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China's Global South Strategy: Twice the Efforts for Half the Result?

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SYNOPSIS

At the G20 Summit held in November 2024, China announced eight actions to support global development, highlighting cooperation with the Global South. However, past records show that China's dual role as both a development partner and a security supporter complicates its image, raising concerns among the Global South countries about the shaping and reshaping of global security governance. Questions arise from the contrast between the Chinese dream and a bitter reality: why does China believe it can consolidate its influence in the Global South through developmental support, and why do such efforts face scepticism and even criticism from the recipient countries?

COMMENTARY

The strategic competition between China and the West has extended beyond their territorial borders, reaching the Global South countries. The Global South plays an increasingly significant role in shaping the balance of power, contributing nearly [39 per cent](#) of global GDP and around [85 per cent](#) of the world population. However, despite China's increased efforts to engage the Global South and thus counter Western influence, the response from Global South countries has not been as favourable as it had hoped.

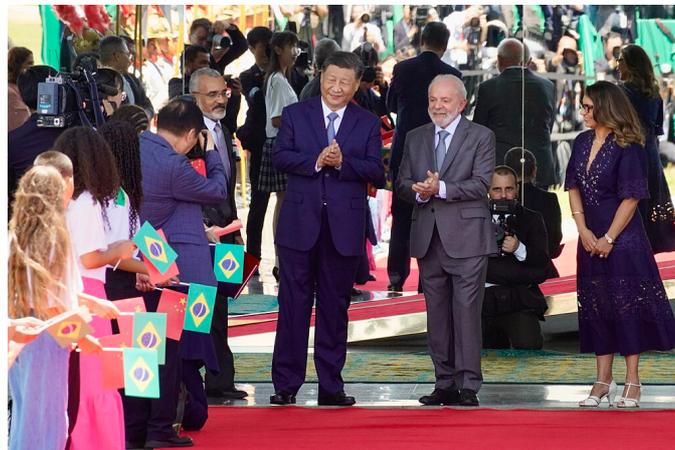
China's Development and Security Cooperation with the Global South

While there is no clear consensus on which countries constitute the Global South, many of these nations share a common identity rooted in histories of colonisation and imperialism. The identity is characterised by prolonged periods of exploitation and subjugation, coupled with a collective desire to advance their interests in the face of dominant Western powers.

During the [G20 Summit](#) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in November 2024, Chinese president Xi Jinping announced [eight actions](#) to bolster global development. Specific measures include pursuing high-quality Belt and Road cooperation, implementing the Global Development Initiative, supporting the development in Africa, and advocating for carrying out “practical cooperation for the benefit of the Global South”. China also plans to strengthen cooperation with other developing countries in areas such as fugitive repatriation and asset recovery, denial of safe haven, and anti-corruption capacity building. Additionally, at the [APEC CEO Summit](#), Xi Jinping reaffirmed China’s commitment to supporting Global South nations through multilateral platforms, seeking solutions for “prosperity around the world”.

China is increasingly strengthening its security cooperation with the Global South. Following the latest round in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, it [facilitated](#) reconciliation talks among various Palestinian factions in Beijing. In [September 2024](#), China and African nations agreed to jointly advance the Global Security Initiative (GSI), deepening cooperation in areas such as counter-terrorism, climate change, disaster prevention and mitigation, and public health.

It is no coincidence that China promotes the benefits of the Global South. Amidst growing antagonism from the West, China portrays itself as a like-minded nation with shared experiences of poverty and discrimination. It aims to present itself as a de facto leader of the Global South, advocating its Chinese-style modernisation that contrasts with the Western model. While it remains debatable whether China should be considered part of the Global South, its presence is becoming increasingly pervasive in these countries. The [Chinese narrative](#) emphasises “fairness and justice” as well as “win-win cooperation”, presenting it as a counterbalance to the US-led rules-based order.



Chinese president Xi Jinping attended the G20 Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in November 2024. He also met with Brazilian president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva and inked multiple development agreements. [Vice-Presidência da República](#), [CC BY 2.0](#), via *Wikimedia Commons*.

Security-Development Nexus as Domestic Motivation

Under Xi Jinping, China has elevated national security to a central paradigm influencing nearly all aspects of its governance. However, in contrast to Western interpretations that often highlight China's focus on security relative to economic development and suggest that security is as important as, if not more important than,

development, China [perceives](#) security as intricately tied to development, with development itself viewed as a form of security. It has closely tied the development and security of Global South countries to its own national advancement goals, intensifying efforts to enhance its global influence in line with the “Chinese Dream” of national rejuvenation and the policy of “strive for achievement”.

A clear distinction can be observed in their approaches: China views development as the cornerstone for addressing and resolving conflicts, while the Global North prioritises security as a prerequisite for achieving development. The unique advantage of China’s approach can be found in its ability to legitimise its security commitments both domestically and within the recipient countries through the promotion of economic growth, social development, and stability. The mutually justifying mechanism is strategically utilised in Chinese discourse to present itself as a more reliable and appealing partner compared to the West.

Ultimately, China seeks to enhance solidarity with the Global South by legitimising the benefits of adopting its state-led model of modernisation through the security-development nexus. It aims to inspire the Global South to embrace its Chinese-style modernisation, demonstrating that developing countries can achieve stability and prosperity without relying on Western practices. For instance, in [Africa](#) and [Southeast Asia](#), China has been promoting initiatives like the GSI and the Global Development Initiative (GDI), integrating economic development with security collaboration and emphasising the “[indivisible](#)” nature of one nation's security with that of others. Additionally, another example is Xi Jinping calling on [BRICS Plus](#) to prioritise “common security, common development, and harmony among civilisations” in October 2024. Such visions position China as a global leader while aligning with the interests of developing countries, though it also serves to promote China's own strategic objectives.

Complicated South-South Cooperation

In practice, although Chinese leaders portray themselves as allies in shared struggles against poverty and discrimination, China has emerged as a great power with far greater resources, industrial capacity, and diplomatic influence than any other developing nation. This disparity has created an unequal relationship with the Global South, raising worries on how global security governance will be shaped and reshaped.

First, China’s massive projects, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), have raised concerns that Beijing may be subtly preparing for potential military use under the guise of development. BRI ports, linked to industrial parks and supporting industries such as shipbuilding, face scepticism that it may strengthen their ability to support Chinese naval ships. For instance, former US vice-president Mike Pence has [accused](#) Beijing of attempting to establish a military base for its navy operations through the developmental projects of the Hambantota port. While it is still debated whether China’s BRI projects aim solely at infrastructure development, the integrated relationship between development and security may increase mistrust between China and the host countries instead of effectively portraying China as a champion of development and peace.

Second, while China's financial and infrastructure support has garnered praises for its developmental assistance, it has faced criticism for involving the Global South in China's ideological battle with the West. Some African analysts and opposition politicians, for example, have [accused China of undermining democracy](#) in the region. In many cases, those who remain in power and are blamed for silencing the opposition are former liberation movements that fought against colonial and white-minority rule with China's support. Moreover, governance problems arise in the recipient countries when transparency and inclusivity remain to be improved. For example, a [report by AidData](#) revealed that nearly one-quarter of surveyed leaders struggled to articulate the purpose of the BRI, and 40 per cent were unsure if their country was even a part of it, although the majority of these leaders perceived Beijing as actively supporting their countries' development.

Third, Global South countries are increasingly confronting divisions as they face pressure to align with either China or its rivals in development or security partnerships. Despite China's efforts to counterbalance the US influence in the Global South, the US continues to rally regional support to shape the geopolitical landscape in its favour. This includes attempts to [mobilise wider support from the Global South](#) to condemn Russia and back Ukraine at the United Nations, while China, on the other hand, has leveraged its currency to [mitigate](#) the effects of US sanctions on Russian banks. Additionally, India is positioning itself as another economic leader in South-South cooperation, with its [democratic alignment widely interpreted as an alternative](#) to China's modernisation model. India also shares [historical ties](#) with the Global South rooted in the Non-Aligned Movement and anti-colonial solidarity.

In the future, the embrace of its model by the Global South will require China to demonstrate its resilience and ability to rebound. However, international assessments regarding China's economic development remain uncertain. The International Monetary Fund projects China's GDP growth to be just [5 per cent](#) in 2024, dropping to around [3.5 per cent](#) by 2028. Moreover, in 2023, foreign direct investment to China was only [US\\$33 billion](#), which is the [lowest](#) since 1993.

Conclusion

As China intensifies its South-South cooperation efforts, it will face [increasing challenges](#) from its delicate balancing through the security-development nexus, the ideological contest with the West, and alternative models presented by rival powers. Particular attention should be given to the mutually constraining nature of the security-development nexus. While China aims to expand its influence in Southeast Asia through infrastructure development, it risks being increasingly perceived as a security threat, especially due to unresolved issues like territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Perceived security threats may drive these countries to deepen their ties with the Global North as a way to counterbalance China's influence, ultimately undermining China's efforts in South-South cooperation.

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