

Rising Powers 101

by
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The global order is changing. The 21st century will be marked by many competing sources of global power. Across politics, economics, culture, military strength, and more, a new group of countries has growing influence over the future of the world.

Several countries are challenging the global order, as well as major issues which cut across national boundaries. They will impact American lives.

As this new world unfolds, America will increasingly need other nations, and they will need us in order to build a better future. Leadership and cooperation in this situation require understanding the world as it really exists.

Each rising power tells a different story about the emerging world, and each story makes a compelling case that old ways of thinking about how the world is organized seem less and less relevant to today. Issues like nuclear nonproliferation, energy, global institutions, and powerful nonstate actors add urgency to the discussion.

What Is the Global Order?

In the wake of World War II, a number of institutions were created to provide structure to international relations. These included the United Nations, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and more. But the war also gave birth to what foreign policy experts call a “bipolar world.” The United States and its allies joined together as one set of powerful forces while the Soviet Union and its allies formed another. The global order

for most of the late 20th century was defined by this Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 ended the Cold War and created a “unipolar world” with the United States in a unique position as the world’s only superpower. Almost by default, the United States has since held a certain, although limited, amount of dominance over world affairs. But nearly two decades later, experts are wondering how long this unipolar moment can last and, perhaps more importantly, asking, “What will come next?”

What Is a Rising Power?

Already, multiple and competing sources of power are emerging around the world. The bipolar and unipolar structure of world affairs may very well be replaced by a much more complex tapestry of forces, alliances, and issues.

“The likely emergence of China and India as new major global players—similar to the rise of Germany in the 19th century and the United States in the early 20th century—will transform the geopolitical landscape, with impacts potentially as dramatic as those of the previous two centuries. In the same way that commentators refer to the 1900s as the ‘American Century,’ the early 21st century may be seen as the time when some in the developing world, led by China and India, come into their own,” according to *Mapping the Global Future: Report of the National Intelligence Council’s 2020 Project* from the US government’s National Intelligence Council.

The report added, “The ‘arriviste’ powers—China, India, and perhaps others such as Brazil and Indonesia—could usher in a new set of international alignments, potentially marking a definitive break with some of the post-World War II institutions and practices.”

Who Are These Rising Powers?

In far-ranging discussions and in dialogue with experts in the United States and abroad, the Stanley Foundation examined the relative position, strengths, and weaknesses of many countries along these dimensions of power:

- Political (including ideology, diplomacy, regional ambitions, role in international and regional institutions, etc.)
- Military (including size and posture, aspirations, participation in peacekeeping operations, etc.)
- Economic (including natural resources, trade, industrial production, transnational service sectors, etc.)
- Cultural (including production and popularity of entertainment/cultural materials which transcend borders, local art/music/culture/cuisines/sport with transnational impact, etc.)
- Others (including demographics, geography, and more)

These deliberations led to a list of nine countries chosen as good starters for public discussion on the changing global order. They are:

Rising Powers



Brazil



Russia



South Africa



Turkey

“The U.S. is, of course, hugely powerful.
But what happens by 2040 is something which is really interesting...”

India

The rise of India seems limitless. It supplies the world with a robust knowledge-based economy, challenges US economic dominance, acts as an important counterweight to China, offers a unique culture, and more.

China

China, with the world's largest population and one of the world's highest growth rates, is well on its way to becoming a formidable global power. China's rise as an economic, military, and political force is one of the transformative events of our time.

Russia

From the old Russian Empire to the far-reaching influence of the twentieth century Soviet Union to the modern energy-rich state, still the biggest country in the world, Russia has long been a powerful player in the global order.

Brazil

With vast natural resources Brazil has seemingly unending potential to grow and develop. The country is already flexing its muscle as a regional leader and a real player in key international venues.

Turkey

Turkey is a strategically important bridge joining Europe with Asia and the West with the Middle East. This majority Muslim nation has a democratic, secular government and fast-growing economy.

South Africa

Post-apartheid South Africa has been a powerful example of peaceful transition from repression to democracy. It has emerged as an

African leader with the strongest economy on the continent, yet it faces sky-high unemployment and poverty rates.

South Korea

On the heels of some of the fastest rates of prolonged economic growth in modern history, South Korea is on track to become the ninth largest economy and third wealthiest nation in the world by 2025.

Japan

Economic strength is one path to international clout, as proven by the small, but determined, Japan. It dedicates less than 1 percent of its national wealth to military spending, yet is one of the most powerful and influential states in the world.

European Union (EU)

The EU, a collection of 27 independent countries, is today an economic power on par with the United States. But wielding more global authority may require greater unity of purpose and broader agreement on the limits of EU expansion.

Are These the Only Rising Powers?

Of course these are not the only countries challenging the global order. They are strong examples of the change happening in the world, but the list is far from comprehensive or exhaustive. These nine countries are strong on more than just one of the dimensions of power listed above, although none of them appears to be advancing on all of the dimensions. And a compelling case can be made for the inclusion of a number of other nations.

Major Cross-Cutting Themes

A small set of major issues also seem to be challenging the global order most. In each of these areas, the ability of the United States to drive toward its own desired outcome seems to be strongly contested by these rising powers and other factors.

Nuclear Nonproliferation

Vigilant multilateral cooperation over the last 60 years has largely limited the number of nations with the ability to develop nuclear weapons. Failure to maintain this effort will have a dramatic impact on the emerging global power structure.

Energy

The American-led global energy order is unraveling. Major powers now compete for exclusive rights to long-term secure energy supplies. And the industrial Western countries no longer share a common strategic approach.

Global and Regional Systems

Groups like the United Nations, World Trade Organization, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Association of South East Asian Nations, and more provide structure to international relations. Can these groups manage (or even survive) a major shift in the global order?

Nonstate Actors

The world is increasingly defined by nonstate actors who live, work, or fight across national borders. These include civil society groups, multinational corporations, “black market” economic actors, transnational terrorists, and others. **Vol 83, No. 5**

“...our world is changing. And you can make a huge difference by stimulating debate on these subjects and getting our children to understand that the world they will inherit from us is a very different world.’

The Role of the United States

“Five hundred years of history tell us that when a dominant power is faced with the rapid rise of another nation, things will not go smoothly. Today, everyone agrees that China, India, even Russia, are regaining power across many dimensions. What this means for America, though, is the subject of intense debate,” write Nina Hachigian and Mona Sutphen in a Stanley Foundation report titled “The United States, Pivotal Powers, and the New Global Reality.”

“Three schools of thought compete,” they continue. “Some argue that because America is still the world’s only superpower, with military strength head and shoulders (actually torso, head, and shoulders) above the rest, America has what it needs to keep its citizens safe so long as it retains this primacy. Next are the ‘offensive realists,’ who argue that in a future multipolar world, a clash between America and other strong powers is inevitable. Finally, there are those who predict a ‘clash of civilizations’ in which powerful, illiberal regimes like China and Russia will join forces and clash with the liberal West. Beyond these theoretical debates, Americans and their policymakers worry that a world with multiple big powers will reduce America’s geopolitical freedom, give solace to its enemies, and reduce the sway of liberal democracy.”

A Very Different World

In February 2008 former World Bank President James Wolfensohn spoke to the annual conference of World Affairs Councils of America. He said:

“The US is, of course, hugely powerful. But what happens by 2040 is something which is really interesting, and which was brought home to me at one of the meetings of the G-7 [2003, Evian, France] five years ago when we were meeting in France with President Chirac as the chair.

It was the first time the G-7 invited China, India, Nigeria, and Brazil. And what was interesting was...the newly elected President Lula [of Brazil] got up to speak and said... ‘Gentlemen I would like to suggest to you that next year maybe you would like to meet in Brazil to get yourself ready for 20 years from now when 5 of you will not be here. Because you should understand that in that period of time, 20 or 30 years from now, the number one country in the world will be China, number two will be the United States, number three will be India, number four will be Japan, and I regret to say that none of the rest of you will be here. I’ll be here,’ he said. ‘But it would still be nice to have you around, so come get used to the developing world.’

It was a joke, but it wasn’t a joke. It was an attempt to reorient this very settled group into an understanding that these planetary changes are real. And that it is hugely important that they as leaders of the world, and indeed you as leaders of thought in terms of American foreign policy, should also understand this new orientation.

My message to [you] is not one of hopelessness but of realism: our world is changing. And you can make a huge difference by stimulating debate on these subjects and getting our children to understand that the world they will inherit from us is a very different world.

To learn more about the rising powers countries, the big issues, and what it all means for the United States, please visit www.risingpowers.org.

(Keith Porter is the Director of Communication and Outreach for the Muscatine, Iowa-based Stanley Foundation. He holds an M.S. in communication from Illinois State University. Porter also serves as the foundation’s Executive Radio Producer, and in that role he has reported from over 20 different countries and interviewed hundreds of world leaders and foreign policy experts.)