



Gulf Research Center
Knowledge for All



Illusion vs. Reality: Understanding the Global South

Saleh Al-Khathlan

Professor of Political Science and Senior Advisor

Gulf Research Center



@Gulf_Research Gulfresearchcenter gulfresearchcenter gulfresearchcenter

Recently, the concept of the Global South has been gaining significant attention, indicating—according to its proponents—a shift in the international order towards a more active and independent role for developing countries on the global stage, breaking away from the dependency that these nations have suffered for decades. The term Global South is used to describe countries outside the advanced development and cultural paradigm of the West, which is often propagated as the ideal model for humanity. These countries follow a distinct developmental path, differing from the Western model, and do not share the same progress trajectories or dominant cultural frameworks. Instead, they seek to develop approaches that meet their unique aspirations and circumstances, achieving strategic independence.

Defining the Global South

There is no precise definition of the Global South; some view it as a substitute for the concept of developing countries, while others see it merely as a political concept used in the competition among major powers. The shared reality of being outside the Western developmental and cultural framework is not sufficient to define the Global South,

which is often discussed with optimistic and prophetic language, envisioning it as the source of transformation that will end the world's suffering from hegemony, arrogance, and the ongoing concerns about international security and peace due to the imbalance of power distribution between a superior West and a struggling non-Western world.

Understanding the Global South, particularly as it is seen as a rising competitor to major powers, requires examining the countries frequently mentioned when this term is used. Countries such as South Africa, Brazil, India, Mexico, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, and Nigeria are often associated with the Global South. Proponents of the Global South concept rely on the diplomatic activities of these specific countries, which



are perceived as adopting independent and active foreign policies, resisting Western pressures to align with Western interests against China and Russia. These countries' resistance to such pressures and refusal to align have resulted in the emergence of a new power called the Global South.

According to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, "The Global South countries have begun to pursue independent foreign policies, guided primarily by their national interests." Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi agrees, highlighting that independence is a defining feature of the Global South, stating that the Global South "is no longer the 'silent majority' but has become a major force for reforming the international system

and a source of hope in a world undergoing unprecedented changes."¹

Proponents of the concept argue that the newfound independence in addressing regional and international issues is the essence of the Global South, which explains the enthusiasm of China and Russia for this concept and the frequent references to it by their officials. However, this concept faces a fundamental issue: it reflects desire and hope more than it describes reality.

It is essential to note that discussing an independent foreign policy for the Global South countries implies that these countries previously lacked such independence in their foreign decisions. This assumption does not align with the historical and political realities of these nations, many of which have pursued independent foreign policies for decades, reflecting their visions and striving to achieve their national interests free from the influence of major powers. Thus, depicting the active diplomatic engagement of Global South countries as a new phenomenon ignores a long history of these countries' efforts to assert their independence in foreign decisions and adopt policies that primarily reflect their national interests.

”

There is no precise definition of the Global South; some view it as a substitute for the concept of developing countries, while others see it merely as a political concept used in the competition

“

among major powers.



Explaining Developing Countries' Position on Sanctions Against Russia

While the term Global South is not new, its use has increased significantly since Russia invaded Ukraine and the subsequent Western sanctions. Russia views the majority of countries' stance on these sanctions as evidence of the emergence of the Global South rejecting dependency. The most significant indicator used by Russia to signal the rise of the Global South is the refusal of most countries to participate in the unprecedented economic sanctions imposed by Western countries on Russia.

Indeed, most countries outside the “Western camp” did not join the sanctions against Russia, despite some facing pressures from the sanctioning countries. A notable example is the attempts by the United States and the

European Union to persuade their traditional OPEC partners to stop coordinating with Russia within the OPEC+ framework, which maintained favorable price levels and mitigated the impact of sanctions on the Russian economy. Many countries continued their trade and economic relations with Russia despite Western sanctions. However, viewing these countries' positions from the perspective of the Global South as an independent collective movement against the West involves some exaggeration. The maintenance of the OPEC+ framework and the continued cooperation of countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America with Russia result from objective needs and economic conditions, not an outright rejection of Western dominance.

“

The concept of the Global South implies a shared identity among the countries forming a new power on the international stage.

”



These countries saw no benefit in entangling themselves in a conflict geographically and culturally distant from them, opting instead to declare political positions through UN General Assembly resolutions without participating in punitive measures that hold no justification from a national interest perspective for any of the Global South countries. History shows the reluctance of countries to participate in punitive actions against others, even if they oppose their policies, as seen in the differing responses of Arab countries towards Egypt after its peace treaty with Israel, or the varied approaches of Gulf countries towards Iran despite a unified condemnation of its interventions.

Moreover, increasing uncertainty and turbulence in the international system make countries more cautious in preserving as many options as possible and avoiding collective actions, especially when they have no role in shaping them. Western countries rushed to impose economic sanctions on Russia, expecting other countries to join in isolating Russia from the global economy. This assumption is unrealistic; countries will only participate in restrictive measures after ensuring they align with their national interests and do not impact their international

relations. The assumption ignores the significant variation in countries' interests and challenges. For example, some countries may find that joining these sanctions negatively affects their economy and international relations more than any potential benefits. This means countries must conduct a thorough assessment to determine if participating in these sanctions serves their interests and identify alternative options that may be more effective in achieving the desired goals without sacrificing their national interests.

The concept of the Global South implies a shared identity among the countries forming this new power on the international stage, coordinating their efforts to assert their independence from the collective West (another term frequently used by Russian officials). The countries mentioned above, as representatives of the Global South, according to its proponents, approach regional and international issues and manage their foreign relations based on individual national interests, without taking any joint action that could indicate a common Global South identity. So far, no bilateral or collective communiqués from these countries have mentioned the Global South or the necessity to coordinate positions to protect its interests.



The increasing activity of these countries on the international stage does not mean they have suddenly gained independence in their foreign decisions or are no longer under Western hegemony, as Russian and Chinese officials implicitly suggested. A realistic explanation for this activity is the larger space available for them to maneuver due to the major powers' preoccupation with their strategic competition and internal challenges (migration, inflation, polarization), which provided other countries with more room for "independent" movement without worrying about repercussions, benefiting from these powers' efforts to attract them to their side.

If we replace the term Global South with "influential southern countries," we would undoubtedly observe notable international activity by countries such as South Africa, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Brazil, and Indonesia. Their diplomatic efforts serve not just the narrow national interests but also express solidarity and responsibility, reflecting their capacity and status that enable them to contribute to the global agenda.

The intensified diplomatic activity of these countries may justify the use of the term Global South. The problem with this term,

compared to the more realistic "influential southern countries," is that the former implies collective action or movement, which we have yet to see confirmed. However, the absence of this characteristic does not negate these countries' efforts to play larger roles on regional and international stages and influence the global agenda. They continue to pursue these roles individually, benefiting from increased maneuvering space. Until these countries begin to coordinate their actions in a consistent manner reflecting the solidarity among them, the Global South will remain more of a goal than a reality.

But let us assume there is indeed a Global South, "partnering with Russia to democratize the international system, eliminate neo-colonial practices, and prohibit the use of



Proponents of the concept argue that the newfound independence in addressing regional and international issues is the essence of the Global South.



political, monetary, and financial pressure tools, (Lavrov)”,² and has become a “main force for reforming the international system,” as stated by the Chinese Foreign Minister. The experience of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), led by prominent countries like Egypt, India, Indonesia, and Yugoslavia, does not bode well for any coalition of countries united only by a general vision of the world, given their significant differences in capabilities, goals, and objective constraints on their foreign policies.

What Does History Say

The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) has made the establishment of a New International Economic Order (NIEO) its primary objective, issuing statements and

appeals for several decades without any result, as complaints about the injustice of the international economic system continue. In the recent NAM summit in Uganda in January 2024, the final communiqué called for “the establishment of a new, just, and equitable international economic order that considers the needs and characteristics of the Global South and removes all obstacles to the development of national capacities.”³ A single glance at the 280-page final communiqué, which addressed every regional and global issue, reveals the limited impact of a movement with 120 member states.

Similarly, another southern grouping, the Group of 77 (G77), established in 1964 as a collective mechanism to defend the economic interests of developing countries and create a common negotiating capacity within the United Nations, initially had 77 member states and now includes 130. Since 2000, the group has held summits under the name “South Summit,” issuing statements reiterating the same demands and complaints about the injustice of the international system and the need to reform it and address poverty, debt, and the development gap between the North and South. Since the 1990s, the group has been known as the Group of 77 and China,

Increasing uncertainty and turbulence in the international system make countries more cautious in preserving as many options as possible and avoiding collective actions.



reflecting coordination and cooperation with China, which supports the group's efforts to reform the international system.⁴

After six decades since its establishment, it is hard to speak of the qualitative impact of the Group of 77 on the international system. As stated in the declaration issued on its fifty-fifth anniversary in 2019, “the imbalances in the global economy and the unfair structures and outcomes in trade, financial, monetary, and technological systems that led to the creation of our group still exist to this day. These, alongside the threats facing the rule-based multilateral system, reaffirm the continued importance of our collective endeavor to advance a just international order in the global economy and to advocate for multilateralism and respect for the United Nations Charter and international law.”⁵ This statement transparently reveals that, after five decades, this southern coalition has not been able to achieve its aspirations.

The current reality of the international system, whether in its political, military, or economic components, as evidenced by the policies of its major powers and their handling of key international issues, still reflects the very imbalances that the South complains

about. Despite all efforts made to reform these structures, these southern groupings, and efforts, including what is known as the Global South, have yet to demonstrate the capability to effect real change, despite their good intentions.

Competition to lead the Global South

India, along with Russia and China, promotes the concept of the Global South, believing it is best suited to lead it, given its close ties with developing countries. In January and November 2023, India held two virtual summits under the title: “Voice of the Global South.” It also worked to “enhance the voice of the Global South within the G20 by pushing for the African Union to become a permanent member during its presidency and by advocating for concrete actions by the G20 for the Global South.”⁶ The timing of these summits indicates India's ambition to “lead”



the Global South in competition with China and Russia. The first summit was held before the G20 summit in India to “hear the voices of Global South countries, understand their interests and priorities, and place them on the agenda of the September 2023 summit.” The second summit took place after the G20 summit to “brief these countries on the outcomes of the G20 summit and India’s efforts to represent their voices.”⁷ According to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, when India “took over the G20 presidency, it considered it its responsibility to bring the voices of Global South countries into this forum.”⁸ Modi emphasized India’s right to a leadership role in the Global South in his opening speech at the first summit: “India has always shared its developmental experience with our brothers

in the Global South. Our development partnerships cover all geographical regions and diverse sectors. We provided medicines and vaccines to over 100 countries during the pandemic. India has always advocated for a greater role for developing countries in shaping our shared future.”⁹ India did not invite China and Russia to the two summits, underscoring the competition for leadership of the presumed Global South.

In promoting the Global South, China, Russia, and India argue that BRICS now represents the Global South, especially after its membership expansion this year. According to the Russian Foreign Minister, BRICS is seen as a globally organized force for the South and East.¹⁰ However, the influence of China, Russia, and India within BRICS and their competition to direct it to serve their interests at least limits its role in protecting and promoting the interests of other member states representing parts of the Global South.

Russia, China, and India’s promotion of the Global South concept and their competition for its leadership and use in confrontations with the West is enough to impede any collective movement by influential developing countries on the international stage. These countries

“**Russia, China, and India’s promotion of the Global South concept and their competition for its leadership and use in confrontations with the West is enough to impede any collective movement by influential developing countries on the international stage.**”



understand the true intentions behind such efforts. They are unlikely to align with these blocs, even if they share criticisms of the international system and demands for its reform to make it fairer and more just. This reality renders the Global South more of a narrative reflecting aspiration than a tangible reality.

There is no doubt that recent years have witnessed the rise of regional powers seeking to participate in shaping the international agenda and addressing issues beyond their regional boundaries. This is based on a combination of the decision-makers' recognition of their countries' capabilities and the status and role they deserve, as well as an enabling external environment. This is not a new phenomenon in international relations, as there have always been examples of regional powers actively participating on the international stage and ensuring their voices are heard, taking advantage of the prevailing polarization among the poles of the international system, and achieving relative success.

As seen with the experiences of the Non-Aligned Movement and the Group of 77, the transition from individual action to effective collective action has not met with

the desired success. The commonality among the countries of NAM or the Group of 77 did not extend beyond a "vision" of the international system that was insufficient to overcome their differences, whether in managing their bilateral relations, especially with the poles of the international system, or the internal transformations they experienced that led to a reassessment of their roles on the international stage. For example, we can refer to the changes in the foreign policies of Egypt and Indonesia during the eras of Nasser and Sadat, and Sukarno and Suharto, respectively.

Although the foreign policy of any country, including developing countries, results from a mix of various factors, decision-makers in these countries play a crucial role in directing it. Therefore, it is difficult for these countries to enter collective arrangements that result in long-term commitments with a tangible impact on the international stage. An illustrative example is Argentina's shift in its position on BRICS membership, from seeking to join and forming a national committee for this purpose to rejecting membership after Javier Milei assumed the presidency, citing a lack of desire to "support any agreements with communists because they do not respect the basics of free trade, liberty, and democracy."¹¹



Conclusion

Today, the world is witnessing the rise of several regional powers that play significant roles on the international stage, garnering recognition, and appreciation for their international activities. These powers are hoped to contribute to the protection and enhancement of global public goods amidst the major powers' preoccupation with strategic competition. However, there is little evidence to support the notion, promoted by some, that these powers are collectively and consciously moving in a manner that

justifies the use of the concept of the Global South as one of the emerging power centers poised to reshape the current international order. Until a unified bloc emerges, moving towards achieving specific goals, the concept of the Global South will remain distant from reality. This necessitates further research and analysis to align this concept with the facts on the international stage and to evaluate its suitability in describing the increasing presence of some Southern states.



Endnotes

1. The concept of the “Global South” dates to the 1970s. At that time, it was associated with issues of development and modernization, as well as the search for an appropriate model for developing countries. See Arif Dirlik, *Global South: Predicament and Promise*, *The Global South* (1(1):12-23), 2007
2. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/global-south-is-a-misleading-term-by-joseph-s-nye-2023-11/arabic>
3. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202308/1296844.shtml>, <https://ip-quarterly.com/en/global-south-geopolitical-reality>
4. https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1929801/
5. <https://arabic.news.cn/20240307/1d2b4406b53e41c1a1657acc54b68f4a/c.html>
6. https://newzealand.mid.ru/en/press_center/news/russia_s_policy_towards_world_majority_report/
8. <https://nam.go.ug/sites/default/files/2024-02/Kampala%20Final%20Outcome%20Document.pdf>
9. <https://english.news.cn/20230917/e295f6c98b204c4f99bf57c504c8aa26/c.html>
10. https://www.g77.org/doc/G77_Joint_Declaration-55th_anniversary.pdf
11. https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/37278/Chairs_summary_2nd_Voice_of_the_Global_South_Summit_November_17_2023
12. <https://www.mea.gov.in/voice-of-global-summit.htm>, https://www.hcic Canberra.gov.in/news_letter_detail/?id=118
13. https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/37266/English_translation_of_Prime_Ministers_opening_remarks_at_the_Inaugural_Leaders_Session_of_the_2nd_Voice_of_Global_South_Summit
14. <https://www.mea.gov.in/virtual-meetings-detail.htm?36109/>



Gulf Research Center
Knowledge for All



مركز الخليج للأبحاث
المعرفة للجميع