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What does the Global South want?

The great powers are unable to see the new realities of the vast middle, mainly because the Global South remains an enigma they do not understand

The term 'Global South' is evocative, but it also elicits a range of reactions. For some, it represents a project-in-the-making by the poorer and formerly colonised nations demanding global justice, solidarity and equity. Others are more dismissive of the potential for collective action, pointing to the great diversity and differing interests within the 'developing' world. For yet others, it is a problematic state-centric construct that doesn't take into account transnational solidarity of racial minorities everywhere, including in the wealthy world.

However, I submit that the Global South is a relevant and useful construct. But not quite in the way many of its critics – and adherents – portray it. To look for a grand project of solidarity or a single leader is to try to answer the wrong questions. The Global South in our time is best described, not as an organised collectivity, but as an analytic framework grounded in geopolitics above all else.

This is not to deny that alternative framings reveal important truths. The long shadow of colonialism explains many current fault lines and conflicts. Economic marginalisation and debt distress are painful realities in much of the 'developing' world, already reeling from the abuses of the neoliberal era and the aftermath of Covid-19. The great diversity among these states is also something that cannot be discounted in any analysis.

But more germane – and useful – is an understanding of the Global South as a 'geopolitical fact'. Geopolitical logic reveals a huge swath of states in Latin America, Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands that lie outside the core of the great power system, which is comprised of the three great powers – the United States, China and Russia – and their core allies. States at the core of the great power system (especially those under a nuclear umbrella) enjoy an elevated sense of security, status and economic opportunity. But the Global South must fend for itself in an international system it does not dominate; governed by rules it mostly did not make.

Two overarching interests

Once we understand the Global South as a 'geopolitical fact', it opens the door to better understand what these states want. Of course, each state has specific needs tailored to its local conditions. But two overarching interests can be identified.

The first is an urgency to 'catch up' with the core. Global South states want to rise in the international system. This means not just economic rise but also an elevation of status. Even in the middle-income states, which have done better than others, there is a distinct sense of wanting more. This includes helping to define the rules of the evolving world order, future-proofing against economic sanctions and safeguarding their sovereignty. The latter is enhanced due to incomplete projects of nation- and state-making that characterise postcolonial states.

The second aspect is that practically all Global South states are fundamentally unaligned in the 'great power competition'. They played little part in triggering this competition in the first place, and most are determined not to choose sides and get sucked into it. Though this does not foreclose strategic alignments, these are typically limited in scope and highly unlikely to turn into formal alliances. Hedging is typically the most common response in our age of declining unipolarity.

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Does this more realist and national-interests-based understanding of the Global South mean that idealistic visions are dead? Not entirely. Grand collective efforts to create a new world of peace and equality may be *passé*. But smaller-scale coordination efforts to achieve practical results in some domains remain alive.

Take BRICS, for instance. Though often described as a Global South grouping, it is in fact a coalition of what I have called the 'Global East' (China and Russia) and the Global South. The two components of BRICS come with their own different interests. The Global South sees value in the coalition because of the many failures of the US-led order. Collective efforts on climate change at the climate COPs by the G77 is another example, as is the wide participation of the Global South in international legal action on Gaza. A world centred on national interests will always have some space, however limited, for collective efforts.

Most states of the Global South are not interested in a radical overturning of the existing order. Nor do they see Washington as an adversary. In fact, they would prefer to remain on excellent terms with

the United States, albeit in a world without American primacy. Their increasing alienation from the US-led order is due to systemic constraints that limit their rise and the transgressions and double standards in Washington's policies.

Sanctions and de-dollarization

A concrete example of these constraints is the international sanctions regime. This regime has expanded to the point where more than a quarter of countries and nearly a third of the global economy are currently a target of such sanctions.

Of these, secondary sanctions, which have become a tool of choice in Washington in the 'great power competition', trigger the greatest concerns. Though the United States claims time and again that such sanctions – which most international lawyers consider to be illegal – are not aimed at the Global South, those states don't see it that way. The secondary sanctions regime, in turn, is enabled by global US dollar hegemony, which makes de-dollarization a major common interest across most of the Global South.

De-dollarization is, however, easier said than done. BRICS has made it a major focus of its rhetoric. But progress would require the central banks of its member states to give up a degree of sovereignty — a tall order. Moreover, with China being by far the biggest trading power in BRICS, India worries about Beijing's dominance in any BRICS-driven alternative currency arrangement.

Efforts towards de-dollarization beyond BRICS are also underway, with mixed results. Thanks to the push factor of the sweeping Western sanctions against Russia in the wake of its illegal Ukraine invasion, Moscow has tilted sharply towards Beijing. This has resulted in the yuan replacing the dollar as the dominant currency in their bilateral trade. Indian exports to Russia are booming thanks to bilateral trade being increasingly denominated in rupees.

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Southeast Asia and ASEAN are also pushing to empower local currencies in regional transactions. In 2023, five ASEAN countries, including Indonesia and Singapore, signed an agreement to establish a regional cross-border payment system in which consumers will make such payments using a QR code, circumventing the foreign exchange market. Indonesia has also signed agreements with China, India, Japan and

South Korea to trade in local currencies.

Are the great powers taking the demands and strategies of the Global South seriously? Unfortunately, not enough. In Beijing, Moscow and Washington, there is a tendency to see 'the rest' predominantly as battlegrounds in the great power competition, or simply as victims. The Global South, however, is more aspirational than anything else. It is not looking for a saviour or to emerge as a saviour itself, but for those blocking its rise to get out of the way.

The great powers have also been resistant to reforming the international system to better align with the increased autonomy and power of the Global South. Beijing is probably the biggest barrier to badly-needed reform of the UN Security Council. Voting shares in the IMF and the World Bank remain heavily skewed in favour of wealthy Western states. Washington has mostly paid lip service to international climate finance. And there seems to be no mood in Washington, Moscow and Beijing to pull back from the steady march towards a militarised great power competition. The great powers are unable to see the new realities of the vast middle, largely because the Global South remains an enigma they are conditioned not to understand.



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