

The Rise of the Global South

The Global South is in vogue; everyone cannot get enough of them. China and Russia say they are the future and solicit their support and the West who for long neglected them now see them as essential to maintaining a liberal future. With the global balance of power in a flux the future structure of the global economy will according to many need to take account of the global South.

Traditional geopolitics has historically viewed the world from an East-West paradigm. The world's wealthiest nations, largest militaries and most prosperous nations are present there. This was usually based on their access to navigable rivers that allowed trade and communication. Nations that reside in the Global North saw their key relationships and competition to be in the north and this is why they had an east-west outlook.

The Global North therefore refers to the industrialised and wealthy nations whilst the south refers to developing nations who unlike the north have commodity-based economies rather than industrialised and service based economies. The global economy for the last 500 years favours the north and was constructed by them, whilst historically the Global South has been characterised by a high degree of economic disparity.

The Global South nations were what has long been considered the periphery of the geopolitical system. They react to events rather than drive them. When the bi-polar world emerged after WW2 the world became a battleground between the Soviet Union and the US who both wanted to expand their influence and incorporate the world into their blocs. Many nations of the world came to see this battle as a threat to their autonomy. Whilst they saw both powers as useful for finance and arms, they couldn't do anything outside the global order or even remain neutral.

In this context the non-aligned movement emerged, and the G-77 emerged to address the economic challenges. Both didn't achieve much as they had little influence over global events. The stagnation, unemployment and liquidity crunch in the 1970s led many to accumulate debt by the 1970s and when the Cold War ended the Global south remained marginalised in the post-Cold War geopolitical system.

With the global liberal order undermined and the global economic system only serving the Global North a number of nations from the Global South with their commodity-based economies want to take a different path. Brazil and India have emerged as leaders in the field. India is key for Russia from an economic perspective and politically for the US. Brazil's commodity based economy has become important for China as well as Europe. Meanwhile, the Central Asian nations are being courted by Russia, Turkey, China, the US and Europe.

The emerging competition amongst the Global North is seeing competition between them for the favour of the Global South. For most of the last 500 years the Global North dominated global politics and economics and set the rules for engagement with the Global South. Going forward the Global North faces demographic and economic challenges the north will rely more on the Global South. This geopolitical reality saw France give an overture to attend the BRICS summit in August 2023, but Xi Jinping turned the offer down.

Japan published a document in 2023 that highlighted the growing importance of the Global south to the international system. Its white paper on International Economy and Trade divided the global economy into three blocs: the West, led by the US, the East, led by China and Russia; and neutral nations. It said that building and strengthening cooperation with the Global South was a priority, with particular emphasis on India.

Can the Global South become a new pole in the world? The Global South does face a number of challenges in achieving this. The "Global South" has no legal or political reality, it's a term of convenience. Most of the Global South's interactions occur at the bilateral level. Many Global South nations suffer from chronic domestic instability, which is a major obstacle in taking advantage of the trends that are emerging. If the Global South was to start acting on the world rather than living at the mercy of the North, this would mark a major change in the 21st century.

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