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Benedicte Bull & Dan Banik

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The Rebirth of the Global South: Geopolitics, Imageries and Developmental Realities

Benedicte Bull and Dan Banik

Centre for Global Sustainability, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway

Abstract The term 'Global South' has seen a resurgence in recent years, evolving from a synonym for the 'Third World' to a geo-historical concept representing low- and middle-income countries and emerging powers. Despite growing prominence in global policy debates, its meaning remains contested. In this introductory article to the special issue, we first discuss five distinct interpretations identified in the literature. We emphasize that Global South is characterized by internal diversity, evolving roles, and shifting alliances, while remaining anchored in the broader struggles for global justice and systemic transformation that give the concept its political meaning. The second part analyses the role of the Global South in reshaping global governance as countries within this grouping navigate strategic balancing between major powers, influencing emerging multipolar dynamics. Through a dialogue with the articles in the special issue we illustrate how the role of the Global South moves far beyond being critical of the west and a liberal world order, but rather both challenge and reaffirm some of the norms underpinning such an order. The third part discusses how South-South Cooperation (SSC) emerges as a vehicle for reconfiguring global cooperation, driven by strategic interests and diverse forms of engagement. The articles in this special issues provide examples of the multifaceted nature of this engagement. Overall, this special issue provides insights into how the Global South's complexities intersect with geopolitical shifts, challenging traditional norms and offering new frameworks for global governance transformation.

Keywords: Global South; geopolitics; world order; South-south cooperation; development

Introduction

The term 'Global South' has experienced a significant revival in recent years. Once merely a synonym for the 'Third World', the term is now frequently invoked in public debates on global policy. Countries identifying as the Global South have an increasingly assertive presence in global governance and are making joint claims with growing frequency. The Global South has evolved into a geo-historical concept, rather than a strictly geographical one, that encapsulates the aspirations, challenges, and dynamism of low- and middle-income countries as well as emerging powers. At the same time, its use in academic literature has exploded (Haug et al., 2021).

Despite the growing attention it has received in recent years, there is still no consensus on what the term truly signifies, or what the implications of its rising influence might be. It also remains uncertain how this diverse group of countries will shape global governance in the future. There is a growing polarization in both political and academic debates surrounding these questions. Some scholars view the rise of the Global South as potentially emancipatory, offering prospects for a more democratic and just form of global governance than that established by the liberal order of the Global North (Artner and Yin, 2023; Mignolo, 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2023). However, others claim that the rise of the Global South is essentially a result of the rise of alternative forces and powers, most notably that of China, promising the emergence of a world order that is less democratic, and potentially as unequal as the liberal order (Acemoglu, 2023; Solarz Hendriks et al., 2024).

Our goal in this special issue is to provide fresh insights on the topic, with contributions from a range of scholars, most of whom either originate from, or reside in, the Global South. The articles offer a diverse set of views on what the Global South entails, as well as its potential to reshape global governance following recent shifts in the global political economy. The contributions to this special issue thus address impressive achievements related to economic growth, poverty reduction, and technological advancements juxtaposed with enduring challenges such as rising inequality, conflict, human rights violations, and the inadequacies of existing international frameworks to address these issues comprehensively.

In this introductory article, we provide an overview of the key debates and position the contributions of this special issue within them. While the first section explores the contested meaning of the term, the second situates its rise within broader geopolitical shifts, including the growing influence of China. In section three, we briefly examine how international initiatives and forms of engagement led by the Global South differ from other models of cooperation, and analyze their implications for democracy, development, and the environment.

The meaning of the 'Global South'

There is no clear consensus on the meaning of the term 'Global South'. The literature reveals at least five distinct approaches to its definition and understanding. One commonly implied (although rarely explicitly stated) interpretation equates the term with countries formerly labeled as 'developing', which share certain economic characteristics such as low levels of income and limited industrialization. From this perspective, the history of the Global South is essentially the history of the world's poorer nations (Prashad, 2012).[1] This interpretation is frequently adopted by scholars, political leaders, and journalists, often without critically reflecting on what these countries

1 See Waisbich & Maglia and Abbondazieri in this volume for short introductions to this history.

actually share, beyond their classification by institutions such as the World Bank or the IMF. As Haug et al. (2021) observe in a recent special issue, 'Whereas hardly anyone would think about framing studies on, say, US politics, French bureaucracy or Brexit negotiations as 'Global North' research, an increasing body of work on phenomena within and across Asia, Africa and Latin America is indeed labeled as 'research on the Global South', often without a consideration of what this framing implies' (Haug et al., 2021, p. 1926). As a result, such interpretations risk reproducing the long-standing pitfalls of research on 'developing countries,' which has often been criticized for essentializing highly diverse countries and populations into overly simplified categories that are designed primarily to render them legible and manageable to external actors and institutions, whether academic, economic, or political.[2]

A second approach seeks to anchor the Global South in geography, offering a clear spatial delineation. However, this approach quickly runs into complications. If the Global South were to refer strictly to countries in the southern hemisphere, it would exclude influential states such as India and China – both located north of the equator but widely regarded as key actors in the Global South (Nye, 2023). Beyond this geographical inconsistency, as Kleinschmidt (2018) argues, treating the Global South as a spatial meta-category misses a crucial point: the term reflects a shift away from worldviews that presumed a fixed and authoritative center of human society. The addition of 'Global' to 'South' was meant to highlight the complex interrelation between geography, social hierarchies, and economic disparities, in addition to allowing for the inclusion of marginalized groups located outside the geographical South.

A third approach associates the Global South with specific political and diplomatic projects and alliances, closely tied to various interpretations of decolonialization. As a political project, the Global South is considered as both a continuation and the transformation of the initiatives with the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the emergence of the Third World concept during the Cold War. Originating from initiatives such as the 1974 Declaration on the Establishment of a New Economic Order and gaining prominence with the 1980 Brandt Report, the term has been used to articulate collective aspirations for a more equitable global economic order. It serves, as Waisbich et al. note 'to denote a political program for decolonial resistance, delineate hierarchical boundaries between the haves and haves-not, or challenge academic practices' (Waisbich et al., 2021, p. 2091). This decolonial struggle has found concrete political and institutional expressions. Among the coalitions and groupings that employ the discourse of the Global South is the NAM, established at the 1955 at the Bandung-conference, which functions as a forum particularly for coordinating reforms efforts within the multilateral system, and increasingly invokes the Global South in its rhetoric.[3]

2 See, for example, the original critique against 'development' and 'developing countries' by Escobar, 1995.

3 In its latest declaration, multiple references are made to the Global South – not only as a grouping of countries, but also as a normative reference point for the creation of a more

The same applies to the Group of 77 (G77) established in 1964 as a platform for joint action among what were then termed 'developing countries' or the 'Third World'. It has since become the foremost platform for South-South Cooperation (SSC). The G77 today comprises 134 member states from across the world and is often referred to as G77+China, reflecting China's active participation and support despite not being an official member. The group increasingly frames its role as 'providing the Global South with the means to articulate our shared vision, promote our interests and enhance our joint negotiating capacity within the United Nations system'.[4]

The creation of BRICS is also often linked to the Global South's grievances with the structure and functioning of the global economic system (Carvalho, 2023; Hogan and Patrick, 2023). The term Global South has been used in several BRICS declarations, serving both as a geographical descriptor and as an ethical signifier. For example, the Johannesburg Declaration of August 2023 affirms a commitment to 'continuing to amplify and further integrate the voice of the global South in the G20 agenda'. Similarly, the term has featured prominently in the G20 discourse particularly during the recent presidencies of Indonesia (2022), India (2023), Brazil (2024) and South Africa (2025), with recent joint declarations highlighting Global South priorities.[5]

However, the growing use of the term Global South in the rhetoric of BRICS and the G20 also raises several concerns. First, there is no complete overlap between countries commonly associated with the Global South and former colonies – nor with membership in the aforementioned coalitions. The most glaring inconsistency is the inclusion of Russia in several of these groupings, including BRICS. Indeed, some argue that Russia has sought to position itself as a Global South power (Grishin, 2024), despite its geographical location in the Global North, its historical and ongoing role as an imperial power, and its status during the Cold War as one of the superpowers from which the NAM aimed to maintain distance. In response to these contradictions, Russia has promoted alternative terms such as 'the global majority' and emphasized a 'multipolar world order'. Nonetheless, Russia's growing alignment with Global South discourse contributes to the perception that

just world order. This is evident in the pledge: 'to also advance in the reform of the international financial architecture with the purpose of establishing a truly just and equitable New International Economic Order, in which the needs and particularities of the Global South are taken into account and all obstacles preventing the development of national capacities are removed.' Kampala Declaration, 19–20 January 2024. https://nam.go.ug/sites/default/files/2024-02/Kampala%20Final%20Outcome%20Document.pdf

4 See Joint Declaration on the occasion of the Fifty-fifth Anniversary of the Group of 77, https://www.g77.org/doc/G77_Joint_Declaration-55th_anniversary.pdf

5 'G20 New Delhi Leaders' Declaration', https://www.g20.in/en/media-resources/documents/doc-outcomes.html and 'G20 Rio de Janeiro Leader's Declaration,' https://g20.gov.br/en/documents/g20-rio-de-janeiro-leaders-declaration

the Global South is defined less by shared historical or developmental characteristics and more by a common opposition to the West.

Another and widely debated issue concerns whether China can be considered part of the Global South. While China has a history of colonial subjugation and continues to self-identify as the 'world's largest developing country' committed to Global South solidarity (Banik, 2019; Banik and Bull, 2018), it is also the world's second-largest economy and a major military power, with growing regional ambitions that some interpret as imperial (Liu, 2022; Shidore, 2024). Moreover, despite China's rhetorical alignment with the Global South's calls for reforming global governance institutions and redistributing power, its economic ascent and impressive economic development over the past two decades has been deeply intertwined with the liberal international economic order that was initially shaped and sustained by the Global North, and now increasingly challenged through tariffs and sanctions, particularly from the United States. While opposition to such sanctions may unite China with other Global South countries, its broader interests often diverge sharply from those of smaller and less powerful nations. Indeed, some political initiatives emerging from within the Global South, such as the idea of 'active non-alignment' proposed by Latin American leaders, explicitly seek to distance themselves not only from the West but also from China (Ominami et al., 2021). Some authors have also cautioned against the homogenizing tendencies of the Global South label, which may obscure the significant diversity among its members. As Patrick and Huggins (2023, online) note, 'one of the many tragedies of the Cold War was the tendency of the United States, especially, to treat the Third World as an undifferentiated terrain for zero-sum superpower competition, rather than to engage individual nations on their own terms, as actors in their own right possessing distinctive identities, interests, and motivation'. In the context of renewed US-China rivalry, insisting on the label 'Global South' may entrench simplistic binaries, obscure internal complexities, and erode the agency of its diverse actors.

A fourth approach considers the Global South not primarily as a geographical designation or a geopolitical coalition, but as a set of diverse sites where transformative and emancipatory forces emerge. Accordingly, the Global South functions as a meta-category – a conceptual space that transcends strict territorial or institutional boundaries. As Haug et al. (2021) and Waisbich and Maglia (2025, this volume) argue, the Global South refers to a shared historical trajectory marked by colonialism, dependency, and structural exploitation by dominant powers, which in turn have constrained the autonomy and agency of many countries and communities. Thus, the Global South category is dynamic and can be mobilized by different actors at different moments and across diverse geographies. As Waisbich and Maglia (this volume) write: 'What often unite developing countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America behind the label of Global South, at least discursively, is their colonial past, as well as a shared sense of peripherality and dissatisfaction with the global political and economic order that emerged after the Second World War'. In this sense, the Global South is defined

not only by structured inequalities but also by collective aspirations to challenge and transform the prevailing (Global North-led) world order. A similar perspective is echoed in a 2011 special issue, which asserts that 'the global south names the places where decolonial emancipations are taking place and where new horizons of life are emerging' (Levander and Mignolo, 2011). Similarly, Abbondanzieri (2024) in this issue argues that the Global South should not be reduced to a one-dimensional economic and political concept. Rather, it 'represents fertile ground for rethinking inherited categories, reflecting on repeated practices, and questioning imposed narratives' (2024, p. 15). From this perspective, the diversity of interests, resources, and political imaginaries among actors associated with the Global South is not a weakness to be overcome, but an important resource for generating new frameworks, narratives and possibilities for global transformation.

This understanding reflects a significant reconfiguration of how the Global South has been conceptualized in recent years. It marks a departure from deficit-based framings that define the Global South as merely 'undeveloped' or as 'the Other', toward a more assertive articulation of collective histories, shared challenges, and mutual aspirations for development, justice, and dignity. This shift is not merely rhetorical; rather, it mirrors broader transformations in the global geopolitical and socio-economic landscape. However, this approach is also not without its challenges. As Acharya (2014) observes, if the Global South is defined primarily by marginalization and limited agency within the global system, then recognizing the increasing agency of some of its members risks undermining the very foundation of the label. What happens, for example, when China, India, Brazil, and South Africa emerge as influential global actors but do not advance decolonial or emancipatory projects aimed at challenging the status quo and reducing structural inequalities? Do they then cease to be a part of the Global South? Similarly, if Argentina adopts the language and political imaginaries of the Global North, framing its struggles in terms of domestic opposition rather than global structures of inequality, should it be excluded from the Global South? These questions highlight the limitations of fixed or essentialist definitions and call for a more dynamic and context-sensitive understanding of the Global South.

Alf Gunvald Nilsen points to a different but related challenge with using the Global South as a meta-category for a diverse group of countries with a shared colonial past and common aspirations in this issue (Nilsen, 2025). He argues that we ought to consider the category as a space for thinking about global transformations. While material expansion in the Global South has resulted in a restructuring of global hierarchies of wealth in the world-system that has allowed actors of the Global South to emerge, the same processes have also deepened various types of inequalities in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. This, in turn, has compelled governing elites to construct new hegemonic projects aimed at reconciling the imperatives of capital accumulation with the need for political legitimation. However, as Nilsen argues, there is little evidence to suggest that these new projects necessarily pave the way for more equitable and democratic futures, particular for popular classes and subaltern groups in the Global South.

The preceding discussion calls for a more critical stance toward the Global South as a catch-all category. Its political utility is undeniable, but so too is its potential to obscure the diverse and often conflicting realities it seeks to unify. Indeed, the category may mask internal power asymmetries, diverging interests and uneven contributions to global transformation among those grouped under its umbrella. The contributors to this special issue have chosen to adopt different strategies to engage with these tensions and challenges. Waisbich and Maglia (2025) and Abbondanzieri (2024) approach the Global South as a grouping of countries linked by shared colonial legacies, structural peripherality, and a common desire to reform institutions of global governance. In contrast, Nilsen argues against the utility of the Global South as a unified analytical category, highlighting the need to differentiate among actors, especially the key role that China plays in the reproduction and restructuring of global capitalism (Nilsen 2025). Benedicte Bull takes yet another approach by conceptualizing the Global South not as a geographical designation or a normative project per se, but as a 'narrative that simultaneously seeks to create a joint identity and a joint agenda based on common interests between post-colonial nations that find themselves to be underprivileged in a global order led by western powers' (Bull, 2024, p. 2). For Bull, references to 'Global South countries' include those states that have explicitly integrated the term into their foreign policy identify and discourse. Other contributions in this volume – such as those by Brautseth (2024), Lin and Wang (2025), Li and Liu (2025) and Bórquez and López (2025) – engage the term primarily as a geographical category or discursive category. They use it as a point of departure for critically examining the actual character of SSC rather than presuming unity or coherence in the name itself.

In other words, this special issue includes a diversity of understandings of the Global South, emphasizing need to recognizes its internal diversity, evolving roles, and shifting alliances, while remaining anchored in the broader struggles for global justice and systemic transformation that give the concept its political meaning.

The Global South and the changing world order

The renewed prominence of the term the Global South must be seen in light of a broader contestation of the existing global order. As explored in the first part, the Global South is not a static grouping but a flexible and often contested category, often invoked to express shared histories, aspirations, and frustrations. One key reason for its rising visibility is that it increasingly figures in debates about the future of international order, both as a site of critique and as a potentially catalytic force for transformation. The global order, as Buzan (2004, p. 181) views it, consists of a pattern of activity that sustains the primary goals of dominant states, reinforced by a set of institutions and organizations that codify norms, rules, and principles. Currently, this world order is widely seen as unstable or in flux, and scholars consider this moment as a 'reordering' (Demko and Wood, 2018), a 'reshaping of order'

(Acharya et al., 2019), an 'order upheaval' (Legler, 2020), or in Nilsen's terms an 'interregnum' – a period between hegemonies, where the rules are being renegotiated although a new consensus has yet to emerge. In this context, the invocation of the Global South is not merely rhetorical but part of a broader effort to shape, contest, or redirect the trajectory of global governance (Nilsen, 2025).

Building on the idea that the Global South is increasingly invoked in the context of a shifting international order, one influential perspective views this moment as the weakening of the liberal and Western-led order that has structured global politics since the mid-twentieth century. This order, according to Ikenberry (2018) has served the world well by facilitating expansion of trade, the globalization of finance, and technological interconnectivity, while maintaining a framework of rules grounded (at least formally) in respect for state sovereignty and human rights. Some scholars interpret its decline as a natural outcome of internal contradictions within the liberal project (Lake et al., 2021; Mearsheimer, 2019). These include the tension between nationalism, which legitimizes domestic political authority, and internationalism, which sustains global cooperation, as well as the reproduction of inequalities at multiple levels, which in turn erodes the normative legitimacy of the world order from within (Kutlay and Öniş, 2023; Prashad, 2012). Yet, there is also a growing body of literature that points to the role of China in actively challenging and undermining this Western-led, rules-based order (Jones, 2020; Malkin, 2020; Schuman et al., 2023). When the decline of the liberal order and the competition between the United States and China is framed as a zero-sum game, the role of the Global South is often reduced to that of a supporting actor that is expected to align with one power block or the other. In this view, China's engagement with the Global South is seen largely as a strategy for alliance-building to support its own interests. Historical analogies are often drawn to the fate of the NAM during the Cold War, which began as an independent platform advancing the interests of the 'Third World' but increasingly came to be associated with anti-Westernism and, at times, alignment with Soviet interests. As during the Cold War, today's geopolitical contest is not only about material power but also about narratives and discourses. While the Cold War was symbolically framed as a struggle between 'freedom' (as promoted by the West) and 'peace' (as championed by the Soviet Union and its allies) (Iber, 2015), the current discursive struggle juxtaposes 'development' and 'sovereignty' – terms invoked by Global South actors – against 'democracy' and 'liberalism'. The Global South has become strongly associated with the discourse of 'development' for obvious reasons as the commonality of the claims by the extremely diverse group of countries behind the Global South label center around the right to development and more equitable economic conditions.

However, the narrative that we are witnessing the demise of the liberal order has clear limitations. As several scholars have pointed out, the ordering capacity of the liberal order has always been selective and uneven, to the extent that some describe it as a 'myth' (Chowdhury, 2018). And while the liberal order is frequently portrayed

as a coherent system promoting free trade, multilateral cooperation, and universal norms, its application has been far from universal. As previously noted, China's rapid economic rise has been deeply embedded within the structures of this order, and in many instances, Beijing has supported existing multilateral institutions in a much more consistent manner than Washington (Liu, 2022; Woods, 2023).

While there is little doubt that multilateralism as envisioned by Ruggie (1992) is in decline, we are not in the midst of a zero-sum struggle between the United States and China. Rather, we are witnessing a more complex contest over new forms of cooperation, evolving values and hybrid forms of governance (Öniş and Kutlay, 2020; Rodríguez and Rüland, 2022). Roles and alignments are also shifting: the United States is undermining liberal trade and the globalization of finance through increased use of tariffs and sanctions (Demarais, 2022), while China, often considered a challenger to the liberal order, is actively working to expand markets, particularly across the Global South. Although the US-China rivalry will continue to shape the global order, it is not the only dynamic at play. The emergence of what some call a 'multipolar world order' creates space for a broader range of actors to influence the direction of global governance. The Global South is not merely reacting to these shifts, it is also actively shaping the contours of the new order (Braveboy-Wagner, 2024). Influential countries within the Global South are increasingly engaging in strategic balancing, navigating between the influence of the United States, China, and other great powers in pursuit of their own interests and visions of mutually-beneficial global cooperation (Ominami et al., 2021). India is a case in point. In his 2020 book – *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World* – India's foreign minister S. Jaishankar outlines a transactional approach to foreign policy, where traditional alliances give way to 'frenemies' (Jaishankar, 2020, p. 39) and nations act with 'less pretense' (p. 26) in pursuing self-interest. He sees 'realism', 'realpolitik', and 'hard security' framing his country's vision, alongside strategies like 'management of differences' and 'pragmatic settlement'. In the 'transactional bazaar' of global politics (Jaishankar, 2020, p. 39), India is encouraged to exploit global contradictions to advance its national interests.

This active role of the Global South in shaping the emerging world order is already visible in the growing invocation of the 'voice of the Global South' across a range of global issues, including the conflicts in Ukraine, Gaza and Sudan, the deepening climate crisis, and the setbacks in achieving the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Indeed, a more coherent Global South agenda has emerged in recent years centered on demands for reforming the multilateral system to make it more just and equitable, securing finance to support the SDGs, and advancing climate justice through mechanisms such as the Loss and Damage Fund, which is earmarked to support low-income countries with adaptation and mitigation efforts. Central to this emerging agenda is the concept of 'development.' While it has increasingly been employed by the Chinese foreign policy establishment, it also resonates more broadly as a rallying point for many countries in the Global South. In many

such situations, references to development reflect a shared sense of marginalization and a growing dissatisfaction with the current global system, especially its failures to deliver on longstanding promises of equity and sustainability. Brazil's G20 Presidency (2024) illustrates this point well as it placed the fight against global inequality, poverty and climate change at the center of its agenda, despite facing fluctuating domestic support for a leadership role within the Global South, as shown by Waisbich and Maglia (this volume). Similarly, the African Union's inclusion as a permanent G20 member during India's presidency (2023) was widely welcomed for granting the continent a stronger voice on global issues, particularly economic development.

While all contributors to this volume share a normative commitment to a more just, democratic, and equitable global order, they differ in their assessments of whether such an order is actually emerging. Nilsen addresses this question most directly, arguing that we are not witnessing an emerging world order characterized by a stronger role for the Global South. Instead, he contends that were entering a 'conjuncture characterized by deep and durable instability and uncertainty' (Nilsen, 2025, p. 4). Drawing on Gramsci's idea of an 'interregnum', a transitional period in which old structures are dying but new ones have yet to be born, Nilsen conceptualizes the present moment a 'southern interregnum'. This period is characterized by two simultaneous dynamics: on the one hand, the growing accumulation of wealth in parts of the Global South; on the other, the persistence of poverty and structural exclusion across much of the global periphery. Ironically, even as 'development' has become a key rhetorical claim in the Global South's global engagement, Nilsen refers to 'the death of development' – referring to a model of capitalist accumulation that is incapable of fostering the kind of structural transformation that has been historically associated with the term development (Carroll, 2015). This echoes findings from Latin America wherein Chinese trade and investment have deepened rentierism and corruption, failing to encourage technological upgrading, industrialization, or institutional capacity-building – the very elements traditionally associated with 'development' (Bull and Rosales, 2024). In this sense, the Global South's growing presence on the world stage may reflect shifts in power and rhetoric, but not necessarily the transformative change that many of its advocates hope to see.

This perspective serves as a caution against assuming that a shift in the global order will automatically usher in more just or equitable outcomes. In light of this, many of the contributions to this volume examine precisely what the shift entails in reality. These include empirical investigations into whether and how the changing global order is reshaping power relations, development trajectories, and patterns of cooperation.

Global governance and the Global South: beyond South-South cooperation

To fully understand the implications of a more vocal and visible Global South in global governance, we must move beyond summit declarations and celebratory

speeches. As previously argued, the Global South is a diverse and plural category, and so too are its effects on the evolving global order. One approach to interrogating these implications is by examining the norms, practices, and institutional forms of SSC. The concept of SSC traces its origins to the Buenos Aires Plan of Action Promoting and Implementing Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries (BAPA), adopted by 138 UN member states in September 1978. BAPA established a normative framework grounded in the principles of sovereignty, mutual respect, and equality of rights – all of which continue to inform the rhetoric and, to varying degrees, the practice of SSC today. The SSC framework has, in particular, shaped the development strategies of China and India as well as their engagement on the African continent and in Latin America (Banik and Mawdsley, 2023). Longstanding multilateral institutions increasingly appear ill-suited to current realities – if they ever truly served broad, inclusive purposes, raising the question: *whose* interests were they designed to advance? No longer passive rule-takers, countries like China and India are increasingly positioned as rule-makers (Banik and Mawdsley, 2023). This shift has sparked interest in creating new multilateral platforms, among which the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) stands out as particularly influential. Yet, while such initiatives aim to foreground the priorities of the Global South, they have so far largely functioned as complements, rather than alternatives, to existing multilateral structures.

Although some have criticized China's aid and investments in the Global South for its failure to comply with the standards set by the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC; Banik, 2019), the more pressing and analytically interesting question concerns the organization, logic, and broader implications of such initiatives. What drives different forms of SSC, and how do they reshape global governance in practice? This is relevant not just in relation to foreign aid, but also in relation to trade, investments and diplomatic outreach. Investigating these dynamics offers valuable insights into how the Global South countries are responding to, as well as reshaping the norms and mechanisms of, global cooperation.

Building on the broader discussion of SSC as a vehicle for reshaping global governance, three of the articles in this volume focus specifically on China's aid and investments in the Global South. Lin and Wang examine how China's development cooperation is closely intertwined with its own economic transformation. They document the substantial rise China's trade and investments with the Global South during its own period of rapid industrialization and growth. Contrary to the more skeptical view offered by Nilsen, Lin and Wang argue that China's rise holds considerable benefits for the Global South. China's development is viewed as a compelling example of a formerly agrarian and closed economy that has successfully integrated into the global system and achieved industrialization. In their view, China's approach to SSC – including the opening of markets, facilitating trade and investment, and pursuing a strategy of industrialization anchored in each country's unique economic

structure and comparative advantage – is specifically designed to support such growth and development in low and medium income countries.

The development narrative outlined by Lin and Wang bears a striking resemblance to the modernization theory that underpinned much of Western development discourse during the early phases of what Bull and Bøås (2012) term as the Western development project. Some critics argue that China's SSC model is less about mutually beneficial development and more about expanding Beijing's geopolitical influence and consolidating its hegemonic role within the Global South (Lim and Ikenberry, 2023). Liu and Li (this volume), however, challenge this interpretation, arguing that China's SSC approach is anchored not in an ambition to dominate, but in its own development experiences, especially the lessons learned from market reforms and poverty reduction strategies. They also point to the considerable evolution over time that China's SSC has undergone, influenced by learning at home and adaptative organizational practices and innovations. Far from being static, China's development cooperation has evolved with its expanding engagement across the Global South and its active involvement in multilateral institutions. In this view, SSC is not so much about projecting power as much as a reflection of China's own evolving capabilities and its pragmatic learning-by-doing approach to development and poverty reduction.

This evolution raises important questions about whether SSCs will remain clearly distinct from traditional Western aid models in the future. Mawdsley (2019, p. 1) suggests that SSC in the coming decade is likely to adopt a more 'muscular, pragmatic, outcome-oriented narrative framing of economic diplomacy.' This shift may involve increasing challenges to the principle of non-interference and deeper collaboration between emerging powers and the Global North in low-income country contexts. While China's SSC has been distinct by emphasizing sovereignty and consistently refraining from imposing (explicit) political and economic conditionalities (albeit extracting support for the One-China policy is commonplace), empirical research from Latin America as well as the African continent suggests that these distinctions may be narrowing in practice. Studies by Oliveira and Myers (2021) and Guo (2024) indicate that as China's presence in the Global South has expanded, both Chinese state actors and private companies have become more cautious and more attuned to risk. And there is now growing attention to protecting Chinese interests abroad as well as efforts to raise the standards and oversight of Chinese investment activities. Similarly, while India continues to champion global governance reform in the name of the Global South, its engagement on the African continent largely reflects neoliberal, market-oriented logics that replicate, rather than challenge, dominant global structures (Venkatachalam and Banik, forthcoming). These developments suggest an element of convergence with traditional aid and investment practices, shaped more by practical experience and institutional adaptation in complex local environments and less by normative commitments.

The advice to avoid overly simplified portrayals of SSC is echoed by Bórquez and López (2025). They examine a novel version of SSC emerging between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Chile – an arrangement that challenges conventional assumptions about who constitutes the leadership of the Global South. Neither Chile nor ASEAN has traditionally been central to political projects of the Global South. Established in 1967, ASEAN was not associated with the NAM but was rather designed to combat the spread of communism. Currently, ASEAN has a free trade agreement with China. Similarly, Chile, which has not historically positioned itself as a leader of Global South initiatives and has traditionally been a strong supporter of liberal trade, was the first Latin American country to sign such a free trade agreement with China. Nonetheless, as Bórquez and López argue, the creation of a development partnership between ASEAN and Chile represents something new under the SSC umbrella. This case offers useful insights into how SSC can take very diverse forms, often driven by economic interests, even when traditional ideological or historical alignments with the Global South narrative are weak or absent.

Taken together, these articles testify to the diversity of forms of cooperation that SSC can take. Indeed, they reveal how SSC is shaped by strategic interests, institutional development and national development trajectories. They also demonstrate that the Global South is not a unified actor but rather a dynamic and diverse field of engagement, where cooperation may entail anything from realizing economic development goals to geopolitical positioning. These contributions also demystify SCC as a concept, moving beyond abstract ideals of solidarity and win-win cooperation to examining how specific institutional innovations help Global South actors to navigate the complex terrain of international relations. These cases, moreover, offer in-depth scrutiny of how cooperation is practiced, what it produces, and whose interests it serves. By doing so, these contributions deepen our understanding of how countries in the Global South are responding to a shifting global order and contributing to its reconfiguration in varied and sometimes contradictory ways.

Contesting norms: the Global South's impact on global cooperation

One of the most pressing concerns surrounding the rise of the Global South is its potential impact on the normative foundations of international cooperation, especially related to democratic and environmental governance. With growing visibility and influence in global affairs, numerous questions have emerged about whether Global South coalitions will uphold, refine, or deprioritize core liberal norms. Such concerns have been widely voiced by Western scholars, think-tanks, and media outlets (Acemoglu, 2023; Allan et al., 2018; Solarz Hendriks et al., 2024) as well as by critical voices within the Global South itself, particularly in Asia and Latin America (Chaguaceda, 2023; Fareedi, 2024; Krishnan, 2022). Critics typically highlight the dominance of authoritarian powers such as China and Russia within Global South-aligned coalitions. They question whether the growing influence of authoritarian powers will erode

democratic norms within multilateral institutions and undermine the vital role of democratic institutions in supporting progressive social movements in the Global South. There is also concern that populist authoritarian regimes may co-opt the language of anti-colonialism and development, even as they suppress dissent and contribute to the shrinking of democratic space.

In this issue, Bull directly addresses these concerns by examining the reaction of Global South countries to the 2024 presidential elections in Venezuela – a case that helps illustrate the normative commitments of actors in the Global South (Bull, 2024). Venezuela is particularly interesting as it has long positioned itself as a highly vocal member of Global South coalitions and has often invoked the term in its foreign policy statements, while the quality of its democracy has sharply declined. The highly contested nature of the 2024 elections resulted in very divergent international responses. The incumbent president, Nicolas Maduro, claimed victory under disputed circumstances and among those calling for greater transparency and urging the Venezuelan government to provide credible evidence of Maduro's alleged win were Brazil, Chile and Colombia – countries that aspire for leadership roles in the Global South. While the United States and most European Union countries rejected the election outcome, China and Russia offered swift congratulations. What stands out in Bull's analysis is that the position taken by Brazil and its regional allies was not driven by ideological alignment with Venezuela's opposition or pressure from the United States. Rather, their actions drew legitimacy from a form of South-South solidarity that places democratic norms at the heart of regional cooperation. This response also reflects a broader pattern: many Global South countries have fragile or highly contested democratic systems and for their leaders, democratic legitimacy remains one of the few widely accepted bases of rule. Accordingly, they may be especially motivated to uphold democratic norms in neighboring countries. But Bull also argues that such countries often frame their democracy-related interventions in a discourse that is distinct from the Global North. Such discourse draws on the language of regional autonomy, solidarity and non-hegemonic engagement.

Brauteseth's focus in this issue is on China's SSC and a particularly understudied aspect of its engagement on the African continent: bilateral investment treaties (BITs) (Brauteseth, 2024). These treaties are important because they represent legally binding commitments (unlike many of Beijing's signature projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the Global Development Initiative) and hence offer a useful lens to assess how Beijing formalizes its development relationships with the Global South. China has often been criticized for not only downplaying democracy in its relationship with the Global South, but also for pursuing projects and policies with negative environmental consequences, while 'development' is given overriding priority (Compagnon and Alejandro, 2013; Gonzalez-Vicente, 2019). Brauteseth's analysis reveals a notable evolution: more recent Chinese BITs with African countries are increasingly incorporating environmental provisions. This shift appears related to the growing prominence, within China, of the concept of 'ecological civilization', which now also has

begun to shape the country's outbound investment practices. However, such changes in treaty language does not necessarily translate into positive environmental outcomes and Brauteseth identifies key challenges ahead such as opaque decision-making within China and the limited institutional capacity of many African countries to implement and enforce these agreements. Nevertheless, a key message here is that China is positioning itself not only as a development partner but also as a responsible and rule-abiding partner within SSC as well as in global governance.

Taken together, these two articles caution us against simplistic narratives about the Global South. They challenge idealized views of SSC as inherently grounded in solidarity, sovereignty, mutual benefit, non-interference, zero conditionality and resistance to the dominance of the Global North. However, both Bull and Brauteseth reject the general assumption that SSC drives global governance in more authoritarian or environmentally destructive directions. Indeed, SSC, like traditional Western aid, warrants closer scrutiny. It is neither inherently progressive nor regressive but, in reality, shaped and reshaped by specific political, economic and institutional contexts. As several contributions to this volume demonstrate, SSC is a broad category, and far from being static, it encompasses a wide range of actors, modalities, and trajectories of change.

Conclusion

This special issue explores the rise of the Global South not as a singular force but as a complex and contested field of geopolitical, normative, and developmental struggle. In tracing the multiple meanings attached to the term, we have argued that the Global South is best understood as a historically grounded and yet open-ended concept. It draws its power from shared histories of exclusion and exploitation, but it is also animated by highly diverse trajectories and ambitions. As the global order undergoes a period of profound transformation and reconfiguration, the Global South has become a key arena in both material struggles and symbolic contests. Across domains such as climate negotiations, trade regimes, and development finance, the term is increasingly used to assert alternative visions of global cooperation and development. However, as several contributions in this volume warn, the presence of entrenched inequalities and authoritarian tendencies within parts of the Global South complicates the assumption that such shifts will automatically result in more inclusive, sustainable, or democratic outcomes.

This complexity has been amplified by recent developments in global economic policy. The resurgence of U.S. protectionism under the Trump administration, marked by a significant expansion of tariffs, has disrupted global trade flows and diminished the normative authority of liberal economic institutions. At the same time, the dismantling of USAID – one of the major aid agencies of the Global North – and the retrenchment of other U.S.-led development initiatives have reduced Washington's presence in several key regions, creating greater room for

countries such as China, India, Brazil, and emerging Middle Eastern powers to expand their influence through SSC and bilateral agreements. While China and other major powers of the Global South may seize this opportunity to further expand their footprint in Asia, Africa and Latin America, they face numerous domestic challenges that may limit their capacity to fill the void. These trends are accompanied by increasing income inequality, raising questions about the developmental sustainability and political legitimacy of these powers. The Global South is also marked by internal tensions, including unresolved border disputes between key actors such as China and India. In this context, the future rise of the Global South will be characterized not only by expanding influence, but also by internal tensions and structural contradictions that will critically shape the trajectory of its role in global governance.

We believe future research should take seriously the diversity of voices, strategies, and institutional innovations emerging from the Global South. This includes greater attention to how SSC is actually practiced on the ground; how domestic political regimes shape and are shaped by global engagements; and how concepts like 'development', 'justice', and 'sovereignty' are being redefined. By doing so, we ought to move beyond dichotomies of North and South, and instead contribute to a more plural, critical, and empirically grounded understanding of global governance and the dynamics of global change.

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Notes on contributors

Benedicte Bull is professor of political science and director of the research group Global Governance for Sustainable Development, at the Centre for Development and the Environment at the University of Oslo. She is the former director of the Norwegian Network for Latin America Research (NorLARNet) and the Oslo Academy of Global Governance. She has published widely on development, governance, elites and Latin American politics and economy. Her

books include: *Latin America today: New Interests and Old Ties to the USA, China, Russia, the Middle East and Europe*, *Diversified Business Groups and Transnational Capitalism in Central America, and Development Issues in Global Governance.*

Dan Banik is professor of political science, director of the Oslo SDG Initiative at the Centre for Development and the Environment, and affiliate professor at Faculty of Medicine, University of Oslo. He is also Academic Director of the Democracy Hub at Circle U. European University Alliance and Extraordinary Professor at the University of Pretoria. His books include *Political Transition, Poverty, and Inclusive Development in Malawi: The Democratic Dividend*; *Poverty and Elusive Development*; and *Starvation and India's Democracy*. Prof. Banik was a Visiting Professor and Consulting Scholar at Stanford University (2010-2017) and a Visiting Professor at China Agricultural University (2012-2017). He is the host of the *In Pursuit of Development* podcast with listeners in 160 countries.

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