this about rising powers wanting greater control and participation of international rules and regimes – and respect – in light of their rising material power and status? In terms of peacefully negotiating the rise of new powers, the stakes are extremely high. Where there is genuine disagreement over the norms that should underpin the global order and where revisionist states do seek to challenge the ‘primary institutions’ of international society,⁸¹ then finding avenues for peaceful accommodation will be extremely difficult. As one account notes, ‘the problem of normative accommodation is, essentially, that the stronger the normative claims made by a state, the harder it is to see past these claims to understand the other side...’.⁸² But if, instead, much of the way that rising powers seek to contest the current order is actually motivated simply by aspirations for greater *status* (via a more authoritative role in global governance mechanisms), then the prospects for peaceful accommodation are much better. Ensuring that such opportunities are grasped will require a greater focus on distinguishing between different types of contestation when they occur.

Notes

¹ Kenkel and Cunliffe, “Rebels or Aspirants: Rising Powers, Normative Contestation, and Intervention”, 3. See also Hurrell, “Power Transitions, Global Justice, and the Virtues of Pluralism”, 201.

² Acharya, *The End of the American World Order*.

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- ³ On the distinction between primary and secondary institutions, see Buzan, *From International to World Society?*
- ⁴ Paul, “The Accommodation of Rising Powers in World Politics”, 4.
- ⁵ Stuenkel, *Post-Western World: How Emerging Powers are Remaking Global Order*.
- ⁶ Li, “Conceptualizing the Nexus of ‘Interdependent Hegemony’ between the Existing and Emerging World Orders”.
- ⁷ Patrick, “Irresponsible Stakeholders? The Difficulty of integrating rising Powers”; Acharya, *The End of the American World Order*; Thakur, “How Representative are BRICS?”; Mielniczuk, “BRICS in the Contemporary World”; Stuenkel, *Post Western World*; Schweller, “Emerging powers in an age of disorder”.
- ⁸ Nye, *Is the American Century Over?*; Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad: The United States’ Global Role in the 21st Century*.
- ⁹ Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*.
- ¹⁰ Kappel, “Global Power Shifts and Challenges for the Global Order”; Acharya, *The End of the American World Order*; Pant, “The BRICS fallacy”.
- ¹¹ Schweller, “Rising Powers and Revisionism in Emerging International Orders”; Patrick, “Irresponsible Stakeholders? The Difficulty of integrating rising Powers”.
- ¹² Hutchings and Kempe, “The Global Grand Bargain”.
- ¹³ Kupchan, *No One’s World*.
- ¹⁴ Kappel, “Global Power Shifts and Challenges for the Global Order”.
- ¹⁵ Xiaoyu, “Socialisation as a two-way process: Emerging powers and the diffusion of international norms”.
- ¹⁶ Gaskarth, “Introduction”, 1. Also Vieira and Grix, “Introduction to the Special Issue on Challenges to Emerging and Established Powers: Brazil and the United Kingdom in the Contemporary Global Order”.
- ¹⁷ Kahler, “Rising Powers and Global Governance”, 711.
- ¹⁸ See for example, Kupchan, *No One’s World*.
- ¹⁹ Dunne et.al., “Introduction: Liberal World Orders”, 5.
- ²⁰ Schweller and Pu, “After unipolarity: China’s visions of international order in an era of US decline”, 41.
- ²¹ Finnemore, “Norms, Culture, and World Politics: Insights from Sociology’s Institutionalism”, 342.

²² Wolff and Zimmermann, “Between Banyans and Battle Scenes: Liberal Norms, Contestation, and the Limits of Critique”.

²³ Wolff and Zimmermann, “Between Banyans and Battle Scenes: Liberal Norms, Contestation, and the Limits of Critique”; Wiener, *A Theory of Contestation*.

²⁴ Contessi, “Multilateralism, Intervention and Norm Contestation: China’s Stance on Darfur in the UN Security Council”.

²⁵ See for example Terhalle, *The Transition of Global Order: Legitimacy and Contestation*, 20.

²⁶ Jepperson et.al. “Norms, Identity, and Culture in National Security”, 54.

²⁷ Buzan, *From International to World Society? English School Theory and the Social Structure of Globalisation*.

²⁸ See Gelpi, *The Power of Legitimacy: Assessing the Role of Norms in Crisis Bargaining*, 20. For an example of work that uses this distinction to identify different types of contestation, see Welsh, “Norm Contestation and the Responsibility to Protect”.

²⁹ Hurrell, “Power Transitions, Global Justice, and the Virtues of Pluralism”, pp. 198-99.

³⁰ Prantl, “Taming Hegemony: Informal Institutions and the Challenge to Western Liberal Order”, 5. See also Song, “Interests, Power and China’s Difficult Game in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization”.

³¹ BRICS, Fifth Summit Declaration.

³² Russian Presidency. Concept of the Russian Federation’s Presidency in BRICS in 2015-2016.

³³ Russian Presidency. Press Conference by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on the Results of the BRICS and SCO Summits.

³⁴ Indian Prime Minister’s Office. Prime Minister’s statement at the Plenary Session of the 6th BRICS Summit.

³⁵ Chinese President’s Office. Building Partnership Together Toward a Bright Future.

³⁶ Chinese President’s Office. Building Partnership Together Toward a Bright Future.

³⁷ Russian Presidency. Press Statement by Russia’s President, Vladimir Putin.

³⁸ Russian Presidency. Interview given to Russian news agency ITAR-TASS.

³⁹ Russian Presidency. Russian President’s Address at the BRICS Summit, Dmitry Medvedev.

⁴⁰ Chinese President’s Office. Remarks by President Xi Jinping of the People’s Republic of China At the Sixth BRICS Summit.

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- ⁴¹ BRIC. BRIC Summit of Heads of State and Government: Joint Statement, Brasília, April 15, 2010.
- ⁴² Indian Prime Minister's Office. Prime Minister's statement at the Plenary Session of the 6th BRICS Summit.
- ⁴³ BRICS. Ufa Declaration.
- ⁴⁴ Chinese President's Office. Remarks by H.E. Hu Jintao President of the People's Republic of China At the BRIC Summit, Yekaterinburg.
- ⁴⁵ Chinese President's Office. Remarks by H.E. Hu Jintao President of the People's Republic of China At the BRIC Summit, Yekaterinburg.
- ⁴⁶ Russian Presidency. Interview given to Russian news agency ITAR-TASS.
- ⁴⁷ BRICS. Ufa Declaration.
- ⁴⁸ Chinese President's Office. Building Partnership Together Toward a Bright Future.
- ⁴⁹ Chinese President's Office. President Xi Jinping Gives Joint Interview To Media from BRICS Countries.
- ⁵⁰ BRICS Fortaleza Declaration.
- ⁵¹ BRICS Fortaleza Declaration.
- ⁵² Chinese President's Office. Building Partnership Together Toward a Bright Future.
- ⁵³ BRICS. Fortaleza Declaration.
- ⁵⁴ Russian Presidency. Interview given to Russian news agency ITAR-TASS.
- ⁵⁵ BRICS. Fourth BRICS Summit: Delhi Declaration.
- ⁵⁶ World Economic Forum Annual Meeting. Speech of President Xi Jinping, 17 January 2017.
- ⁵⁷ Russian Presidency. Russian President's Address at the BRICS Summit, Dmitry Medvedev.
- ⁵⁸ BRICS. Ufa Declaration.
- ⁵⁹ Russian Presidency. Concept of the Russian Federation's Presidency in BRICS in 2015-2016.
- ⁶⁰ Chinese President's Office. Building Partnership Together Toward a Bright Future.
- ⁶¹ BRICS. Ufa Declaration.
- ⁶² Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Declaration of the Heads of State of the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization on Building a Region of Lasting Peace and Common Prosperity.
- ⁶³ Russian Presidency. Interview given to Russian news agency ITAR-TASS.

⁶⁴ Chinese President's Office. Statement by H.E. Xi Jinping President of the People's Republic of China At the 15th SCO Meeting.

⁶⁵ Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Declaration of the Heads of State of the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization on Building a Region of Lasting Peace and Common Prosperity.

⁶⁶ BRICS. Ufa Declaration.

⁶⁷ Russian Presidency. Concept of the Russian Federation's Presidency in BRICS in 2015-2016.

⁶⁸ Indian Prime Minister's Office. Remarks by Prime Minister at Plenary Session of the 7th BRICS Summit.

⁶⁹ Indian Prime Minister's Office. Statement by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh after the Plenary Session of the 5th BRICS Summit.

⁷⁰ Chinese President's Office. Remarks by H.E. Hu Jintao, President of the People's Republic of China at the 11th SCO Meeting of the Heads of State.

⁷¹ Stephen, "Rising Powers, Global Capitalism and Liberal Global Governance: A Historical Materialist Account of the BRICs Challenge". See also Hurrell, "Narratives of emergence: Rising powers and the end of the Third World?"; Kahler, "Rising powers and global governance: negotiating change in a resilient status quo".

⁷² Käkönen, "BRICS as a new power in international relations?".

⁷³ Cooley, "Countering Democratic Norms".

⁷⁴ Lai, "BRICS: Sovereignty, power and weakness".

⁷⁵ Stuenkel, "The financial crisis, contested legitimacy, and the genesis of intra-BRICS cooperation".

⁷⁶ BRICS. UFA Action Plan.

⁷⁷ For a full discussion of progress achieved so far, see Roberts, Armijo, and Katada, *The BRICS and Collective Financial Statecraft*.

⁷⁸ BRICS. Ufa Declaration.

⁷⁹ Cooper, "The BRICS' New Development Bank: Shifting from Material Leverage to Innovative Capacity."

⁸⁰ Zarakol, "What made the World Hang Together?"; Steele, "Broadening the Contestation of Norms in International Relations", 133.

⁸¹ Buzan, *From International to World Society?*

⁸² McLauchlin, “Great Power Accommodation and the Processes of International Politics”, 297.

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