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Exploring the Global South: Politics, Perceptions, and Development Challenges

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Introduction

The term “Global South” has experienced a resurgence in usage due to recent geopolitical developments. It describes the political and economic divisions that exist around the world. The intensifying struggle between the United States and China mirrors the bipolar tensions of the Cold War, a time when many countries found themselves caught in the middle of a superpower conflict. Russia’s aggressive actions in Ukraine have increased pressure on developing countries to take a stand—either aligning with the democratic West or siding with authoritarian forces like China and Russia. However, many of these nations are understandably hesitant to make such a divisive choice (Patrick & Huggins, 2023).

Recent geopolitical events, including the post-pandemic global order, the economic consequences of the conflict in Ukraine, and the escalating climate crisis, have exposed the glaring inequalities present in the global economy. Additionally, these developments highlight the vulnerability of lower- and middle-income nations to crises stemming from political, economic, and ecological challenges, many of which they have contributed to.

World leaders as well as academics have overly explored the term ‘Global South’ in recent times, for instance, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on November 2022 has said “*Many countries of the Global South face huge debts, increasing poverty and hunger, and the growing impacts of the climate crisis*” while he was speaking on when the world population reached 8 billion (Eight Billion People; One Humanity. - Op-Ed by António Guterres, 2024).

World Bank President Ajay Banga, alongside U.S. President Joe Biden and his dedicated team, which includes the national security adviser and the secretary of commerce, has introduced a visionary new initiative that is truly inspiring. What is even more uplifting is that leaders from the countries they represent fully support this endeavour. During a press conference on June 22, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasised that “*empowering the voices of the Global South*” is a central aim of India’s G20 leadership. In her address at the UN General Assembly in September 2023, Indonesia’s Foreign Minister Retno LP Marsudi powerfully emphasised, “The

current global framework serves only a privileged few” (Brooke-Holland, 2024). The West might have coined the term to define the distinct realities of the North vs the South. However, it also signifies the very conceptualisation of international politics from the perspective of the southern nations. For instance, as early as March 1947, on the very eve of independence, the country hosted the Conference on Asian Relations to bring together a diverse range of countries, including China, Indonesia, Egypt, the Arab League, Australia, and many of the Soviet republics (Rossow, 2025). While the world was still recovering from the aftermath of the World War II and subsequent geopolitical transformations, the then Vice President of the Viceroy’s Executive Council, Jawaharlal Nehru has argued at the inaugural Asian Relation Conference in New Delhi on March 1947 that “One of the notable consequence of the European domination of Asia has been the isolation of the countries of Asia from one another”. However, “as that domination goes, the walls that surrounded us fall, and we look at each other again and meet as old friends long parted” (Ibid).

Post-colonial India decided to craft a powerful foreign policy that would neither align with its former ruler nor with its adversaries, and to remain nonaligned. As a modern nation, India has remained mindful of its theoretical foundations of foreign policy, while developing hard-power tools based on its defence technology and outbound foreign investment.

The Meaning and Approaches

Carl Oglesby, a prominent American writer and activist aligned with the New Left, is credited with coining the influential term “*Global South*” in 1969. In a compelling editorial published in the Catholic journal *Commonweal* amid the turbulent backdrop of the Vietnam War, he argued that the North’s dominance over the Global South had converged to create an untenable social order. At that juncture, the prevailing Western perspective segmented the world into three distinct categories, a framework initially articulated by French demographer Alfred Sauvy in 1952. (Patrick & Huggins, 2023) This model comprised a “First World,” which included the United States and its Western allies; a “Second World,” represented by the Soviet Union and its Eastern bloc satellites; and a “Third World,” encompassing developing nations, many of which were newly liberated from colonial rule.

The term “Global South” began to resonate more widely as a synonym for the Third World during the 1970s, particularly amid urgent calls for a New International Economic Order. Its significance was profoundly amplified by the 1980 Brandt Report, an essential document produced by an international commission led by former West German Chancellor Willy Brandt. This landmark report set a critical precedent by distinguishing between countries with significantly higher GDP per capita, predominantly situated in the Northern Hemisphere, and those that lagged economically. Most of the latter group was identified as lying south of the so-called Brandt Line—a conceptual boundary extending from the Rio Grande into the Gulf of Mexico, then across the Atlantic Ocean, the Mediterranean Sea, and the vast regions of Central Asia, to the Pacific Ocean.

The Brandt Line



Source: <https://www.bisa.ac.uk/articles/brandt-line-after-forty-years-more-north-south-relations-change-more-they-stay-same>

However, it is crucial to recognise that this geographical delineation, while thought-provoking, was not entirely precise. For instance, nations labelled as “southern,” such as India, are entirely in the Northern Hemisphere, while countries like “northern” Australia and New Zealand are south of the equator. Such inaccuracies underscore the complexity of global economic disparities and the need for a nuanced understanding of the Global South that transcends simplistic geographic categorisations. Embracing this broader perspective is essential for addressing the profound challenges and inequities faced by nations around the world today.

The term has more of a political and diplomatic use rather than the real geographical marking; however, it can be understood with five distinct approaches (Bull & Banik, 2025):

1. As a Label for the ‘Developing’ World

The countries share specific economic characteristics, especially low income and limited industrialisation. Majorly, these countries were the ex-colonies and either they had shared their economic progress in the late 1940s and 50s, however, the challenge, as Prof. Sebastian Haug (Haug et al., 2021) pointed out, is that ‘research on the Global South’ often occurs without a consideration of what this framing implies.

2. Global South as Geographical Marking

The dilemma is to define the “Global South” solely as countries in the southern hemisphere, which would overlook the vital contributions of powerful nations like India and China. Despite their geographic position north of the equator, these countries are undeniably key players in shaping the dynamics of the Global South (Nye, 2023). Prof. Kleinschmidt (2018) argues that ‘Global’ to ‘South’ aimed to illustrate the complex relationship between geography, social hierarchies, and economic inequalities, while also facilitating the inclusion of marginalised groups located outside of the geographical South.

3. Global South as a Political and Diplomatic Project and Alliance

The Global South represents not just a continuation but a vital evolution of the principles championed by the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Third World concept that emerged during the Cold War. Rooted in pivotal initiatives such as the 1974 Declaration on the Establishment of a New Economic Order and brought to light through the influential 1980 Brandt Report, the term embodies the shared vision of nations striving for a fair and just global economic landscape. The Global South is a powerful call to action for collective progress and a more equitable world for all; it manifests in decolonial struggles for tangible political and institutional change. Along with the NAM are efforts such as the Group of 77 (G77), which was established as a platform for collective efforts of the ‘developing countries’ or the ‘Third World’ and has become a foremost cooperation for South-South Cooperation (SSC). The G77 has 134 member states; it is also referred to as G77+China because of its active participation and support.

The establishment of BRICS is often associated with the Global South’s concerns regarding the structure and operation of the global economic system (Carvalho, 2023). The BRICS declaration contains multiple references to the term Global South, which is used as a distinctive geographical and ethical signifier. In recent times, at various G20 summits, especially in Indonesia (2022), India (2023), Brazil (2024) and South Africa (2025), the member nations have highlighted the Global South’s priorities. However, the glaring inconsistency in the definition of the Global South as ‘developing’, ‘ex-colonies’ or nations with ‘Low economies’ is the inclusion of Russia in the BRICS. In response to contradictions, Russia has promoted terms such as “the global majority” and emphasised a “multipolar world order.” However, its alignment with the Global South suggests that this group is defined more by opposition to the West than by shared historical or developmental traits. However, as Parrick and Huggins are concerned about the tendency to use the Global South as a Homogenised group of nations, this oversimplification may be diminishing the agency of their

varied actors. Honouring diverse identities and meaningful engagement are needed (Patrick & Huggins, 2023).

4. Realm of Transformation and Emancipation

This approach holds that the Global South should be understood not only in terms of structural inequalities but also as a collective aspiration to challenge them and to lead a transformation of the world order. As Prof. Abbondanzieri (2024) mentioned, the Global South should be understood as ‘represents fertile ground for rethinking inherited categories, reflecting on repeated practices, and questioning imposed narratives’, which implies that the diversity of interests, resources, and political visions among actors in the Global South should be seen not as a hurdle to overcome, but as a powerful asset. This richness of perspectives can ignite the creation of innovative frameworks, compelling narratives, and transformative opportunities that can reshape our world. Embracing this diversity is essential for driving meaningful global change.

5. Reconceptualisation of the Term

This approach signifies a crucial shift away from viewing the Global South through a deficit lens, which often reduces it to a mere state of ‘underdevelopment’ or an ‘Other’ category. Instead, it embraces a bold affirmation of shared histories, common challenges, and collective aspirations for development, justice, and dignity. This change transcends mere rhetoric; it reflects significant shifts in the global geopolitical and socio-economic context.

To summarise this section, there is substantial political utility in the terms, but they have the potential to obscure the diverse and often conflicting realities they seek to unify. At the same time, this categorisation may mask internal power asymmetries, divergent interests, and uneven contributions to global transformation among those grouped under its umbrella.

Changing World Order and Global South

The world order in International relations reflects a systematic pattern of activities that advance the goals of dominant nations, supported by a framework of institutions and organisations that establish key norms and rules. Currently, the world order is undergoing a reordering, widely seen as unstable or in flux (Demko & Wood, 2018), and there has been a significant upheaval in established norms (Legler, 2020). As Nilsen aptly describes it, we find ourselves in an interregnum—a crucial period between hegemonies in which the existing rules are actively being renegotiated, yet a new consensus remains elusive. (Nilsen, 2025).

Indicators of a shifting world order can be seen in the weakening of the liberal, Western-led order that has fundamentally structured global politics in the mid-twentieth century. Ikenberry (2018) has suggested that the classic Western-led world order had served the world by expanding trade, globalising finance, and fostering technological interconnectivity, while the rules were framed around the sovereignty of states and human rights. Scholars have noted that the liberal order’s capacity to organise is selective and uneven, with some calling it a ‘myth’ (Chowdhury, 2018). While often portrayed as a coherent system promoting free trade and multilateral cooperation, its application is inconsistent.

However, its decline may be due to internal contradictions, including the tension between nationalism, which legitimises domestic political authority, and internationalism, which sustains global cooperation, as well as the reproduction of inequalities at multiple levels. The tension between the two has eroded the normative foundation of the world order; for instance, many scholars have cited China’s consistent challenge to the Western-led, rules-based order (Jones, 2020; Malkin, 2020; Schuman et al., 2023). The decline of the liberal order and the competition between the United States and China are often viewed as a zero-sum game, with the Global South relegated to a supporting role, expected to align with one power bloc. In this context, China’s engagement with

the Global South is primarily seen as a strategy to build alliances to advance its own interests. The US-China rivalry will continue to influence the global order, but the emergence of a ‘multipolar world order’ allows more actors to shape global governance. The Global South is not just reacting to these changes; it is actively shaping the new order (Braveboy-Wagner, 2024).

India provides a compelling example of a modern approach to foreign policy. In his 2020 book, *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World*, India’s Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar presents a pragmatic, transactional framework in which traditional alliances evolve into relationships with ‘frenemies’ (Jaishankar, 2020, p. 39). He advocates for a foreign policy built on ‘realism’, ‘realpolitik’, and a firm focus on ‘hard security’. Key strategies such as the ‘management of differences’ and ‘pragmatic settlement’ further emphasise this approach. Within this ‘*transactional bazaar*’ of global politics (Jaishankar, 2020, p. 39), India is strategically positioned to leverage global contradictions to bolster its own national interests.

India and the Global South

The evolving global landscape is opening exciting opportunities for India to enhance its influence on the world stage. As we transition from an era of U.S. unipolarity to one marked by fierce competition among great powers, the relevance of emerging economies is becoming increasingly apparent. India stands at a pivotal moment, with a rapidly expanding economy and an arsenal of hard-power capabilities poised for substantial growth. With vital interests in the international arena, it is no wonder that India is reclaiming its central role in dialogues among nations that once embraced the principles of nonalignment. This resurgence signals a transformative shift, positioning India as a formidable player and a key architect of a more equitable global order.

India’s ascent as a global economic powerhouse will undoubtedly attract countries eager to forge stronger ties. By positioning itself as “a friend to all and an enemy to none,” India is poised to amplify its diplomatic influence on the world stage. However, the pursuit of “strategic autonomy” will face significant challenges, as nations may increasingly urge India to take a stance in critical global conflicts, from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine to the longstanding Israeli-Palestinian tensions and its complex relationship with Iran (Rossow, 2025).

India has actively worked to unite Global South countries to advocate for reform in international institutions. Since the 1990s, it has emerged as a prominent voice for developing nations at the World Trade Organisation (WTO), where officials note that developed countries essentially set the agenda. India highlights that issues like agricultural market access adversely affect poorer nations and demands discussions that ensure protections for them. Additionally, India routinely calls for governance reforms at the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the Nuclear Suppliers Group, and the International Telecommunication Union. India had advocated the principles of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities within the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

India’s Foreign Policy has navigated between the two prominent poles of stasis and change. PM Modi has cautioned against an “adversarial relationship” with the Global North and warned that the alternative to an inclusive international order is “a world that is adrift, that becomes more fragmented”.

India’s approach to global order involves three main strategies (Rossow, 2025):

1. *Reforming International Institutions*: India aims to enhance its authority in global governance by advocating reforms to international financial institutions, improving the functioning of organisations, reducing state influence in multilateral systems, and pursuing comprehensive UN reforms, particularly regarding the UNSC.

2. *Plurilateral Omni-Alignment*: Moving away from its historical nonalignment, India is adopting a strategy of “plurilateral omni-alignment,” seeking strategic autonomy through simultaneous partnerships with significant powers and coalitions of Global South countries. This includes participation in various multilateral organisations.
3. *Expanding Regional Relations*: India is focusing on strengthening ties with its immediate neighbours to counter Chinese economic influence in South Asia. Initiatives like the Colombo Security Conclave and strategic investments, such as interest-free loans to the Maldives and a long-term energy agreement with Sri Lanka, aim to enhance India’s regional presence and economic engagement.

India in the Era of Multi-Alignment

Indian foreign policy, with its pragmatic focus on strategic autonomy, is effectively steering the country through the turbulent waters of a multipolar world characterised by escalating US-China tensions. What sets this approach apart is the deepened commitment to multi-alignment—an essential aspect of strategic autonomy—made possible by India’s increasing stature as a rising power. As a prominent advocate for the Global South, Delhi is not just participating in the international arena; it is shaping the discourse and redefining its role on the global stage.

Multi-alignment has enhanced India’s room to manoeuvre in decision-making by cultivating a diverse network of strategic partnerships and relations. In the words of Indian Foreign Minister Jaishankar (2020: 10), “[t]his is a time for us to engage America, manage China, cultivate Europe, reassure Russia, bring Japan into play, draw neighbours in, extend the neighbourhood and expand traditional constituencies of support”.

To quote Ambassador Ashok Sajjanhar, India’s partnership with the Global South has achieved great heights in recent times. Honourable PM has organised the first Voice of the Global South Summit (VOGSS) on 12-13 January 2023, parallel to India’s G20 Presidency. India’s development assistance initiatives for Global South nations illustrate its commitment to being a proactive partner in progress. Through the *Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC)* program, India has empowered over 160 countries by providing essential training, capacity building, and technical assistance. This program covers a wide range of areas, including healthcare, education, agriculture, and information technology, thereby contributing to human resource development in the Global South.

Four Distinct Areas of Cooperation May Define India’s “Global South Partnership” for Development

A. Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) & “The India Stack”

India has transitioned from achieving domestic milestones to engaging in global initiatives.

- *Fintech Diplomacy*: The Unified Payments Interface (UPI) is now operational or in the pilot phase in several Global South countries, including Namibia, Sri Lanka, and parts of Southeast Asia.
- *Social Impact Fund*: India’s \$25 million commitment to a Social Impact Fund aims to help smaller nations develop their own digital identity systems (similar to Aadhaar) and payment systems, thereby promoting financial inclusion.

B. Health & Pharmaceutical Leadership

India proudly reclaims its title as the “Pharmacy of the World,” transitioning from merely supplying medicines and vaccines during the COVID-19 pandemic to becoming a pivotal force in enhancing global health resilience.

- *Generic Medicines*: By providing affordable, high-quality generic medications, India is making a significant impact in countries across Africa and the Caribbean, ensuring that essential

healthcare is accessible to those in need.

- *Regulatory Capacity*: India is taking the initiative by actively training drug regulators in Global South nations, empowering them to establish their own robust pharmaceutical safety standards. This commitment fosters self-sufficiency and ensures safer medications globally.

C. The Global Development Compact

In a bold move, Prime Minister Modi proposed the Global Development Compact in late 2024, centred around transformative goals:

- *Trade for Development*: By reducing trade barriers for Least Developed Countries (LDCs), India is championing economic growth and equitable opportunities for all.
- *Concessional Finance*: Instead of imposing “debt-trap” loans common among other major powers, India offers project-specific grants that foster sustainable development without compromising countries’ financial integrity.

D. Climate Justice & Energy Transition

India stands firm in its advocacy for “Common but Differentiated Responsibilities” (CBDR), emphasising the importance of equitable climate action.

- *International Solar Alliance (ISA)*: With 121 member nations, many from the Global South, the ISA showcases India’s leadership in combating climate change and promoting renewable energy initiatives vital to our planet’s future.
- *Mission LiFE (Lifestyle for Environment)*: Through Mission LiFE, India is inspiring a global shift towards sustainable consumption—a narrative that resonates deeply with developing nations that bear the harshest impacts of climate change despite being its least responsible contributors.

Conclusion

The Global South should not be viewed merely as a singular entity; rather, it is a rich and intricate landscape of geopolitical, normative, and developmental dynamics. By exploring the varied interpretations of this term, we assert that the Global South is best understood as a concept rooted in history, yet fluid and evolving. It derives its strength from a shared legacy of marginalization and exploitation, while also being propelled by a myriad of distinct paths and aspirations. As the global landscape undergoes significant shifts, the Global South emerges as a crucial battleground for both tangible struggles and symbolic challenges. In key areas such as climate negotiations, trade policies, and development finance, the term increasingly serves as a platform for advocating alternative visions of global collaboration and progress.

The complexity of the current global economic landscape has intensified due to recent policy shifts. The rise of U.S. protectionism under the Trump administration, coupled with a substantial increase in tariffs, has disrupted international trade flows and undermined the legitimacy of established liberal economic institutions. Concurrently, the reduction of USAID—one of the principal development agencies in the Global North—along with the scaling back of other U.S.-led development initiatives, has weakened Washington’s influence in critical regions. This has opened the door for nations like China, India, Brazil, and emerging powers in the Middle East to expand their reach through South-South cooperation and bilateral agreements, significantly reshaping the geopolitical landscape.

The Global South is not only distinguished by its growing influence on the world stage but also by significant internal strife, exemplified by ongoing border disputes between major players like China and India. This dynamic suggests that the ascent of the Global South will involve a complex interplay of expanding power and persistent internal conflicts. These structural contradictions will

play a crucial role in shaping and engaging with global governance in the years to come.

India's geopolitical relationships with the Global South have changed significantly over the years, reflecting its growing economic power, strategic interests, and ambitions to become a significant global player. India's proactive engagement with the Global South underscores its commitment to a multipolar world in which developing nations have a meaningful voice in global affairs. Through ongoing efforts in diplomacy, economic cooperation, and strategic partnerships, India is well-positioned to play a crucial role in the evolving dynamics of the Global South.

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