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Regional Powers Still Matter!

Economic and domestic political crises as well as global structural shifts that have resulted in a much tighter interconnection of events, actors, and institutions across the national, regional, and global levels have called into question the ability of so-called regional powers, such as Brazil, India, and South Africa, to have a serious impact on global politics in the remainder of the twenty-first century.

- Regional powers have been considered important contributors to regional and global order because they are expected to, for example, ensure stability and effective regional cooperation in a world that is increasingly difficult to govern.

- Yet, the actual outcomes of their regional projections have been mixed. While some regional powers, such as Brazil or South Africa, seem to have lost clout in the past few years, other countries, such as Saudi Arabia or Turkey, are striving for regional power status.

- Regional powers face contradictory demands in regard to their global and regional policies. Being at the interface between regional and global politics poses particular challenges and often leads to indecisive, reluctant, and sometimes contradictory policy choices.

- New and old regional powers are, further, facing important domestic challenges, such as significant downturns in their economies, corruption, and reduced state capacity to mobilise resources, as well as growing populist sentiments and even a drift towards authoritarianism. These issues create disruption in their foreign policies and represent potential challenges, due to unpredictability, for both research and policymaking.

- Nevertheless, "regional powers" is still a useful analytical concept with which to make sense of some of these trends by focusing on the regional dimension of international politics. Being a regional power does not preclude being a rising power or even a great power in global terms.

Policy Implications

Germany's and other Western countries' foreign policies often treat rising and regional powers as hubs of stability and economic prosperity. Yet, in a changing world order, a better understanding of regional dynamics and tensions is needed: regional powers do not automatically serve as multipliers of policies within their regions given the sometimes low degree of regional integration. Their ability and willingness to influence their neighbourhood may change over time and policy fields; this variance should not be underestimated.

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Researching a Moving Target

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, the study of regional powers became a central area of concern for International Relations (IR) scholars across the globe. The reasons for this interest are obvious: At the turn of the century, there was an expectation of a looming global power shift from the West to the East, and from the North to the South. The central dynamic related to the expected power shifts was a perceived weakening of the "West" and the withdrawal of the United States from several world regions, which created new space for regional actors to shape politics in their respective neighbourhoods and to compete for regional leadership.

The growing influence of the "rising powers" of the Global South – such as Brazil, China, India, and South Africa – and the simultaneous emergence of a "world of regions" (Katzenstein 2005) in which regional governing processes were becoming increasingly important (Acharya 2007) were among the salient traits of world politics in the early years of this century. Based on the assumption that powerful countries such as India, Brazil, or South Africa would play a substantial role in shaping their respective regions, a new research agenda emerged, which conceptualised these countries as "regional powers." In policy circles, notions such as "anchor countries" (Stamm 2004) or "pivotal states" (Chase et al. 1996) reflected the belief in these countries' influence on their respective regions and their potential as driving forces of change at the regional level.

The GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies played a major role in driving the debate on this topic, which led to important comparative insights on regional political dynamics. GIGA-based research unveiled patterns of leadership and followership, hegemony and contestation, and explored the regional powers' ambivalent influence on regional cooperation as well as the complex relationships between their regional and global policies. In the following years publications by GIGA-based researchers helped structure the debate and set the research agenda, which focused on a rather stable set of states (Brazil, China, India, and South Africa, and occasionally a few more). However, over the past decade, several trends have emerged that require a fresh view of regional powers. In April 2018, the GIGA organised an international conference titled "Regional Powers Revisited." This event brought together some of the leading scholars in the field, with the aim of critically reviewing past research and identifying what further research is needed to understand contemporary regional powers. Among the main trends that require a new approach to regional powers are the following:

- The importance of regions in world politics is decreasing or increasing depending on the issue area and the perspective.
- Some regional powers, such as Brazil and South Africa, have not lived up to the expectations and have seen their influence reduced, both within their respective regions and in global politics.
- A number of "new" countries have come to play a major role in shaping their regions, which has led to an expansion of regional powers research to countries such as South Korea, Turkey, Egypt, Indonesia, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. At the same time, rising powers such as China or India have retained important roles in their respective regions.

- Regional powers have increasingly become the object of different expectations articulated by their regional neighbours and by global actors, often leading to ambiguous policies on their part.
- Domestic dynamics, which have so far been neglected in the study of regional powers, have proven to have a major impact on regional powers' ability to shape their regions.

In the following sections, we discuss each of these trends in greater detail. We close by drawing some conclusions about the future of regional power(s).

The Shifting Salience of Regions

The role of regions in world politics has changed in an ambiguous way in recent years. While the end of the Cold War set regions free from the overwhelming influence of the two superpowers and thereby gave regional powers greater room to manoeuvre, more recently we have witnessed a further shift. Particularly since 2010, the United States has been withdrawing from several world regions. This shift has included its withdrawal from Afghanistan and the relative disengagement from the Middle East implicit in President Obama's "pivot to Asia." Under President Trump, we are currently witnessing a mix of isolationist tendencies and continued meddling in crises in the Middle East and in Asia, but overall such developments hint at a greater autonomy in regional dynamics. Indeed, the competition for regional leadership between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Turkey's increased foreign-policy activism in its neighbourhood, or the persistence and growing virulence of territorial disputes, as in the South China Sea, are all dynamics that seem to confirm the continued – and possibly growing – salience of regions in world politics.

Such an increasingly de-centred world obviously presents new opportunities for powerful regional states – not just regional powers – to pursue their goals. We can observe conscious efforts by several governments to (re)shape regions. This is happening in rhetorical terms, as exemplified by ongoing debates about the "Indo-Pacific," a term adopted by countries like India, Japan, Australia, or the United States. The (re)constitution of regions can, however, also emerge in practice, and large-scale infrastructure projects such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) should be interpreted as efforts to redefine regions from East Asia to Eastern Europe. Even new mega-regional trade agreements such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP-11), which includes Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, and Vietnam, are "regional" in this sense. Yet, the rise of China and the more belligerent rhetoric of the US government as reflected in the new National Security Strategy of December 2017 entail the risk that the USA and China might again impose the logic of bipolar power competition on different world regions. This would also affect the politics of regional powers.

Therefore, while regions definitely continue to matter in world politics in terms of security and connectivity, possibly more so than a decade ago, in other issue areas they have become less important. Trade agreements, for example, are increasingly signed between countries belonging to different regions, thereby undermining conventional patterns of regionalism and generating new forms of "cross-regionalism" (Garzón 2017). More generally, several regional integration projects have

undergone severe crises in recent years: Brexit and the rise of Eurosceptical parties are weakening the European Union, and instances such as the recent crisis within UNASUR (the Union of South American Nations) reveal the current challenges that regionalism is facing in other world regions as well. Such weaknesses can be partly traced back to a lack of leadership on the part of regional powers, but they also reveal that regions have become more porous in an increasingly interconnected world.

Regional Powers: An Evolving Concept

The second important trend concerning regional powers, which is related to some of the aspects just mentioned, is an enlargement of the "universe of cases" (i.e. all those states to which the concept is applied). The growing power capabilities and increased political activism of countries such as Turkey, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, and Iran warrant their inclusion in the category of regional powers – and indeed a growing body of literature has applied this analytical category to them (e.g., Kardaş 2013, Ogunnubi et al. 2017). At the same time, the countries that were originally at the core of the literature on regional powers – most notably, India, Brazil, and South Africa – have not only become rising powers in global politics, but also remain important players in their regions. For this reason, we should continue to study them as "regional powers" when it comes to their interactions with their regional neighbourhood, irrespective of their "rise" at the global level. The term "regional powers" has sometimes been used by politicians as a derogatory label – think of President Obama dismissing Russia as a "regional power" in 2014. We argue in favour of using "regional powers" as an analytical category to capture the regional status of such countries, irrespective of their global clout. Even the United States can be considered a regional power within North America, while at the same time obviously being a great power with global reach and influence.

Given that regional power is an evolving concept, what are the constitutive elements for being classified as a regional power? There is a broad consensus that a necessary condition for regional "powerhood" is that these states be powerful in terms of valued resources in relation to the other states within a geographic region. In some cases, however, such regional attribution is not immediate, as regional powers can belong to different regions. For example, Turkey is a country with major influence in several regions: the Black Sea and the Caucasus, the Middle East, and the Balkans. At the same time, regional powers have often tried to shape their regions as part of a political project – think of Brazil's efforts to highlight its belonging to "South America" as opposed to "Latin America." Some of these dynamics are particularly relevant today. Turkey, for example, is in the process of distancing itself from Europe while aiming to revive past Ottoman glories and the related regional sphere of influence. Moreover, as the case of the Middle East suggests, we might have competing regional powers within the same region, which raises interesting questions about the impact of regional powers on regional order.

Research on regional powers has long focused on definitions and classifications, in an attempt to identify how much relative power is needed for a country to be considered a regional power. Such research has focused on the military and economic capabilities necessary to be a regional power. The *status* of a regional power is ultimately awarded by the other states in the region through the recognition of the

superior power capabilities of the regional power. But such recognition of regional power status does not equate with the acceptance of a regional leadership role. As research on contestation within regions (e.g., Flemes and Lobell 2015) has shown, a mere predominance in terms of power capabilities not only does not automatically translate into regional leadership but also generates resistance against the regional power on the part of other regional countries. Therefore, regional power status may also provoke negative reactions (contestation) related to a regional power's material power and leadership claims. A typical case in point is India, which not only faces the hostility of its arch-rival, Pakistan, but also has to cope with resistance and balancing efforts on the part of its smaller South Asian neighbours, such as Nepal. While hard power is essential to regional power status, other elements are necessary for a regional power to successfully exercise a leadership role. Whether leadership initiatives will generate followership depends very much on the regional constellation as well as the particular issue areas. It might be easier to project ideational power on topics such as climate change and global health policies, and it might be much more difficult in times of militarised conflicts, where hard power is the main currency. Moreover, a foreign policy based on ideational powers needs a sound economic and institutional basis, as the negative examples of South Africa, Brazil, and Nigeria demonstrate.

In sum, there is a certain consensus regarding the core elements necessary for the definition of a regional power. While some authors include the will to lead and regional leadership into the definition, it seems more useful to differentiate between the status of a regional power and certain leadership roles – as well as a reluctance to lead (Destradi 2017) or even a detachment from the region (Prys 2010). Even more importantly, "regional power" has to be used as an analytical category that is not mutually exclusive vis-à-vis other classifications such as great power or rising power.

The Regional–Global Nexus

Since regional powers are in many cases also "rising" in global affairs, these countries face some important challenges in setting their priorities and devising their policies. On the one hand, they need to take into account their regional neighbours' wishes and preferences if they want to successfully exercise regional leadership; on the other hand, in most cases they aspire to be recognised as important players beyond their regions and to obtain international recognition for their status as rising powers. Forums such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) summits are important venues for these countries to display their growing importance in global politics. And "established" powers have actually put increasing pressure on rising powers, asking them for greater contributions to global public goods provision in accordance with the motto "with power comes responsibility." From climate change negotiations to international crisis management, rising powers are subject to a range of expectations stemming especially from Western countries.

Things become complicated if the expectations of regional and global actors diverge, as regional powers will have to find a balance between them. More generally, regional powers have to devise strategies to navigate in an ever more complex international environment, striking a balance between national, bilateral, regional, interregional, and global commitments. The regulation of challenges such as climate

change takes place within institutional landscapes that cut across all levels of social organisation. This requires states to take decisions on how intensely to engage in these governance complexes, the ways they will do so, and within which institutions this will occur. An important example of the ways in which these policy mixes can be potentially contradictory is how India is presenting itself within the global level of the climate regime as a developing country while at the regional level it needs to play a much more decisive role in shaping the response to climate change and carrying a majority of the related burden. India has also been asked by the United States to engage more actively in Afghanistan, but it cannot afford to provoke its regional rival Pakistan beyond a certain point through its engagement. The result has been an extremely hesitant, indecisive, and "reluctant" policy on the part of India (Destradi 2014). The same is true of South Africa in the case of Zimbabwe (Prys 2009, 2013). Both policymakers and those studying regional powers thus need to consider a holistic picture of these states' foreign policies that takes into account potentially conflicting expectations.

Domestic Challenges and Opportunities

Some of the regional powers that were the object of early theorising – most notably Brazil and South Africa – have undergone severe domestic political crises in recent years. The impact of such crises on these countries' ability to fulfil their status as regional (and rising) powers and to pursue regional leadership projects has been substantial. For example, the Brazilian government has almost completely turned away from its regional engagements and has been unwilling or unable to continue on its previous path of foreign policy activism in global affairs. Domestic politics and the government's fight for political survival have not left many resources for major foreign policy activities. The economic crisis has revealed that Brazil's power resources might not be sufficient to achieve major power status at this time. State capacity also plays an important role in creating the preconditions for regional status. For example, Nigeria has been characterised as a "failing regional power" because of its incapacity to put an end to the Boko Haram insurgency. South Africa has been analysed as a regional hegemonic power, though one with serious limitations, and Southern Africa might witness the emergence of a second regional power besides South Africa: Angola, which has caught up enormously in terms of both economic and military resources. One therefore also has to take into account a state's capacity to mobilise existing power resources, and how effectively it does so. Volgy et al. (2017) use the term domestic political competence, which refers to the ability to develop and implement effective strategies for creating a regional order.

Furthermore, among some of the traditional and non-traditional regional-powers, populism is on the rise. Two notable examples are Modi's India and Erdoğan's Turkey. However, we do not yet have systematic evidence about the impact of populists in government on a country's foreign policy. While populists in Europe are undermining the EU and condemning regional institutions as elitist and detached from the "real" will of the "people," further research is needed on populists' approaches to regionalism in other parts of the world. Prime Minister Modi, for example, has pursued a rhetoric of reconciliation with India's regional neighbours under the label

"Neighbourhood First," but the substance of his foreign policy has not differed much from that of the previous government (Plagemann and Destradi forthcoming).

The Future of Regional Power(s)

Against the backdrop of current changes in world politics and particularly the four trends outlined above, is it still worthwhile pursuing the "regional powers" research agenda? We believe it is. What we need is a more nuanced understanding of the multiple roles that regional powers can play in international politics. Regional powers can also be (and often are) rising powers in global affairs. The use of the analytical category of regional powers, however, allows us to identify the specificities of regional dynamics. A distinction between regional power status and regional "leadership" allows us to make sense of the often conflictive dynamics that take place within regions. Regional powers do not automatically lead their regions, be it because they face contestation and resistance on the part of their regional neighbours or because they are torn between different expectations that induce them to pursue indecisive, reluctant policies. But regional powers can also use their contemporary role as rising powers in global politics as an opportunity to set priorities between the regional and global levels.

For policymakers interacting with regional powers, these findings imply the need for a greater sensitivity to the challenges faced by these countries. The often apparently inexplicable reluctance of regional powers stems from their difficulties in handling the different expectations of regional and global actors. Instead of unilaterally attributing responsibility to regional powers and putting pressure on them, policymakers in the "West" should be more attentive to these countries' concerns. Moreover, in some cases they should consider whether there are potential synergies between their own goals and those of regional powers' neighbours, as converging expectations might help regional powers shed some of their reluctance when it comes to regional leadership. More generally, regional power status should not be equated with regional leadership: regional powers are not always and not automatically able and willing to represent their regions or to serve as multipliers of certain policies among their regional neighbours.

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Related GIGA Research

Research on regional powers has been a key focus of the GIGA's Research Programme 4: Power and Ideas for over a decade. With the Regional Powers Network, funded by the Leibniz Association and founded in 2008, the GIGA established a network of leading research institutions to study regional powers (www.giga-hamburg.de/en/rpn). Since 2010, the Schumpeter Fellowship, funded by the Volkswagen Foundation, has addressed the topic of contested regional leadership in different world regions from a comparative perspective (www.giga-hamburg.de/en/project/contested-leadership-in-international-relations). Moreover, the Hamburg International Graduate School for the Study of Regional Powers (HIGS, www.giga-hamburg.de/en/dp/about/history) produced a number of dissertation projects on the topic and constituted a cornerstone of the GIGA Doctoral Programme. In April 2018, the GIGA organised the international conference "Regional Powers Revisited" with the aim of reviving the regional powers research agenda.

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