

A Race for the Global South or a Battle for the World Majority: Russia's Prospects

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Abstract

The explosive growth of attention to the Global South—a natural result of the past decade's synergetic trends—is likely to influence the rapid transformation of the world order that is now underway. Currently, expert attention is predominantly focused on the African continent. This article examines global changes in a broader perspective—with reference to the Global South and the World Majority. Their mammoth resources, underinvested infrastructure, and huge population (i.e., potential consumer market) drive global players to compete for influence in these countries. Compared to the other main actors involved (the U.S., the EU, Gulf monarchies, India, and China), Russia can formulate an original and sustainable approach to the Global South. Russia's advantages in trade and security, together with its pragmatic diplomacy, remove the political and ideological barriers to bilateral and multilateral relations with the Global South's politically, economically, and civilizationally diverse states.

Keywords: Global South, World Majority, East-West contradictions, food security, global development, globalization, international security.

CAUSES

Changes in globalization have turned the great powers' attention to the Global South. By the mid-2010s, globalization—already slowed by economic, commercial, financial, and technological factors—was facing cautious and flexible pushback from the Asia-Pacific countries. The regionalization of the Asia-Pacific was partly a reaction to Barack Obama's Pivot to Asia. The "black swan" of COVID-19 contributed to global fragmentation, greatly enhancing the role of nation-states, weakening integration trends globally and regionally, disrupting logistics, and triggering a "vaccine war." The Global South, above all Africa, was the hardest-hit by the pandemic.

One cause of the “turn to the South” is China’s soaring economic and political influence. China is rapidly becoming the center of the rising Asia-Pacific region, and its Belt and Road Initiative has accelerated its expansion into Africa and elsewhere.

Simultaneously, in the mid-2010s, the Global South drew the EU’s attention by disrupting the latter’s prosperity with uncontrolled flows of migrants fleeing conflicts and famine (caused, *inter alia*, by climate change). The EU proved unable to cope with these problems, which remain among its most controversial ones.

Another cause of attention is the inability of the traditional postwar international institutions to resolve the problems of the Global South, which endangers global stability but also offers vast future resources, production, and markets. The UN and the IMF, are clearly degrading. The rigid system, built according to the templates and needs of the bipolar world, cannot respond quickly and adequately to acute crises. Decades-long UN programs (for food, climate and others) have yielded few visible results. IMF programs do not work. Meanwhile, alongside the over-bureaucratized organizations of modernity, post-post-modern alliances are arising based on interests, allowing “double, triple and greater” membership, taking into account the positions of sovereign nation-states, and permitting and even encouraging multi-vectored foreign policies (Bogdanov, 2019; Kobrinskaya, 2024). In practice, it is such groups—from BRICS to the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation—that are now beginning to display an active interest towards the Global South, offering it *a la carte* projects and services.

Finally, the race for the Global South was triggered by the Special Military Operation (SMO), regarding which the votes of the UN’s African members were particularly sought-after in the General Assembly.¹

The world community’s general reaction motivated the concept of the *World Majority* in Russian political discourse. For all its vagueness

¹ Since the start of the SMO, six resolutions directly related to the Ukraine conflict have been put to the vote in the UN General Assembly (ES-11/1, ES-11/2, ES-11/3, ES-11/4, ES-11/5 и ES-11/6), with 53 African states showing significant disagreement with the U.S. position (<https://digitallibrary.un.org/?ln=en>).

and behavioral basis, the term implies opposition to the Western liberal order,² which draws the concept of the World Majority closer to that of the Global South. The World Majority highlights the principles of the emerging world order that differentiate it from recent periods and almost bring it back to the Westphalian era. As the analysis of votes in the General Assembly indicates, the World Majority states are by no means ready to bow to the will of the West.

At this point, the leading world actors—the West, China, Russia, and India—have clearly different objectives regarding the Global South.

The West sees the Global South not as a prize, but as a *sine qua non* condition for success in competition with China and Russia. The North-South axis is becoming crucial to determining the West-East balance. Western players' efforts are partly reactive and seek to contain the threats emanating from the Global South. At present, this mostly entails development assistance, particularly through UN and EU programs.

For China, its long-running investment in the Global South is a projection of its growing economic and now political potential.

For Russia, the Global South offers real opportunities to overcome isolation and strengthen its international position (Bogdanov et al., 2023).

Who will win this race? What are Russia's prospects? Will the Global South itself benefit? And what place will it take in the future world order?

WHAT IS THE GLOBAL SOUTH?

The “authentic” Global South, primarily Africa, is still synonymous with the Third World—a term it began to replace in the late 1960s. The Global South clearly does not belong to the Western world, for which reason it is often defined as the ‘non-West.’ As the ‘developing world’ it still lags behind the West, but, again, predominantly in Africa. Apart from economic indicators, affiliation with the Global South stems from

² The “World Majority” means a community of non-Western countries that have no binding relationships with the United States and the organizations it patronizes—those who do not impose sanctions against Russia, recognize American dominance, etc.” (Karaganov, Kramarenko, and Trenin, 2023).

the colonial past of many Global South states, as borne out by two enduring trends.

The first is the longstanding grievance and distrust towards former colonial powers and the U.S. that tend to generate positions different from the Western one. *This gives certain advantages to Moscow, which continues to benefit from the USSR's image as a fighter against colonialism.* Western critics speak of Russian “memory diplomacy” in Africa (Brzozowski and Fox, 2023).

The second trend is a tendency towards non-binding alliances and non-alignment. In this sense, little has changed since the Bandung Conference of 29 Asian and African countries in 1955, and the Non-Aligned Movement's foundation at the Belgrade Conference in 1961. *Paradoxically, the countries involved—internally modern or even pre-modern—prefer post-post-modern foreign policies.*

The current Global South differs little from that defined by German Chancellor Willy Brandt in the 1980s report *North-South: A Program for Survival* (Lees, 2021): everything other than the U.S., Canada, Europe (including the USSR), Japan, Australia, and New Zealand.

Much of the Global South remains relatively poor and thus motivated primarily by pragmatic interests: “Caught between America, China, and Russia, many countries are determined not to pick sides. As the American-led order in place since 1945 fragments and economic decoupling accelerates, they seek deals across divides. This transactional approach is reshaping geopolitics” (The Economist, 2023). In contrast to the anxious West, some Russian experts see the World Majority's main task and purpose as countering Western consolidation, “which is creating problems for international security and the world economy” (Bordachev, 2023).

What has changed is the Global South's self-perception. In line with contemporary prioritization of sovereignty, national interests, and multi-vector hedging, the countries of the Global South have been bolstering their status as independent actors. Incidentally, this testifies to the fundamental differences between the current world order and that which immediately followed the Cold War. In the earlier case the limitrophe Central and Eastern European states fled as fast as possible

into the EU and NATO and transferred their sovereign powers to them. But now, as the degradation of traditional Western institutions becomes ever clearer and power shifts to the South and the East, the Global South is not hurrying to merge itself into anything else; it is becoming a space of opportunity instead of a backward Third World. Symbolically, China, which long refused to recognize itself as part of the Global South, officially declared itself as such in 2023.

Aside from China, major Asian economies (primarily India) and Brazil have recently become more active in Africa. South-South networking has emerged on the basis of states' pragmatic interests. *India, which enjoys more support and trust in this vast space than does China (with its tough economic policies), could become the Global South's leader.*

India's financial and technological support to African countries includes supply of agricultural machinery and equipment, training of farmers and extension workers, and the establishment of agricultural research centers. In addition, India has provided capacity-building assistance to African countries in soil and water management, and in crop production and protection (Krishnak Jagat, 2023).

James Marape, the prime minister of Papua New Guinea, in his address to the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation in May 2023, called on India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi to act as a spokesperson in relations with the Global North. As he welcomed Modi as a leader of the Global South, Marape pledged that the Pacific's island states would support him in global forums. India, like China, appeals to a common history of colonization to strengthen ties with the Global South.

Yet there are significant differences in the approaches of India and China to the Global South.

India acts as a mediator that understands the Global South but can influence the U.S., seeking more equitable cooperation between the Global South and the West. India's contacts with the Global South have been largely bilateral, but New Delhi has been keen to ensure multilateral inclusiveness. India advocated for the inclusion of the African Union (AU) in the G20, which was accomplished in September

2023. While engaging with the entire Indo-Pacific region, from East African countries to Pacific islands including Taiwan, India has tried to present itself as a security provider, especially in the field of human security, which is in great demand across the region. While the concept is vague, it is defined as freedom from violent conflict and physical want. India's emphasis on ensuring "freedom from want" and "freedom from fear" as a way of addressing global insecurity is particularly attractive to the Global South (UNDP, 1994, pp. 22-46).

In a gesture of support for states coping with harsh terms of credits from China, India at the G20 advocated more lending to poorer countries and more World Bank financing for them: "From the Pacific Islands to East Africa, India can knit the region together in a way that the West can't, and China doesn't want to" (Ramesh and Pascal, 2023, p. 65).

China, on the other hand, seeks to strengthen its own economic and political positions in the Global South and to create mechanisms capable of resisting the West. Through investment (including via the BRI), China positions itself as an alternative to the United States. India tries to increase its influence by positioning itself as a mediator that understands the interests of the Global South and, at the same time, influences the United States.

The U.S.'s Council on Foreign Relations does not rule out competition/rivalry between China and India for leadership in the Global South. It remains unclear whether the Global South sees either country as their leader. "Countries in the Global South continue to accept support from both China and India. However, growing friction over issues such as China's approach to the global debt crisis and India's obstructionism in international organizations has contributed to building distrust and dislike of both countries" (Miller, 2024).

The wealthy Gulf monarchies are less ambitious but no less active in Africa. For example, the UAE has been strengthening economic ties with Angola, Zambia, and the DRC, promising heavy investment into critical sectors, such as energy (including renewable energy), agriculture, IT, and maritime logistics. In 2023, Angola contracted for the construction of three corvettes in the UAE. Between 2012 and 2022, the UAE invested \$59.4 billion in Africa, ranking third after China

and the U.S. In turn, Angola has significant agricultural potential with fertile soil and a favorable climate that could help the UAE diversify its food imports. It also offers the UAE minerals, a growing consumer market, and influence in the continent. The UAE plans to become a hub connecting Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. This strategy, which will help ease the African countries' dependence on China, enjoys Western backing, too (Ribe, 2024).

THE WEST IN THE NON-WEST

In contrast to China (which is moving into the Global South with the inevitability of a paving machine), India (which is trying, albeit with fewer resources and investments, to build a new global network structure) and the Emirates (which has started actively developing 'its' region), the old masters of the Global South do not seem to have discovered new ways of effective interaction with it. The EU and its members are impeded by the Global South's memory of the colonial past and, more importantly, by a wrong choice of strategy.

Less than three years after the Global Gateway strategy was launched by the EU in 2021, foreseeing €300 billion for the Global South by 2027—in exchange for African countries' tighter control of illegal immigration to Europe—it has been labeled ineffective, even in Brussels itself. According to former EU Ambassador Romana Vlachutin, the EU's aid is linked not “to its business interests but to robust convergence with European values, to which it [the EU itself] does not always adhere. This has entailed the recipient countries' suspicion and accusations of hypocrisy. They may well understand economic realities and transactional relationships, as China has amply demonstrated, but they do not like patronizing. EU policy towards the Global South needs a reset” (Vlachutin, 2023).

The U.S. strategy for Sub-Saharan Africa, updated in August 2022 (The White House, 2022), is traditionally aimed at supporting democratic values but now also “welcomes and affirms African agency.” However, the real (economic and logistical) importance of Africa seems to be expected around the middle of the 21st century, while Washington's current policy remains focused on containing rivals.

The U.S. strategy for the Global South, proposed by Carnegie Endowment for International Peace³ Vice President Andrew S. Weiss, is also vague and defensive: “The right way for America is to counter Russia in Africa. Help democracies—and let Moscow’s appeal fade in autocracies. ... Instead of simply trying to compete for the affections of African leaders who are sometimes more of a liability than an asset to the United States, Washington should continue helping its current partners deliver good governance, economic opportunities, and security for their citizens. Such aid can both improve the lives of ordinary Africans and diminish the likelihood that their governments will look to Russia in the future. As for those countries that have already turned to Russia for assistance, Washington needs to acknowledge that in many cases the most fruitful policy—difficult as inaction may be—is to step back and allow Russia’s appeal to fade on its own” (Wehrey and Weiss, 2024).

It can be assumed that Washington, having abandoned Afghanistan but forced to intervene in Ukraine and Gaza, will not actively participate in the race for the Global South in the foreseeable future, as the proposed action plan does not mention China, the U.S.’s main adversary.

WHAT CAN RUSSIA DO?

Russia, which has sharply stepped up its efforts in the Global South on a range of issues, has good chances to strengthen its presence there in the near future.

The time and resources available are of particular importance here. Russia has a relatively large window of opportunity, five to seven years, opened by the West’s evident unreadiness to seriously address the problems of the Global South. The EU, after consolidating in 2022, will in the coming years be trying to overcome serious internal ideological and other divides, as the EU Parliament election has shown. This is especially true regarding migration—a derivative of the Global South’s problems. In the foreseeable future, the EU’s anti-colonial discourse will remain a fact of life. The U.S., focused on China, is unlikely to

³ Recognized as a foreign agent and an undesirable organization by the Russian Ministry of Justice.

increase its attention to the Global South, regardless of the 2024 election's outcome.

As for Russia's plans, they are clearly outlined in the 2023 Foreign Policy Concept (MID Rossii, 2023): the Global South currently offers Russia opportunities to overcome isolation and strengthen its international position. Russia intends to prioritize "support for the sovereignty and independence of interested African states, including through security (including food and energy security), military, and military-technical cooperation."

Moscow's obvious advantages, in addition to its historical lack of African colonies, are its long experience of doing business with African governments and the significant share of elites friendly to Russia. Moscow also offers the Global South new formats for cooperation—institutions and mechanisms that suit current international realities—especially in the form of the growing and developing BRICS, where Russia closely interacts with some of the South's leading economies: China, India, Brazil, South Africa, and the UAE.

This advantage also poses an acute problem for Russia—its main partners in world politics may become its main competitors in the Global South: China (the main economic actor in the region) and India (the Global South's "guide" into the world community). Given this and Russia's limited capabilities, Moscow will likely focus on the sectors of the economy that are of greater social and especially security value (Kortunov, 2020, p. 7).

Food Security—Southern Solutions to Southern Problems

One of the decisive frontlines in the struggle for the World Majority is food, which is existentially important for most countries in the Global South. Per the phrase attributed to Henry Kissinger, "Control oil and you control states. Control food and you control nations." Only the first part has lost some relevance. The second remains a deep scar on the historical memory of most Southern states and a terrible everyday reality for some of them.

It is here that the collective West is increasingly losing its historical initiative and its ability to propose an adequate vision of food security

in national, regional, and global dimensions. The terms ‘developing’ for the countries of the South and ‘developed’ for the countries of the Global North are beginning to reflect less their static positions and more their potential for future growth. Over the past two decades, the South’s food independence has increased dramatically. Formerly an importer of food and a recipient of food aid from the West, the Global South as a whole has become an independent and influential actor in the global food economy. In 2021-2023, the Global South’s production of various basic foodstuffs (wheat, maize, sugar, vegetable oils, meat, some dairy products) accounted for 48-77% of the global total, and 97% in the case of rice, the staple food for half of humanity (OECD-FAO, 2024).

However, food security indicators vary significantly across the Global South. In 2020-2023, the proportion of Asians and Latin Americans facing hunger fell from 8.5% to 8.1% and from 6.5% to 6.2%, respectively, compared to a ‘Prevalence of Undernourishment’ of 9.3% globally—while in Africa, the rate rose from 18.7% to 20.4%. But in 2023, Africa accounted for more than 40% of the world’s hungry, a level that will exceed 50% by 2030 if current trends continue. According to the latest Global Report on Food Crises (GRFC, 2024), nearly 282 million people in 59 countries and territories experienced high levels of *acute hunger* in 2023—a worldwide increase of 24 million from the previous year. The FAO predicts that by 2033, Sub-Saharan Africa’s net imports of staple foods will increase by about 80%. At the same time, malnutrition in states like Brazil and China (leading food-producing countries and the richest in the Global South) barely exceeds North American and European levels (in China and the UAE it was at the level of “zero hunger,” which the UN set as a strategic goal for humanity (FAO, 2023; FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WHO, 2024).

Existing bilateral and multilateral international cooperation mechanisms, which do not take into account these changes, are becoming insufficient to address current, let alone future, problems. The disruptions of the global food and agricultural supply and trade, caused by COVID-19 and the West’s anti-Russian sanctions, have shown the ineffectiveness of international business institutions (e.g., ABCD—the “big four” U.S. companies controlling up to 70% of the global grain

market) and major interstate organizations—from the UN to the IMF and the WB. Bilateral relations based on Western supremacy have also become obsolete, as illustrated by the delay in EU-MERCOSUR free trade zone talks caused by Europe's insistence on the imposition of rigid eco-climatic requirements for food production in Latin American countries. The EU's Global Gateway, a competitor to China's Belt and Road Initiative, ignores the needs of developing countries' agricultural sectors, while the trade of Belt and Road members with China increased by 35% in 2013-2022 to almost \$110 billion—about 30% of China's total external agricultural trade (Guo, 2023).

In these conditions, the importance of food security of South-South cooperation is increasing significantly. In 2022, half of Brazilian agricultural exports went to the Global South, primarily China. Six of India's ten top agricultural customers are Global South countries. The expansion of Global South leaders into Africa's agricultural sector is particularly intense. Brazil, China, and India are already among the leading food suppliers to the African market. Moreover, unlike the West, they are supplementing trade with long-term cooperation that accords with local technological and organizational needs and with local government features.

Brazil offers its experience of transforming the backward savannah with highly mechanized production of soybeans and corn by family farms.

China has established some 30 technology-demonstration centers in Africa, promoting more than 300 advanced technologies that have increased local crop yields and incomes by 30-60% for more than 1 million farmers. Chinese agricultural investment in Africa in 2023 approached \$2 billion, and Sino-African agricultural trade came close to \$10 billion (Xinhua, 2023).

India is also pursuing the principle of "African solutions to African problems," given its long experience with the "green revolution" and its emphasis on local crops for domestic consumption (millet, sorghum) processing and storage of agricultural products. This trend⁴

⁴ Few investment projects on biodiversity and sustainable agri-food systems are included in the "Climate and Energy" section of the Global Gateway and are practically lost there (see Bilal and Teevan, 2024).

is particularly noticeable in the context of several agricultural MNCs' withdrawal from Africa.

The African agricultural sector's importance to Russia's "turn to the South" is also growing. Russia already provides about 20% of Africa's imported wheat and barley and about 15% of its imported soybean and sunflower oil. Russian mineral fertilizers occupy more than 10% of the African market, a share that is expected to double in the next five years with advances in the fertilizers' use. This will effectively complement the expansions of China, India, and Brazil, which are themselves major importers of Russian fertilizers.

African countries, like Russia's other partners in the South, have reacted negatively to the collective West's use of sanctions without regard for their disruption of international trade and logistics, sometimes provoking agricultural crises in Africa and elsewhere. But they appreciate the determination and ability of Russian businesses and the Russian government to overcome the sanctions and their consequences—especially through the proposed BRICS alternative to Western commodity exchanges and Western payment systems. Thus, Russia's growing cooperation with the Global South countries in food security is becoming an important geopolitical factor of strategic partnership.

Security in an Insecure World

The landslide transformation of the unstable post-Cold War world order is radically changing the emphasis and focus on security issues, without distinguishing between major powers and small nations, between global and local problems—"a rising tide lifts all boats." The creeping securitization of everything—nuclear risks, energy, food, disinformation campaigns, election interference, and protection of spiritual and moral values—is throwing the world back into its old ways: the balance of power, brinkmanship, and coercion. Old conflicts are unfreezing and new ones are emerging, especially in the Global South.

The prioritization of sovereignty and the real or perceived increase in external threats combine to invalidate the vulgar 1990s understanding of

collective security as a client's 'outsourcing of defense' to its patron. This approach worked in a world focused on economic growth and public welfare at the expense of military expenditure. Its outcome can be seen in Western Europeans' rush to now boost expenditures and buy new weapons to catch up after a thirty-year hiatus.

Russia is a traditional provider of security goods and services on the world market. Security cooperation with the Global South now seems especially promising in the new high-risk world order.

Russia's ability to offer military-technical cooperation has been diminished by the reorientation of its defense industry towards the Special Military Operation. However, it would be wrong to conclude that Russia has permanently lost its position in the world arms market (see Tkach and Banerjee, 2024) on the basis of decreased revenues in 2022 and the following few years. The SMO is not only demanding most of the Russian defense industry's attention but also providing *invaluable experience of modern combat, setting priorities in the defense industry, and securing a competitive advantage in equipment and tactics that can and should be exploited in security cooperation with the Global South*. The combination of low cost, availability and obvious practicality of wartime solutions makes Russian military equipment preferable for countries that are often involved in low-intensity armed conflicts but have financial limitations. This is in line with the historical practice of Russia's military-technical cooperation with African countries (with very few exceptions like Uganda), which mostly imported Russian arms and ammunition "off the shelf."

The SMO has revealed the efficiency of using reconnaissance and attack drones as advanced tactical means of combat. Private Russian drone manufacturers can play an important role in stabilizing and strengthening Russia's position in global arms supplies, if thoughtfully given access to export channels. The global market for military UAVs is currently estimated at between \$13 and \$20 billion, 12-14% annual growth forecasted until 2030 (MarkNtel, 2024; Fortune Business Insights, 2024).

The SMO has also marked *artillery's return to dominance on the battlefield*. Artillery's effective deployment requires the production

or procurement of guns (especially of quickly-worn-out barrels) and of shells (122 mm, 152 mm, 155 mm, and rockets). Russia, which is successfully solving this problem for itself, could also reliably and efficiently supply others, making its current production capacities more economically sustainable in the long run. Notably, many militaries of the Global South use Soviet/Russian artillery.

The seeming backwardness of many militaries in the Global South may turn out to be a strength, amid warfare's partial archaization, featuring cheap drones and relatively simple artillery—a stark contrast to the long-dominant image of 'precision warfare.'

Another area in focus is the *training of military and security personnel*. With the supply of unmanned combat vehicles to the Global South's countries it becomes necessary to share the latest tactical methods of modern combat *and expand the system of command training for the Global South's armed forces*. This expenditure should be seen as a strategic investment not only into future military-technical cooperation, when people familiar with the Russian military machine will be oriented towards the purchase of Russian security systems and services. Above all, this is *a form of investment in forming future elites positively disposed towards Russia in the Global South*, where the factor of the military in power continues to be significant and clearly has no tendency to decrease under the conditions of the "high-risk world order" we are considering.

Finally, *security cooperation may also take the form of protecting large-scale infrastructure projects in the Global South*, which are often vulnerable to internal unrest or interstate conflict. This sector is potentially of interest to private military corporations and might involve both the direct protection of sites (mines, factories, power plants, logistics complexes, transportation infrastructure) and the implementation of integrated security in certain areas, combining military and non-military methods.

Such protective services may be especially useful in connection with the low-capacity modular nuclear power plants (and their fuel) that are particularly suitable to much of the Global South. Physical protection of the nuclear facilities and nuclear materials (on the site and during

transportation) would make it possible to employ Russian specialists on a permanent basis. Such practices could then be replicated in other sectors of administrative and economic activity.

ENOUGH ROOM FOR EVERYONE?

The Global South's vast range of opportunities is conducive to conflict-free cooperation there between state, private, and semi-private providers of development and security. The Global South features:

- a lower level of geopolitical confrontation—at least for the rest of this decade—than is present along the West-East axis;
- actors that are open to cooperation and capable of pursuing their own interests;
- numerous platforms for political and economic cooperation: BRICS, business forums, etc.

Based on its experience and resources, Russia has the ability to become one of the frontrunners in the race for the Global South and, in any case, to benefit from it.

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