



India and the World

Perspectives from Northern Europe on India in world affairs. Issued on a regular basis by the Project for Nordic-India Relations at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI). For previous issues please visit www.ui.se/english/research/asia/pnir



#17 2024-04-26

India and the Global South

The “Global South” is increasingly evoked in conversations about international affairs and India’s role. Connecting back to decades old postcolonial solidarity and non-alignment movements, the term has now found its way into debates among states on representation and agency in the current world order. Whereas commentators in the transatlantic region have questioned the utility of the concept, those of the Global South are embracing it. Clearly, as has been pointed out by [Ronak Gopaldas](#), the Global South is neither a homogeneous nor a geographically distinct grouping of countries. Rather, it is a geopolitical construct of self-identification, centred on a questioning of current distribution of power, of representation, and of available international options. In this way, the debate surrounding the concept itself is telling of a rift in the international system that has seemingly widened after the Covid 19-pandemic and the wars in Ukraine and Gaza.

Seen from the perspective of the Global South, there are currently positive and negative trends galvanising collective sentiment, and occasionally, action. On the negative side, low- and lower-middle income countries face multiple crises at a time where development assistance from the West and China is tapering off. Simultaneously, the multilateral order struggles with finding acceptable collective solutions to urgent problems of conflict, climate, energy, and trade. Questions are also asked about how representative the global institutional architecture is today, given that it is based on the power equations of 1945.

On the positive side, there are clear signs of growing political capabilities of previously peripheral economic geographies. The Global South is, in a sense, as Gopaldas puts it, “moving off the menu and to the table”.

India, a rising power of the Global South, sees a possibility to both channel and utilise a restive dynamism in the Global South. New Delhi has proved an ability to connect with future possible growth centres in the Indo-Pacific and Africa, and to engage in new ways diplomatically to build pressure for reform of the international system that might benefit India, as well as others. It is not the only country with ambitions to shape developments thus. China, Brazil, and South Africa, all have, in different ways, signalled a willingness to do so. Due to a variety of complicating factors, however, these countries do not possess a similar bridging capacity as India currently enjoys. India's economic prospects and geopolitical sweet spot provide New Delhi with unique leverage in the international system at this point in time. India is exploring ways to make the most out of the moment.

While lacking the economic heft of China, India has shown an ability to utilise other forms of capital – trust, affinity and goodwill -- to advance issues of relevance across the Global South in a global context. By putting issue-oriented cooperation high on the agenda of the Quad, the [Voice of the Global South](#) summits, and other regional unilateral or bilateral initiatives, along with a successful development-oriented chairmanship of the G20, India has managed to make connections between Northern and Southern actors in an increasingly disconnected international system.

Many commentators have focused on the anti-western dimension of Global South solidarity, especially in connection to the enlarged BRICS+. In India's case, this may be too narrow a reading. New Delhi does not see a call for less Western dominance of the international system and the institutions that underpin it as equivalent to being against the West. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar described India's posture at the Munich Security Conference as being "non-West, but not anti-West". New Delhi's questioning of the fairness of the UNSC P5 set-up, or the vote share or leadership selection of the IMF or World Bank, is in India's case, not to be confused with anti-West sentiments. It is on the contrary obvious to New Delhi that India's own rise, as well as real progress on global challenges, cannot come about in a protracted conflict with the West, and without Western technology and capital. This sets India's views of the Global South in a multipolar world apart from the visions of China and Russia.

India's definition of the 'Global South' should be seen in particular as a contrast with China's ambitions to lead the developing world, even as the latter's economy competes effectively with developed ones. At the BRICS summit in South Africa, President Xi Jinping declared that "China will forever be a member of the developing world". India's conception of the Global South, in comparison, has no place for China. Institutionally, therefore, New Delhi is uncomfortable with associating its Global South activism with non-Western forums and organisations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization or the BRICS+ grouping.

New Delhi would in fact argue that its emergence as a leader of the Global South props up rather than diminishes the existing liberal international order. It provides forums and a voice for dissent and reform that are not susceptible to being hijacked by either Russia or China and turned against the West. Meanwhile, new South-South cooperation mechanisms can dissipate some of the discontent that has built up across the developing world about Western choices during the pandemic and the two ongoing military conflicts. This discontent might otherwise have proved destabilising for existing institutions. India does not see any stake in a reworked global order that places Beijing at the apex. Nor does it wish to see global institutions hollowed out by their inability to address developing-world needs.



Dr Henrik Chetan Aspengren
Senior Analyst and Project Lead, UI
Henrik.aspengren@ui.se
+46(0)708986797



Mihir Swarup Sharma
Director, ORF
Mihir.swarup.sharma@orfonline.org