



POLICY BRIEF

# Rising democracies, burden-sharing, and the international liberal order

**Ted Piccone**

Amid an erosion of leadership among established democracies, rising democratic powers—though saddled with their own problems at home—should be ready to step up on the international stage.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The international liberal order based on collectively securing peace, promoting development, and protecting human rights is facing a major stress test. With the decline of U.S. leadership, a weakening Europe, and the rise of authoritarian China and Russia, the future of the liberal order depends on newer democratic powers picking up the slack. Leading players such as India, Brazil, South Africa, the Republic of Korea, Indonesia, and Mexico are capable of playing a more active role to sustain a global cooperation agenda favoring open democratic societies. Many of these countries, however, face significant political and economic challenges of their own. If geopolitical competition intensifies, they may choose to sit on the fence or accept lowest common denominator outcomes for the sake of avoiding outright economic or military conflict. Liberal democracy and human rights, in this scenario, will erode further.

A close look at the evolution of these six middle power democracies reveals a turning away from more ambitious goals of regional and global influence. In Brazil and South Africa, the traditional political order has nearly collapsed under the weight of revelations of deep structural corruption and economic downturns. Mexico's foreign policy is returning to its traditional noninterventionism as it struggles to maintain equilibrium in the face of direct challenges to its trade and migration relationship with the United States and escalating violence and corruption. South Korea, after weathering a major constitutional crisis that led to the jailing of former President Park Geun-hye, is consumed by the threat of war on the Korean Peninsula. Indonesia is coping with a more muscular version of political Islam and a retrenchment in its regional ambitions. Only India, which also has chosen a more nationalist and populist approach to governing at home, is raising

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its foreign policy game, for example by contesting China in the Indo-Pacific.

Middle power democracies, like the six reviewed in this essay, have a potentially positive role to play if they can revive their once promising paths to sustainable democratic development. As they have mostly benefited from the upside of economic globalization and democratization, they should also become more responsible stewards and shapers of our interdependent system. They now need to step up and share the burden of managing a more multipolar world that aligns with their own democratic values and interests. They can do so by contributing more resources to international institutions that uphold universal values and protect the global commons, support implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, defend civil society and independent media from growing attacks on their work, build cross-regional coalitions to block the growing trend toward zero-sum nationalism, and proactively share the burden of good global governance.

## INTRODUCTION

With the decline of U.S. leadership, a weakening Europe, and the rise of authoritarian China and Russia, the international liberal order is facing a serious stress test. Middle power democracies such as India, Brazil, South Africa, the Republic of Korea, Indonesia, and Mexico, which together represent 27 percent of the world's population,<sup>1</sup> are capable of playing a more active role in shoring up the liberal order's shaky pillars. A more concerted effort by these countries, along with more established middle powers in Europe, Canada, Australia, and Japan, could provide the backbone necessary to sustain the international agenda on human rights, sustainable development, and cooperative security. But are they willing to play that role given their own internal political and economic challenges posed by their populations' demands for improved governance and standards of living? And what effect will the intensifying competition

among the world's great powers have on these rising democracies' interest in sharing the burden of defending the international liberal order?

After an earlier period of more ambitious expectations of regional if not global leadership, leaders of these six middle power democracies in the last five years have mostly steered away from a more activist role internationally. In Brazil and South Africa, the traditional political order has nearly collapsed under the weight of revelations of deep structural corruption and economic downturns. Mexico, under its new populist president, is tackling its massive domestic challenges in ways that reinforce nationalist and strongman tendencies. South Korea, having survived a major constitutional crisis that led to the jailing of former President Park Geun-hye, is distracted by the threat of war on the Korean Peninsula. Indonesia enters an important year that will test its ability to cope with a more muscular version of political Islam and amid retrenchment in its regional ambitions. Only Prime Minister Narendra Modi's India, which also has chosen a more nationalist and populist approach to governing at home, is stretching its ambitions, for example by contesting China in the Indo-Pacific.

This policy brief will take an updated look<sup>2</sup> at how these middle power democracies are performing in the context of an emerging great-power contest for global leadership. It will consider how their democratic governance challenges and economic interests shape their respective foreign policies and activism on liberal order issues. It will then provide recommendations on how best they could engage as partners for sharing the burden of sustaining the international liberal order.

## HOW ARE MIDDLE POWER DEMOCRACIES DOING?

### *Domestic performance*

After two decades of impressive progress on both the political and economic fronts, six middle power democracies from around the world—India, Brazil,

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South Africa, the Republic of Korea, Indonesia, and Mexico—raised expectations in the established West that they could become constructive players in the emerging multipolar world system. More recently, however, their performance as liberalizing exemplars has fallen short of those expectations. Turkey, for example, has fallen so far from the democratic fold that it can no longer fairly be included in this grouping. The timing of their backsliding behavior couldn't be worse: The United States under Donald Trump and a worrisome number of European societies are facing their own crises of liberal democratic governance. Moreover, populist and nationalist leaders are unabashedly contesting fundamental assumptions of international peace and security founded on shared democratic interests and values that have facilitated relative peace since World War II.

According to a number of indices, the quality of democratic governance, respect for human rights, and the rule of law have declined over the last two years in all six middle power democracies except for South Korea.<sup>3</sup> Brazil's ongoing struggle to overcome decades of entrenched corruption, combined with economic malaise, high rates of crime, and worsening poverty, have led to historically low rates of approval of current political leaders and parties<sup>4</sup> and opened the door to populist nationalism and calls for a return to military rule. A similar phenomenon in Mexico has resulted in the first election of a left-wing populist in Mexico's democratic history and a likely return to economic nationalism. Both countries, among the 20 most murderous in the world, are struggling to deliver public security to their citizens.<sup>5</sup> South Africa's crisis of crony corruption, which forced the resignation of President Jacob Zuma in early 2018, has shaken the ruling party's hold on power and renewed efforts for the country to tackle long-standing demands for land reform and economic justice. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's more authoritarian and sectarian governing style and a weak opposition are stifling space for civil society, independent media, and free expression. Under President Joko

Widodo, or "Jokowi," Indonesia has faced rising Islamist radicalization and underperformed on its once-promising leadership role in Southeast Asia and the Islamic world as the world's fourth-largest democracy. Only South Korea has continued the course of strengthening liberal democracy, including weathering a presidential impeachment and criminal trial, while simultaneously pursuing a negotiated peace with its nuclear-armed neighbor to the north.

On the economic and sustainable development fronts, these six present a mixed picture. India stands out with the best economic performance of the group in terms of both gross domestic product (GDP) and year-over-year growth, while South Africa presents a slow growth rate and the lowest GDP of the six countries.<sup>6</sup> Brazil's economy, after impressive growth rates in the 2000s, is mainly stagnant after suffering a major recession between 2014 and 2017. In terms of tackling inequality, South Korea is the highest performing country in the group with a Gini Index score of 31.6 out of 100. The most unequal country is South Africa with a score of 63, followed by Brazil with 51.3 and Mexico with 43.4.<sup>7</sup> Together, they are heavily invested in the international trading regime, particularly with China.

A preliminary analysis of each country's progress in achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) shows that South Korea and Brazil have made the greatest advances. All but South Africa score highly with regard to fighting poverty, for example, but performance is uneven. Mexico is losing ground in the fight against inequality and Brazil is backsliding with regard to SDG 16 pertaining to peace, justice, and strong institutions. South Africa also scores low in this category, but does well in achieving gender equality.<sup>8</sup> All six countries but South Korea present some of the highest spillover costs in the G-20, meaning that they cause higher negative environmental, economic, and security externalities that undermine other countries' paths to achieving the SDGs.<sup>9</sup>

**Foreign policy**

Such daunting internal challenges have hurt these governments' ability to strengthen governance and accountable institutions, and diminished their soft power as positive examples for other developing democracies. Domestic demands also have clipped their once lofty ambitions for a more activist role in reshaping the international liberal order. Buffeted by the confusing and at times hostile actions of the Trump administration, and courted by an ever more powerful China and revanchist Russia, these states are hesitant to step up and bolster such elements of the international liberal order as sustainable development, human rights, and cooperative security. The notion that these states, in their own ways, could help fill the leadership void left by a quickly fading United States, looks increasingly unrealistic under current trends.

**Brazil** provides a clear case of collapsed ambitions for regional hegemony and global influence. Under President Lula da Silva, Brazil made impressive strides in projecting a vision of multipolarity that gave it freedom to maneuver across different regions and domains. In South America, it positioned itself as the first among equals in a new Union of South American States (UNASUL) designed to foster regional integration and solidarity; it also developed new partnerships in Africa. It became an active player in the BRICS coalition (whose other members are Russia, India, China, and South Africa) as a leading voice for the global South. In a bid to become a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council, it played a growing role at the United Nations through participation in peacekeeping operations, while demanding restraints on the use of force, especially in the wake of the controversy over the Security Council's authorization for intervention to protect civilians during the Libyan civil war in 2011. Under Lula's handpicked successor, President Dilma Rousseff, Brazil began to drift away from this more activist role until, following her impeachment in 2016, Michel Temer all but neutered it. His administration has tried to "depoliticize" Brazilian

foreign policy away from left-leaning favoritism and facilitated Venezuela's suspension from Mercosur for failing to meet the bloc's democracy and human rights standards. In April 2018, Brazil announced its decision to suspend membership in UNASUL indefinitely due to fights over leadership.<sup>10</sup> While it has become more engaged at the U.S.-led Organization of American States, the region's traditional diplomatic forum, it has shrunk from playing a leading role in regional diplomatic efforts to resolve crises in Venezuela, Peru, and Nicaragua. And in a sharp swing to the right, its newly-elected populist president, Jair Bolsonaro, has not hesitated to align himself with President Trump's "anti-globalist" foreign policy.

**South Africa** has followed a similarly woeful path. President Zuma's shoddy management of South Africa's once-promising economy, prompting further divisions within the ruling African National Congress, has made it difficult for Pretoria to build on its natural post-apartheid leadership role as the continent's most advanced economy and democracy. At the regional level, South Africa under President Thabo Mbeki used its influence to strengthen the African Union (AU) and other pan-African initiatives such as the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM). Zuma's government, on the other hand, has been less involved in AU affairs, for example on the African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance, as it shifted toward building a strategic partnership with China and joining the BRICS coalition.<sup>11</sup> Both governments failed to strengthen the Southern African Development Community (SADC) as a subregional anchor for supporting democracy and human rights, particularly in Zimbabwe and in removing the SADC court's ability to hear cases of human rights violations.<sup>12</sup> It has little to show for its diplomatic efforts to resolve raging conflicts in South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It also has actively undermined international standards for human rights and accountability for crimes against humanity by refusing to arrest Sudanese

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President Omar al-Bashir when he visited South Africa in 2015<sup>13</sup> and threatening to withdraw from the International Criminal Court. Its voting record at the U.N. on condemning human rights abuses is also retrograde.

As **Mexico** underwent its own democratization and economic liberalization process, its foreign policy broke from its traditional noninterference line and over time became a reliable voice for upholding human rights norms at the U.N. Human Rights Council and in the inter-American system. It also has embraced a rules-based approach to economic globalization through its membership in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and benefited greatly from the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and other free trade arrangements. Its complex relationship with the United States, however, has driven most of its foreign policy agenda toward managing migration, drug trafficking, and organized crime. Now, with the resounding victory of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) and his MORENA coalition in congress, Mexico is likely to take a step backward toward its traditional pro-sovereignty approach to international affairs. As AMLO's designated foreign minister stated just days after the election, "Mexico will follow a respectful foreign policy of nonintervention ... and right now, we don't expect to abandon that policy."<sup>14</sup> With leftists in electoral retreat across the region, combined with the tragic violence and despair in Venezuela and Nicaragua, AMLO is trying to restore Mexico's credentials as an independent balancing force in the region's long-standing struggle between U.S.-friendly democratization and neoliberalism and the Chavista/Castroist vision of anti-U.S. socialism.

**Indonesia's** retreat from President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's relatively robust posture toward democracy promotion in the inhospitable region of Southeast Asia during the 2000s further illustrates the negative trends away from international norms and effective peer pressure. After much diplomatic effort by Indonesia to insert human rights standards

and mechanisms into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) mandate and then condition Myanmar's entry into ASEAN on its commitments to such standards, President Jokowi's administration has turned its attention to more parochial concerns such as maritime security, protection of fisheries, and defense of Indonesian migrants abroad. Meanwhile, Cambodia's regime led by Hun Sen has further consolidated its authoritarian rule and the Philippines has waged a scorched earth battle against drug trafficking, with little expression of concern from Jakarta, which has decided apparently to hide behind ASEAN's policy of noninterference in each other's internal affairs. The flight of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims from ethnic cleansing in Myanmar has generated some protests and offers of humanitarian assistance from President Jokowi and his foreign minister who for domestic reasons want to be seen as defending persecuted Muslims while avoiding a migration crisis on their shores. Their efforts, however, have not yielded any concrete pressure on Myanmar's military from Indonesia or its ASEAN colleagues. Indonesia clearly prefers a passive, wait-and-see attitude toward the shifting winds of global geopolitics, very much with managing China's rise on its mind. China is Indonesia's largest trading partner and most important source of foreign direct investment and development aid.

**South Korea**, which has benefited greatly from globalization and democratization, has largely embraced the main elements of the international liberal order and plays a constructive role at the U.N., the G-20, the OECD, the Community of Democracies, and other fora. Its current foreign minister, Kang Kyung-wha, served previously as the U.N.'s deputy high commissioner for human rights and has been outspoken about the importance of defending civil society and expanding women's rights.<sup>15</sup> Its economy has outperformed the other middle power democracies on a GDP per capita basis and it has significantly increased its official development assistance, although with some criticism of its transactional nature, complex and

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slow project approvals, and limited transparency and civil society engagement.<sup>16</sup> Seoul also has seen delays in addressing sustainable development and human rights mainstreaming goals.<sup>17</sup>

Overall, however, South Korea has punched below its weight on liberal order issues due mainly to more important priorities, such as the pursuit of denuclearization and peaceful coexistence (if not unification) of the Korean Peninsula, checking China's and Japan's regional ambitions, and protecting close ties with the United States. It has demurred, for example, from U.S. suggestions to create its own national institute to promote democracy abroad in part for fear of antagonizing China. Its attention to North Korea's deplorable human rights record fluctuates depending on which party is in power, but one must acknowledge the remarkable efforts the international community has made, with Seoul's blessing, to document a range of abuses, including alleged crimes against humanity, committed by the Kim Jong-un regime.<sup>18</sup> These efforts by the government of South Korea and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights now extend to preparing court cases in the event Seoul decides to pursue domestic accountability.

**India** is probably the most promising yet confounding aspirant for activism on liberal order issues among this group. Its economic growth trajectory has been impressive since it undertook liberalization reforms in the 1990s and recently surpassed France as the world's sixth-largest economy. But it has failed to spread this growth evenly across society as evidenced by some of the highest rates of poverty in the world.<sup>19</sup> At various times, New Delhi has played an important role in its neighborhood to foster democratic stability, particularly in Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Nepal, but has drawn fire for occasionally overplaying its hand. On the most important human rights and humanitarian crisis of the past year—the Burmese military's brutal attacks against its Rohingya minority—India has tried to find a middle path between outright condemnation of

the regime's tactics, on one hand, while on the other hand, leaving Bangladesh, which has absorbed the vast majority of the displaced, to navigate the situation on its own. India favors the return of the refugees to Rakhine state (while classifying those who enter India as illegal immigrants) along with new development assistance and transitional housing.

Significantly, India's national security doctrine recognizes the critical relationship between liberal democracy and peace (both internal and external) as a matter of both principle and pragmatism. Building a regional buffer of like-minded democracies against a rising authoritarian China and hostile Pakistan makes sense. Its foreign policy, however, struggles to break free of its nostalgia for nonintervention, particularly outside its neighborhood, for instance during the tumultuous days of the Arab Spring. India's voting record at the U.N. on human rights issues continues to reflect this old way of thinking, siding repeatedly with China and Russia against international criticism of egregious human rights abusers. This can be explained in part by its desire to deflect international scrutiny of its own checkered record on civil liberties, gender-based violence, and excessive use of force in its long-standing conflict with Pakistan over Kashmir. This is in contrast to steadily warming relations with the United States, a trend that political parties on both sides have continued under the rubric of a values-oriented Indo-Pacific strategy that places India as a cornerstone of a Japan-Australia-U.S.-India strategic partnership of democracies. This emerging alliance would contest China's attempts to subvert international norms, support illiberal regimes, and claim greater control of the vital maritime routes connecting the region.<sup>20</sup> It apparently does not, however, hinder India's long-standing defense ties to Russia, another antagonist of the international liberal order.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE INTERNATIONAL LIBERAL ORDER**

The first step in addressing the current troubles facing the international liberal order is to recognize the gravity of the problem. The coalition of liberal democratic states and like-minded groups from civil society, philanthropy, media, religion, and business that have progressively built and benefited from today's international rules-based system is under assault from internal and external sources. International institutions tasked with mediating the inevitable tensions between national sovereignty and governance of such global issues as trade, human rights, and security are fraying under the weight of authoritarian populism, nationalism, and tribalism. Significant sectors of democratic societies, particularly the United States and in Europe, are holding up a big STOP sign on the accelerating process of globalization and its dislocations.

This is where the solutions to the problem must begin—with a refounding within established democratic societies of fundamental norms of human dignity, citizen participation, transparency, and accountability at all levels of governance, including in the corporate sector. Leaders of all stripes—from mayors and local officials to presidents, prime ministers, and business CEOs—must reaffirm and implement the norms of peaceful dialogue, mutual respect, compromise, and the rule of law. Parents and educators bear an especially important responsibility for teaching the moral and ethical values that have underpinned several decades of relative peace and prosperity. Journalists must do a better job of depoliticizing their coverage of the news and technology companies must do more to clean up abuse of their social media platforms.

Middle power democracies, like the six reviewed here, have a potentially positive role to play if they can revive their once promising paths to sustainable democratic development. As they have demonstrably benefited from the upside of economic globalization and democratization, they

should also become more responsible stewards and shapers of our interdependent system. They now need to step up and share the burden of managing a more multipolar world that aligns with their own democratic values and interests.

To do so, they should lead by example, as South Korea has done, to balance economic growth with equity, or as South Africa has done on gender empowerment. India's impressive record in managing free and fair elections at a massive scale should be emulated; its recent court decisions upholding a constitutional right to privacy are also laudable. Brazil should get credit for its efforts to uproot chronic corruption and lift millions out of poverty. These and other examples from around the world can serve as inspirations for other societies striving to revive the democratic experiment, including in older democracies of the West.

This, however, is not enough. Middle power democracies have an obligation to realign their foreign policies toward an enlightened multilateralism in which national interests in protecting core democratic values at home and abroad coincide with, rather than degrade, the demands of protecting the global commons. This would entail a different approach to their foreign policies than seen to date. For instance, beyond rhetorical support for democracy and human rights, these states should contribute more resources (funds and personnel) to the key institutions engaged in upholding those values, such as the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and regional bodies. They should take the initiative to build coalitions at the U.N. General Assembly and Human Rights Council to address the worst cases, such as Syria, Venezuela, Myanmar, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in meaningful ways. They should take leadership roles in advancing implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 16 on access to justice, and mainstream those goals in their development assistance strategies. They could work with other like-minded states to defend the

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U.N.'s peacekeeping and human rights budgets from attempts by Russia and China (and the Trump administration) to cut them. They could take steps in their bilateral and regional relations to isolate, condemn, and punish egregious violators while supporting democratic reformers. As they grapple with gross corruption scandals, they should do more to support transnational law enforcement cooperation to curtail money laundering and return stolen assets.

These and other middle power democracies should take leadership roles on other key issues that put meaning into the "liberal" part of the international order, such as protecting civil society from attack, particularly by China and Russia; promoting right to information laws; defending a free, neutral, and open internet system; improving access to education and health care, especially for women and girls; and holding transnational corporations to agreed-upon guidelines on human rights. Corruption, which impairs all democracies, is increasingly understood not only as a transnational phenomenon that facilitates crime but also as a major impediment to the provision of basic public services like clean water, healthy food, and adequate shelter. It deserves to be high on the list of any multilateral effort that seeks to strengthen a rules-based international order.

The diplomatic options for fostering cooperation to uphold the international liberal order are many—the Community of Democracies, International IDEA, and the Open Government Partnership readily come to mind as appropriate fora—but they are not enough. Middle power democracies should form their own coalitions to work together in other international institutions to block the growing trend toward zero-sum nationalism and propose positive initiatives like the ones outlined above. Akin to the G-20 affinity group known as MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, the Republic of Korea, Turkey, and Australia), these six democracies (dubbed, perhaps, as IBSAKIM) could proactively operate at the United Nations with other like-minded democracies to share the burden of good global governance. Without such an effort to build pragmatic solidarity among democracies, they too will face mounting pressure to take sides—either for or against the Trump administration's attempts to cast away international norms and the anti-democratic regimes of China and Russia. Surely their own democracies will suffer as a result.

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