

The Global South and India: Opportunities and Challenges

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- India aspires to champion the concerns of developing nations, demonstrated by hosting the Voice of Global South Summit before the 2023 G-20 meeting and advocating for the African Union's G-20 membership. However, challenges for India persist, including China's substantial influence in the Global South and strained relations with its neighbours. Additionally, emerging powers like South Africa, Brazil, and Indonesia compete for leadership. India must collaborate with other nations in a multilateral framework to effectively represent the Global South, leveraging collective strength to navigate these complexities and establish a unified voice.

Introduction

'Global South' has recently become a popular expression in global politics.

The amorphous term includes a large group of countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America that are socially and economically underdeveloped, developing or has reached a certain level of development but not quite the level of the Global North of prosperous and industrialised nations in Northern America, Europe, and some in Asia (Japan and South Korea) and Oceania (Australia and New Zealand).

Major North and South powers seek engagement with the Global South countries because of their combined population size, economic potential, and growing political voice.

However, the North-South engagement has become less effective because of the perceived self-interest of the developed countries, such as on climate issues. It was also the case during the global pandemic when the North prioritised its interests over the needs of developing countries.

The war in Ukraine has further opened the cleavage between the two groups of nation-states. While the North staunchly stood with Ukraine and strongly opposed Russia, most countries of the South did not openly criticise Russia or offer support to Ukraine. They continued their diplomatic business as usual and did not choose one over the other.

South-South Cooperation and India

South-South Cooperation is not new but has become more salient in an era of strategic competition and cleavage between the North and South. Moreover, some prosperous Global South nations have significant resources and willingness to assist less developed countries, while Global North countries are losing their economic clout and willingness to assist the less fortunate. For example, the Second Trump administration has frozen its aid program.

China, for example, is the world's number two economic power while still in the category of developing countries and, hence, in the Global South, as stated by its foreign minister, Wang Yi, in a statement in July 2023. It has actively created its zone of influence within developing countries through its massive infrastructure financing and development projects institutionalised through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its initiatives in the multilateral and multilateral institutions such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation).

Although India has historically been a significant player in raising challenges of fellow developing countries, it has fallen much behind China.

India's critical role in the non-aligned movement and its initiatives to bring post-colonial Afro-Asian nations together under the leadership of its first prime minister, Jawaharlal

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Nehru, bears out India's history of engaging and raising the concerns of developing countries on world forums.

As a member of the Global South, India today seeks to engage the Global South to leverage its position as a major global actor.

India is no longer content with being a 'swing state' or merely a rule-taker; it aims to be a 'leading power' and enhance its international status in the hierarchy of nation-states.

During its role as Chair of the G-20 and host of the 2023 summit in New Delhi, India proposed and succeeded in including the African Union as a full member of the G-20.

India hosted a Voice of Global South summit before the G-20 summit and communicated its concerns to all G-20 members, including Global South and Global North countries. Since then, New Delhi has held two subsequent summits in November 2023 and August 2024. India proudly recounts its role in providing COVID-19 vaccines to the Global South at a time when its population was not fully vaccinated, in contrast to the Global North, which put its interest first.

Strengths of India

India is the only country in the Quad (Australia, Japan, the US and India) that is not a security ally of the US, nor does it intend to join an alliance of any sort. It has argued for and followed a policy of non-alignment, that is, not to join any camp, manifested in recent times in the narrative of strategic autonomy and multi-alignment, or the 'India way'. This positions India as a 'neutral' actor within the Global South.

While not joining any group, India has significantly improved its economic and security ties with the United States and the collective West, including Europe, Japan and Australia. At the same time, it has not weakened its traditionally close engagement with Russia, reflected in its stance on the Ukraine war and significantly increased trade with Russia (a record increase to \$66bn in 2024 according to an article of the *Economic Times*, Nov.27, 2024) amid the ongoing war.

India has developed strong ties with the West while not losing its partnership with Russia, a country that the West condemns through sanctions and opprobrium. India's diplomatic capacity and skill to juggle so many balls that move in different directions without dropping any is unique. Being in both camps could be a serious weakness in world politics, but India has leveraged this to its advantage and improved its status globally.

Challenges and Hurdles

India is in direct competition with China, which has greater financial contribution, technological edge, political clout and a history of engagement with the Global South. Cooperation in global politics between China and India is few and far between except through their membership in the G-20, the SCO and BRICS. Their ongoing unresolved territorial dispute divides them more than they unite on global issues.

A more significant challenge for India is its immediate neighbourhood. All six other South Asian countries are underdeveloped, least developed, or developing and have political and diplomatic tensions with each other. The only region-wide South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is non-functional, mainly due to an ongoing tense relationship and irreconcilable differences between India and Pakistan.

A cycle of improvement and derailment in the inter-state relationship is a constant feature of South Asia. Bangladesh, the only country with which India had a degree of stable relationship for many years, has come unstuck with the ousting of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her refuge in India. Japan and India supported the Hasina government to develop infrastructure and improve trade bilaterally and multilaterally. Now, there are strong anti-India sentiments in Bangladesh. With an interim government in Dhaka and the resultant political uncertainty, it is unclear how the country will recover and pick up its economic growth path.

Because of India's strained relations with most of its neighbouring countries, New Delhi has a constrained role overall in the development process of its neighbouring countries. Furthermore, the growing Chinese influence around India offers significant strategic road bumps, challenging New Delhi's role as an effective voice of the Global South.

Furthermore, new actors are emerging on the horizon: Brazil and South Africa, for example, and another Asian power, Indonesia, especially under its new President, Prabowo Subianto. Additionally, global south countries are not one unit and do not always have the same dreams, although they share the same bed.

How India leads as a key player and engages other competitors and like-minded countries to make a political pact that amplifies the voice and positions of the Global South internationally will determine India's leadership role as a bridge between the North and South and a powerful spokesperson of the Global South.

(Purnendra Jain/ The University of Adelaide)