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Leadership or Symbolism? Evaluating India's Contradictions in Global South Diplomacy and Strategic Exclusions

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Abstract

India's self-positioning in the Global South faces substantial challenges and contradictions, limiting its capacity to assert genuine leadership. Although India has undertaken initiatives such as hosting the Voice of the Global South Summit and promoting priorities relevant to developing countries, these efforts are frequently

manifested as symbolic gestures rather than producing significant and actionable outcomes. The dual role India seeks—acting as a leader in the Global South while simultaneously aligning closely with the United States in the Indo-Pacific strategy—creates inconsistencies within its foreign policy framework, thereby undermining its credibility on the global stage. Additionally, India’s decision to exclude key developing nations such as China, Pakistan, and Brazil from its Global South diplomacy further emphasizes the limitations of its approach. This exclusion not only reflects strategic miscalculations but also complicates India’s ability to effectively advocate for the interests of the Global South. As a result, India faces significant difficulties in reconciling its national interests with the collective aspirations of the Global South, which may hinder its potentiality to foster meaningful partnerships and promote a cohesive strategy for global governance. India’s contradictory foreign policy and exclusion of key developing nations undermine its aspirations for a cohesive Global South leadership.

Keywords: India, Global South, Foreign Policy, South-South Cooperation, Strategic Limitations

Introduction

The concept of the “Global South” encompasses most developing countries, typically referring to nations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. While the term originated from phrases like “South” and “Southern countries”, it remains broad and somewhat vague, highlighting economic and developmental disparities while also reflecting the growing influence of these nations in international relations. As countries in the Global South face pressing global challenges—such as climate change, economic development, and social equity—there is an urgent need for unity and collective action. India, as a prominent member of the Global South, seeks to take on a more active leadership role. However, its efforts are frequently criticized for

prioritizing the enhancement of its own international standing over addressing the collective challenges faced by the Global South.

The rise of the Global South signals the immense potential of developing countries and emerging economies, while also emphasizing the shifting dynamics of geopolitical power. This trend has become even more pronounced since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2022, as over eighty developing countries from Asia, Africa, and Latin America have opted to maintain neutrality, resisting pressure to align with the West's anti-Russia stance and expressing the independent voice of the Global South. This phenomenon indicates that the Global South is increasingly moving to the forefront of international politics, becoming a strategic force that cannot be ignored.¹

Literature Review

Discussions regarding India's role in global politics have become increasingly intense. Some scholars point out that India's global image is profoundly influenced by the rhetoric of the Global South. However, despite this rhetoric providing India with a sense of self-identity and strategic importance, it faces many limitations in actual policy formulation and execution.² Moriguchi Jun examines the historical development of India's cooperation with African countries and considers the future trajectory of relations between India and African nations. However, it does not address the limitations inherent in these partnerships.³ Gabriela, Ranjan, and Torterolo⁴ provide insights into Latin America's perspectives on India's G20

¹ Zhu, Lingling. "New Trends in India's Diplomatic Strategy: A Global South Perspective." *Social Sciences in Yunnan*, no. 01 (2024): 158-165.

² Chakrabarti, Sumantra. "Global South Rhetoric in India's Policy Projection." *Third World Quarterly* 38, no. 9 (2017): 1909–1920. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2017.1350092>.

³ Moriguchi, Jun. "India's 'Global South' Strategy: Focusing on Diplomatic Relations with Africa." *Mitsui & Co. Global Strategic Studies Institute Monthly Report*, September 2023. https://www.mitsui.com/mgssi/en/report/detail/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2023/10/19/2309f_moriguchi_e.pdf.

⁴ Rodríguez, Gabriela M., Rajesh Ranjan, and Lucía S. Torterolo. "India's G20 Presidency: Implications for the Latin American Region in the Framework of the Global South." *India Quarterly* 79, no. 4 (2023): 514–524. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09749284231176594>.

Presidency and its role as a leader of the Global South. This context is crucial to understanding the limitations and challenges India faces in asserting its leadership in the Global South. Suryakanta⁵ discusses India's trajectory on the global stage and the importance of fostering cooperation with regional and global partners, without addressing the limitations. To fill this gap, this paper will explore India's positioning in the Global South and its limitations, analyzing how its position on the international stage aligns with its rhetoric and identity, as well as the challenges and contradictions it encounters in promoting cooperation in the Global South.

India's Pursuit to the Leadership of the Global South

In January 2023, at the opening ceremony of the "Voice of the Global South" summit hosted by India, Prime Minister Modi remarked that the world was experiencing a crisis and that as the eighty-year-old model of global governance was gradually evolving, efforts should be made to shape the emerging order. He expressed confidence that their time was approaching and emphasized that for India, the voice of the people was India's voice, and their priorities were India's priorities.⁶

At the third India-Pacific Island Cooperation Forum (FIPIC) summit held in May 2023, Prime Minister Modi actively demonstrated his willingness to express empathy for the "Global South." He noted that those once considered confidants were found lacking in support during times of need. He remarked that the old saying, 'a friend in need is a friend indeed,' had proven true in such difficult times, though he refrained from naming any specific country.⁷ In June 2023, Indian Foreign Minister Jaishankar

⁵ Rout, Suryakanta. "India in Emerging World Order: An Asian Centric Approach to 'Going Global Strategy'." *Research Review International Journal of Multidisciplinary* 9, no. 3 (2024). <https://rrjournals.com/index.php/rrijm/article/view/1172>.

⁶ "Our Time is Coming: PM Modi at Voice of Global South Summit." January 12, 2023.

⁷ *Economic Times*. "India Respects Your Priorities; Proud to Be Your Development Partner: PM Modi to Pacific Island Nations." October 4, 2024. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/india-respects-your-priorities-proud-to-be-your-development-partner-pm-modi-to-pacific-island-nations/articleshow/100410133.cms?from=mdr>.

held a special press conference to comprehensively review and summarize the Modi government's foreign policy, positioning India as a "leader of the Global South."⁸

Highlighting traditional cultural ties and shared developmental stages is a key link for India to strengthen its relations with Global South countries. Modi stated that India's affinity to Africa was natural, highlighting the millennia-old cultural and commercial ties between the two regions. He noted their shared history of movements against colonialism and added that, as a youthful and aspirational nation, India could relate to the people of Africa and their aspirations.⁹ Jaishankar, from the perspective of identity, emphasized that India is a member of the Global South and has the responsibility to expand the international voice of the Global South. The disruptions caused by the coronavirus pandemic and recent geopolitical conflicts call for a realignment of the world order.¹⁰ In January 2023, India convened over 120 developing countries for the online summit "Voice of the Global South," to voice concerns on issues such as finance, sustainable development, debt, food, and energy for "three-quarters of the world's population."¹¹ Modi has further put forward the slogan that India aims to be the spokesperson for the "voice" and "priorities" of the Global South. At the G20 summit in September, the acceptance of the African Union as an official member of the organization, proposed and passed by India, was

⁸ Ministry of External Affairs, India. "Transcript of Special Briefing by External Affairs Minister on 9 Years of Modi Government." June 8, 2023. https://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/36662/Transcript_of_Special_Briefing_by_External_Affairs_Minister_on_9_years_of_Modi_Government_June_08_2023.

⁹ PMIndia. "PTI's Exclusive Interview with Prime Minister Narendra Modi." Accessed October 4, 2024. https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/ptis-exclusive-interview-with-prime-minister-narendra-modi/.

¹⁰ *Business Today*. "Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar Makes Strong Pitch for 'Reglobalisation' with Focus on Global South." August 27, 2023. <https://www.businesstoday.in/latest/in-focus/story/foreign-minister-s-jaishankar-makes-strong-pitch-for-reglobalisation-with-focus-on-global-south-395826-2023-08-27>.

¹¹ *New York Times*. "Can India Challenge China for Leadership of the 'Global South'?" September 12, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/12/world/asia/india-china-global-south.html>.

described as a confirmation by Prime Minister Modi that the “representation of the developing world,” including the G77, had reached its highest level within the G20.¹²

India positions itself as a representative of the Global South, continuing a legacy from the Cold War era when it led the non-aligned movement and advocated for the developing world. The Voice of the Global South Summit saw the participation of 125 countries. Through this, India aims to bridge the gap between the Global North and South, establishing itself as an independent player, separate from China, in fostering cooperation between Asian nations and the broader Global South.¹³

In addition, Jaishankar praised India for being recognized by Global South countries as a “genuine contributor” in areas such as “vaccine philanthropy,” debt relief, and investments.¹⁴ Modi has further promoted India as the “natural leader” of the Global South, asserting that it should gain greater influence and take on a more significant role.¹⁵

India’s leadership goal is grounded in its growing geopolitical influence and economic potential. However, scholars argue that to realize this goal, India must not only maintain robust economic growth but also address the pressing challenges facing other Global South nations, ensuring that its leadership is inclusive and responsive to shared development needs. According to scholars, for India to play a leadership role

¹² *Times of India*. “At G77, India Reinforces Its G20 Global South Focus.” Accessed October 4, 2024.

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/at-g77-india-reinforces-its-g20-global-south-focus/articleshow/103739716.cms>

¹³ Brender, Reinhold. “On the Contribution of This Year’s G7 and G20 Summits and Suggested Next Steps for the EU.” *Egmont Policy Brief* No. 311. Egmont Institute, 2023. https://www.egmontinstitute.be/app/uploads/2023/07/Reinhold-Brender_Policy_Brief_311_vFinal.pdf?type=pdf.

¹⁴ Ministry of External Affairs, India. “Transcript of Special Briefing by External Affairs Minister on 9 Years of Modi Government.” June 8, 2023. https://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/36662/Transcript_of_Special_Briefing_by_External_Affairs_Minister_on_9_years_of_Modi_Government_June_08_2023.

¹⁵ *Wall Street Journal*. “India’s Modi Sees Unprecedented Trust With U.S., Touts New Delhi’s Leadership Role.” <https://www.wsj.com/articles/indias-modi-sees-unprecedented-trust-with-u-s-touts-new-delhis-leadership-role-35e151b4>; Bao, Shanliang. “New Characteristics of India’s ‘Modi-Style’ Foreign Strategy.” *Contemporary International Relations* 2023, no. 12 (2023): 132–152, 163–164.

in Global South,¹⁶ it must ensure the continued growth of its economy and achieve self-reliance in defense. To achieve this goal, India needs to adopt a series of strategies.

Firstly, India must protect its economy and trade from the coercive influence of China's economic power and accelerate the identification of its comparative advantages in global trade. This includes formulating targeted trade policies and prioritizing relevant issues in multilateral and bilateral negotiations, while selectively liberalizing the economy when necessary. Additionally, India should enhance policy coordination among different government departments, particularly by establishing a dedicated trade representative office to promote the implementation of such policies.

Secondly, as one of the world's largest defense importers, India's self-reliance in the defense sector is also a crucial guarantee for maintaining its leadership position in the Global South. India must strike a balance between its defense budget, technological innovation, and industrial development. It should enhance its competitive edge in defense innovation. This can be achieved through collaboration between the public and private sectors. These efforts are crucial to countering China's influence. This dual strategy—strong economic growth and defense self-reliance—will be the foundational conditions for India to sustain its leadership in the Global South.¹⁷

The analysis reveals that economic prosperity and defense autonomy are the core prerequisites for India to consolidate its leadership position in the Global South. However, it is worth noting that in its pursuit of this leadership role, India faces significant challenges and internal contradictions. India's ability to balance multilateral cooperation with Global South autonomy while countering China's influence will determine its role as a leader of the Global South.

¹⁶ Dewan, Sabina. "India's G20 Presidency an Opportunity to Focus on Global South." *Moneycontrol*, December 6, 2022. <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/opinion/indias-g20-presidency-an-opportunity-to-focus-on-global-south-9657951.html>. Accessed June 1, 2024.

¹⁷ Zhang, Longfei. "An Analytical Review of Indian Think Tanks' Perceptions of the China-India Leadership Competition in the 'Global South.'" *South Asian Studies Quarterly*, 1-18.

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India asserts its position as the leader of the Global South, yet its actual performance in international affairs has been underwhelming. For example, while India successfully promoted the African Union (AU) to join the G20, attempting to showcase its influence in the Global South, this achievement was more of a symbolic victory with little practical significance. The Global South's ability to set the agenda on international platforms like the G20 remains limited, and India's self-proclaimed "autonomy of the Global South" has had minimal success in addressing substantive issues. The topics India raised at the Global South Summit, such as Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), climate action, and debt relief, largely reiterate existing international agendas and have not offered new solutions or innovative approaches for the Global South.

India did not extend an invitation to Pakistan or China, highlighting the complex dynamics in South Asia and India's broader geopolitical positioning. Pakistan's exclusion from the summit reflects a subtle but clear statement of the strained relationship between the two nations. Pakistan may view India's claims of leadership in the Global South with skepticism, especially given the long-standing rivalry between the two countries. Islamabad might contest New Delhi's representation of the region as being unilateral, given their different political alignments, particularly on issues like Kashmir and international diplomacy.

India's exclusion of China, Pakistan and Brazil from Global South affairs, ostensibly to preserve South-South cooperation's autonomy, exposes the shortsightedness and limitations of its diplomacy. While the competitive dynamic between India and China in the Global South is evident, excluding China weakens the collective solidarity and influence of the Global South. Addressing the real needs of these countries, such as climate change, debt relief, and development financing, often requires multilateral cooperation that includes China, Pakistan and Brazil. India's decision to exclude China reflects overconfidence in its diplomatic abilities and neglects the diverse and complex needs within the Global South.

India's notion of "Global South autonomy" appears more like a political slogan than a viable action plan. At the summit Jaishankar stressed that "those truly part of the Global South know they belong to it," signaling India's desire to break free from the international order dominated by traditional major powers and the influence of China and the U.S. to give a voice to developing countries. Yet, this rhetoric lacks clarity and fails to offer concrete direction or guarantees of benefits for Global South countries. While India's summit attracted participation from 125 countries, it ultimately amounted to a diplomatic performance aimed at enhancing India's international image, lacking concrete policies or actionable frameworks for cooperation.

India's Balancing Act: Leadership Aspirations and Challenges

India aims to shape global governance debates from the perspective of the Global South, seeking to unite developing countries and reduce reliance on existing international systems and frameworks. Through this strategy, India intends to enhance its influence in global governance, particularly in areas where current mechanisms are ineffective or lacking. The Modi government has promoted the "4R" principles in global governance—Respond, Recognize, Respect, and Reform—as a framework to guide collective action among Global South nations. This approach positions India as a leader in addressing the shortcomings of existing global systems.

A key aspect of India's foreign policy is the prioritization of national interests over ideological alignments, reflecting a pragmatic realism. Modi's government consistently emphasizes strategic autonomy. For instance, in his 2023 Independence Day speech, Modi underscored the "Nation First" policy. Jaishankar also stated that Modi has reshaped India's foreign policy to balance national interests with global concerns.¹⁸ This focus on national sovereignty and pragmatic engagement is a

¹⁸ "PM Modi Reshaped India's Foreign Policy, Says EAM Jaishankar." *Times of India*. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/pm-modi-reshaped-indias-foreign-policy-says-eam-jaishankar/articleshow/93461343.cms>.

response to the broader geopolitical context, allowing India to project leadership without being constrained by traditional ideological divides or alliances.

While India's "4R" principles are designed to showcase its leadership in global governance, they also represent a strategic move to secure a more prominent voice in the international arena. However, it is essential to note that this vision of leadership may be more aspirational than fully realized. India's push for global governance reform often emphasizes symbolic leadership, lacking clear mechanisms for substantial changes or benefits for the Global South. Although India's call for reform resonates with many developing nations, its ability to turn this rhetoric into actionable leadership remains limited by the need to balance national interests with broader global ambitions.

Jaishankar has articulated that India can take on the role of a "Southwestern Power" in international affairs, positioning itself as a leading nation within the Global South while simultaneously maintaining strong ties with developed countries. His remarks emphasize India's commitment to the Global South, even as it strengthens its strategic partnerships with the West. Instead of opposing the West or forming formal alliances, India seeks to bridge the gap, leveraging its unique position to mediate between the two.¹⁹

India's diplomatic approach reflects a balancing act between its commitment to the Global South and its growing strategic partnerships with the West, seeking to mediate between both without taking an adversarial stance or forming formal alliances.

This perspective aligns with India's broader diplomatic strategy. While engaging in US-led initiatives like QUAD within the Indo-Pacific strategy, India also pursues South-South cooperation, as seen in platforms like the Global South Summit. This strategy illustrates India's effort to balance its participation in Western-led mechanisms while asserting its independent leadership role within the Global South.

¹⁹ Wu Lin. "The Reconstruction of Great Power Narrative and India's New Diplomacy for the Global South." *Pacific Journal* 31, no. 11 (2023): 1–15.

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In the Indo-Pacific strategy, India collaborates with countries such as the United States through multilateral mechanisms like QUAD. However, India also extends its diplomatic strategy to South-South cooperation. This reflects India's diversified diplomatic approach. India's participation in these initiatives may dilute its commitment to South-South cooperation, as it appears to align more closely with the strategic objectives of Western powers rather than fully championing the collective interests of the Global South. Additionally, India's reluctance to take a firm stance against the West or form formal alliances may be viewed as a form of hedging, where it seeks to maximize its influence without fully committing to either side. This approach, while pragmatic, risks alienating some countries in the Global South, who might perceive India's actions as prioritizing its own geopolitical ambitions over the shared challenges of the developing world. Furthermore, critics contend that India's focus on economic growth and strategic partnerships with powerful nations can sometimes overshadow its efforts to address the more immediate needs of poorer nations, weakening its credibility as a true leader of the Global South.

India aspires to create a new institutional platform for the Global South. It positions itself as an innovator, moving away from outdated mechanisms like the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and G77, to establish more relevant structures that address 21st-century challenges. India's engagement with the Global South reflects its ambition to be a key leader in this grouping, suggesting a shift away from a role that aligns solely with the United States. Its pursuit of autonomy and leadership in the Global South underscores the complexities of its engagement with mini-lateral mechanisms in the Indo-Pacific strategy. India's role goes beyond simple participation in initiatives, demonstrating its broader aspirations for global influence.²⁰

²⁰ Zhang Li and Xin Yilun. "The Modi Government's Diplomatic Shift towards the 'Global South'." *Contemporary International Relations*, no. 4 (2024): 77–95; Rajiv Bhatia. "Maintaining the Global South Momentum." *Gateway House*, November 23, 2023. <https://www.gatewayhouse.in/maintaining-the-global-south-momentum/>. Accessed October 5, 2024.

Prabhu²¹ highlights India's leadership in South-South Cooperation post-2030, emphasizing its initiatives in climate action, digital technology, and energy transition. While these efforts are framed as empowering the Global South, from a critical perspective, one could argue that they reflect India's strategic ambitions to position itself as a leader in the developing world. India's competition with China and its influence on regional dynamics raises the question of whether these initiatives are primarily about fostering equality or advancing India's geopolitical interests under the guise of South-South solidarity.

India's outreach to Uganda highlights its strategic maneuvering in Africa. It illustrates the broader limitations of India's self-positioning within the Global South. While India seeks to strengthen ties with African nations, its efforts often reveal the balancing act required to manage its own economic and geopolitical ambitions against the expectations of genuine South-South solidarity. This dual focus can be viewed as a limitation in India's approach, as it may risk being perceived as self-serving rather than as an equal partner in the Global South.²²

India's Strategic Initiatives towards the Global South

On December 1, 2022, India assumed the rotating presidency of the G20. Prime Minister Modi stated that the voices of the "Global South" are often overlooked, emphasizing that G20 priorities should not only be determined in consultation with G20 partners but also with a broader array of counterparts from the "Global South." Advocating for the interests of the Global South has become one of the core objectives of India's G20 presidency, marking the Indian government's first active stance on this matter. This initiative illustrates India's effort to enhance its role and influence in the Global South while also highlighting the importance of inclusive dialogue in global governance.

²¹ Prabhu, Swati. "South-South Cooperation in a Post-2030 Agenda World." *Raisina Debates, Expert Speak*, September 13, 2024. Observer Research Foundation. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/south-south-cooperation-in-a-post-2030-agenda-world/>.

²² Ibid.

Shortly after assuming the G20 presidency, India invited the leaders of countries such as Bangladesh, Thailand, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, Cambodia, Guyana, Mozambique, Mongolia, and Senegal to attend the Summit. Prime Minister Modi stated that the aim of this initiative was to create a platform for countries in the Global South that are not yet part of the G20, providing them with an opportunity to share their views and aspirations with the world's foremost economic cooperation forum.²³ India has organized over 200 G20 events under the theme "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" (One Earth, One Family, One Future), inviting non-G20 countries from the Global South to participate. Representing the Global South, India has outlined six key agenda items for the G20 dialogue: green development, climate finance, and the concept of LIFE (Lifestyle for Environment); accelerated, inclusive, and resilient growth; technological transformation and digital public infrastructure; and women-led development.

These initiatives reflect India's attempt to establish a leadership role within the Global South, while also revealing its limitations in balancing global North-South relations. Although India strengthens its ties with Southern countries through these activities, its influence and role in enabling these countries to genuinely participate in global governance remain limited.

India's effort to develop digital public infrastructure

India's digital public infrastructure has already reached a certain level of development domestically and has the potential to be extended to the Global South. Currently, India is actively promoting digital public infrastructure in the Global South, with a focus on digital identity systems and mobile payment systems. India has outlined its development objectives and implemented several key initiatives in the following four areas.

²³ Parashar, Sachin. "PM Modi: Global South Must Create New World Order." *Times of India*, January 13, 2023. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/pm-modi-global-south-must-create-new-world-order/articleshow/96949065.cms>.

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- (i) First, India is actively promoting a modular open-source identity platform to serve the Global South.
- (ii) Second, India is encouraging the adoption of the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) in the Global South to enable cross-border payments.
- (iii) Third, leveraging its digital public infrastructure, India is working to establish a framework for cross-border data flows and advocating for a digital governance system within the Global South to enhance its influence in the digital transformation process.
- (iv) Lastly, India is promoting its stance on digital public infrastructure through multilateral mechanisms, emphasizing the need to support the development of this infrastructure in the Global South.²⁴

India is promoting digital public infrastructure in the Global South to increase its influence in the digital space and to establish itself as a leader in this area. This effort aims to strengthen India-US relations, create a “new front” against China, and increase its strategic options amid rising global competition among major powers.

As early as the G20 summit in Bali in 2022, Modi called for the international community to widely adopt India’s digital public infrastructure. After assuming the G20 presidency, the government declared that it would focus on digital technology transformation, the development of digital public infrastructure, and the reform of multilateral mechanisms. The Modi administration aims to integrate India’s distinctive digital infrastructure into the frameworks of “reformed multilateralism” and global digital governance at international events, showcasing India’s strength and responsibility as a major power.²⁵ This excessive emphasis on self-interest and pragmatic tendencies may undermine India’s leadership position in the digital sphere

²⁴ Zhang, Jie, and Chen Zhuo. "India's Digital Public Infrastructure Initiatives in the Global South." *Contemporary International Relations*, no. 3 (2024): 25-43+133.

²⁵ T20 India. "TF-7: Towards Reformed Multilateralism: Transforming Global Institutions and Frameworks." Accessed October 5, 2024. <https://t20ind.org/taskforce/towards-reformed-multilateralism-transforming-global-institutions-and-frameworks/>.

of the Global South and increase the risk of digital projects being viewed as strategic tools. In the foreseeable future, India will adopt more diversified measures to advance cooperation with the Global South and strive for leadership in this region on a global scale. Furthermore, the attention and support from Western countries will further promote the development of India's Global South strategy.²⁶

India's Limitations of Self-Positioning in the Global South

Due to limitations in its own strength, India is still far from becoming a true leader in the Global South. India's ambition to lead the Global South is constrained by its economic and diplomatic limitations. By excluding key players such as China and Pakistan, it undercuts its ability to unify the Global South. Furthermore, foreign policy must be based on the realities of international politics. The Global South Summit hosted by India did not invite major developing countries raising questions about its representation. This decision seemed to undermine China's influence in the Global South. Indian scholars contend that the Modi government is attempting to establish India as a leader of the Global South through the G20 platform. However, they argue that this strategy downplays India's own limitations and misinterprets the broader global landscape by involving itself in the divides between Northern and Southern nations. This strategy may negate the political benefits of hosting diplomatic activities and push India to the forefront of geopolitical competition.²⁷

It is evident that India sees itself as a key driver of sustainable development through South-South Cooperation. India has introduced innovative models to address transnational challenges, including Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), climate-smart

²⁶ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. "Transcript of Special Briefing by Foreign Secretary on Prime Minister's Visit to USA (September 23, 2024)." Accessed October 5, 2024. <https://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/38340/transcript+of+special+briefing+by+foreign+secretary+on+prime+ministers+visit+to+usa+september+23+2024>; Zhu, Lingling. "New Trends in India's Diplomatic Strategy: A Global South Perspective." *Social Sciences in Yunnan* 2024, no. 01: 158-165.

²⁷ "After G20, India Won't Get to Be Leader of Global South, Can't Prevent New Cold War Either." *ThePrint*. Accessed October 5, 2024. <https://theprint.in/opinion/after-g20-india-wont-get-to-be-leader-of-global-south-cant-prevent-new-cold-war-either/1751167/>.

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agriculture, disaster-resilient infrastructure through the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), and renewable energy through the International Solar Alliance (ISA). These initiatives have undoubtedly captured international attention. India's ability to mediate between the Global North and South is seen as crucial to maintaining balance in its relationships. However, despite its potential to craft innovative development models for a post-2030 world, India's role is fraught with challenges. Its capacity to act as a true bridge is limited by both internal constraints and geopolitical dynamics that often prioritize national over collective Global South interests.

India's attempts to position itself as a leader in the Global South face significant challenges, particularly when addressing critical issues such as climate change. While India has advocated for representing the Global South's interests, its efforts often lack the necessary financial and structural support to bring about meaningful change. A key limitation is India's ability to mobilize sufficient resources for vulnerable countries and communities facing climate-related risks. Although engaging local actors and co-creating solutions tailored to specific regional contexts is essential for addressing climate challenges, these efforts remain ineffective without adequate funding.

In the context of the Indo-Pacific strategy, India's leadership within the Global South has not enhanced its diplomatic flexibility. Instead, it has further exposed the ambiguity of its strategic positioning. On one hand, India plays the role of an autonomous leader in Global South affairs. While on the other hand, it maintains close cooperation with the US, Japan, and other countries in the Indo-Pacific strategy. This dual role makes India's foreign policy appear inconsistent and lacking in credibility on the international stage. Particularly in the face of China's rise, India's attempt to balance its strategies between the Global South and the Indo-Pacific actually weakens its influence in both spheres. While India tries to exclude China from Global South affairs, it simultaneously relies on the US in the Indo-Pacific

strategy to counter China's influence. This contradictory approach renders India's foreign policy detached from reality and lacking a clear strategic direction.

India's assertive posture toward its South Asian neighbors is significantly shaped by the influence of China. India is apprehensive about China's deepening relationships with Pakistan and its expanding ties with other countries in the region. These neighboring nations view China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as an attractive opportunity and seek to assert their own "strategic autonomy" through engagement with China. India must recognize the legitimate rights of its neighbors to benefit from investment opportunities arising from their interactions with China.

Pakistan, in particular, has consistently resisted Indian dominance in the region, prompting India to diplomatically isolate it. The unresolved Kashmir dispute largely stems from India's refusal to grant Kashmiris their right to self-determination. Since 2016, India has severed all contact with Pakistan and has concentrated on portraying it as a perpetrator of cross-border terrorism. Ironically, Pakistan is now facing terrorism that is reportedly linked to India. This dynamic underscores the limitations of India's approach and highlights the need for a more constructive engagement with its neighbors, rather than relying on a strategy of isolation and demonization.²⁸

Overall, India's assertion of leadership in the Global South appears more as a display of self-promotion than a demonstration of genuine global leadership. While India's efforts at the Voice of the Global South Summit earned symbolic victories, its performance on substantive issues has been less impressive. India's dual role between the Indo-Pacific strategy and Global South affairs not only complicates its foreign policy but also puts its international reputation to the test. The so-called leadership of India in the Global South ultimately reveals the limitations and strategic inconsistencies in its foreign policy, making it difficult for India to truly lead the Global South to breakthrough achievements on the international stage in the 21st

²⁸ Chaudhry, Aizaz Ahmad. "Indian Foreign Policy." *Dawn*, August 18, 2024. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1853041>.

century. Without a more inclusive approach, India risks alienating key allies, diminishing its prospects for long-term leadership in the Global South.

Conclusion

India's efforts to position itself as a leader in the Global South face significant challenges and contradictions that ultimately hinder its ability to establish genuine leadership. While India has made symbolic gestures, such as hosting the Voice of the Global South Summit and promoting the African Union's G20 membership, these efforts often lack substantive results and long-term strategic planning. India's dual approach—attempting to lead the Global South while aligning closely with the United States in the Indo-Pacific strategy—exposes inconsistencies in its foreign policy, which undermines its credibility both within the Global South and on the global stage.

Furthermore, by excluding key developing nations such as China, Pakistan, and Brazil from its Global South diplomacy, India demonstrates strategic miscalculations that limit its ability to advocate effectively for the collective interests of the Global South. These exclusions, coupled with India's focus on advancing its own national interests, complicate its role as a representative of the developing world.

Ultimately, India's self-positioning reflects more symbolic leadership than actual policy-driven achievements. The country's engagement with mini-lateral mechanisms and attempts to balance its relationships with both the Global South and the Global North illustrate the broader limitations of its leadership ambitions. In the absence of more inclusive and concrete actions, India's ability to foster meaningful partnerships and lead the Global South towards substantive global governance reforms will remain constrained.

To overcome these challenges, India must adopt a more inclusive and balanced approach. Engaging with key excluded nations such as China, Pakistan, and Brazil would strengthen multilateral cooperation and enhance India's capacity to represent the broader interests of the Global South. Additionally, India needs to recalibrate its

foreign policy to better balance its national interests with the collective goals of developing countries. A clear, coherent strategy that prioritizes genuine collaboration over symbolic gestures is crucial for India to gain the trust and support of Global South nations. According to Sharma and Varshney, it is essential to establish effective mechanisms to oversee and assess the success of South-South Cooperation initiatives.²⁹

In the future, whether India can lead the Global South will depend on its ability to align its actions with its rhetoric, particularly in addressing critical global issues such as climate change, economic inequality, and South-South cooperation. Without meaningful reforms, India's leadership aspirations in the Global South may remain largely rhetorical, limiting its influence on global governance.

Ultimately, India's current foreign policy direction reveals significant limitations in its leadership ambitions in the Global South. If India seeks to solidify its leadership, it must prioritize inclusive diplomacy and collaborative strategies, ensuring that its actions resonate with the collective aspirations of the Global South. Failing to do so may result in India's continued struggle to assert a cohesive and credible leadership role on the international stage.

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²⁹ Sharma, J., and S.K. Varshney. "Role of India in South-South Cooperation to Achieve Sustainable Development Goals." In *Science, Technology and Innovation Diplomacy in Developing Countries*, edited by V. Ittekkot and J.K. Baweja, 123–145. Research for Development. Singapore: Springer, 2023. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-8470-6_7.