

RETHINKING GLOBAL POWER: HOW THE GLOBAL SOUTH IS REDEFINING THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER

Nwaneri Justin Chukwuma Ph. D

History and International Studies, Gregory University Uturu.

***Correspondence:** Nwaneri Justin Chukwuma Ph. D

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ABSTRACT: The global balance of power is undergoing a profound shift, with the Global South increasingly asserting its agency in redefining the international order. Historically marginalized by Western-dominated institutions, many states in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East now challenge entrenched global hierarchies. This study investigates how the Global South repositions itself through economic initiatives, diplomatic coalitions, and normative leadership. The objective is to understand the mechanisms by which these states influence global governance structures, and the implications for a more equitable world order. The study adopts a qualitative research methodology, drawing from case studies, documentary analysis, and scholarly literature. It is anchored in post-colonial theory, dependency theory, global governance, and regional integration theory, which together provide a robust lens for understanding the evolving nature of power, sovereignty, and legitimacy in international relations. Significantly, the research highlights emerging trends such as climate diplomacy led by vulnerable nations, financial alternatives like the BRICS bank, digital sovereignty movements, and regional security arrangements exemplified by ECOWAS interventions. These developments underscore the Global South's growing role as a co-architect of global norms and institutions. The study concludes that the Global

South is not merely reacting to global inequities but actively shaping alternative structures of influence. It recommends reforms in multilateral institutions, support for South–South cooperation, and inclusive participation in global governance. By amplifying the voices of historically underrepresented regions, this research contributes to a more balanced and pluralistic international system.

Keywords: *Global South, International Order, Redefining/Redistribution of Power.*

Introduction

In the 21st century, the Global South—comprising Africa, Latin America, parts of Asia, and the Middle East—is playing an increasingly assertive role in global affairs. This emergence represents a significant departure from the Cold War-era global structure, which was largely characterized by the dominance of the United States and Western Europe in political, economic, and institutional realms. During that period, global power was concentrated in the hands of a few Western actors, whose influence was institutionalized through mechanisms such as the United Nations Security Council, the Bretton Woods institutions (World Bank and IMF), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the World Trade Organization (WTO). These institutions set the tone for international rules and norms, often without adequate representation from the Global South.

However, the 21st century has ushered in new dynamics. The Global South now accounts for a significant portion of the world's population, economic growth, and geopolitical relevance. Countries such as China, India, Brazil, Indonesia, South Africa, and Nigeria are asserting themselves in regional and global affairs, leveraging their demographic advantages, natural resource endowments, and growing middle classes¹. These states are no longer content with a subordinate position in global decision-making processes. Instead, they are demanding structural reforms and equal participation in global institutions to reflect contemporary realities.

Rather than being passive beneficiaries of the international order, countries of the Global South are increasingly exercising agency through the establishment of new multilateral institutions, alternative financial mechanisms, and strategic diplomatic alignments². Examples include the formation and expansion of BRICS, the

establishment of the New Development Bank, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and regional economic blocs such as ECOWAS, ASEAN, and MERCOSUR. These platforms allow member states to coordinate development policies, pool resources, and present unified positions on global issues.

Furthermore, the Global South is engaging in South–South cooperation to reduce dependency on the Global North and foster mutual development. These collaborative frameworks are reshaping global governance by promoting values such as mutual respect, non-intervention, and shared prosperity. Importantly, Global South countries are also leveraging their collective voice in international forums—such as the United Nations General Assembly, the G77, and climate negotiations—to push for reforms in global finance, trade, and environmental justice.

This transformation signals not just a redistribution of material power but also a shift in the ideational and normative frameworks that govern global relations. The Global South is no longer a monolithic bloc of aid-dependent states; it is now a mosaic of rising powers, middle-income countries, and dynamic regional actors capable of influencing the contours of the global order. The ongoing redefinition of global power dynamics reflects the emergence of a more multipolar world where influence is shared, contested, and diversified.

Conceptual Clarifications

Global South

The term Global South broadly refers to countries located in Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, parts of Asia, and the Middle East that are generally categorized as lower- and middle-income economies³. However, the concept transcends mere economic categorization. Historically, these nations were subject to colonial domination, economic exploitation, and political marginalization—realities that significantly shaped their developmental trajectories and place in global power hierarchies. The Global South emerged as a political and ideological construct during the Cold War to distinguish newly independent nations and non-aligned states from the industrialized Western bloc and the Eastern socialist bloc.

In contemporary discourse, the Global South is used not just to describe a geographical grouping but to signify a shared experience of historical disadvantage, underdevelopment, and collective aspirations for sovereignty, equality, and justice in the international system. While diverse in culture, language, and political orientation, countries of the Global South often unite around common issues such as global economic inequality, climate injustice, debt restructuring, trade imbalances, and calls for reform in international institutions. Importantly, the term also reflects a sense of solidarity and agency—highlighting how these nations are increasingly shaping alternative visions of global governance³.

International Order

The international order refers to the constellation of formal and informal rules, norms, institutions, and power arrangements that structure relations among states and other international actors⁴. These include institutions like the United Nations, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Trade Organization (WTO), as well as unwritten practices and expectations regarding diplomacy, war, sovereignty, trade, and human rights.

Historically, the international order has been shaped by the outcomes of major global conflicts such as World Wars I and II, and more recently, the Cold War. The post-1945 international order was largely constructed by Western powers, particularly the United States, with a view to promoting liberal economic policies, open markets, and political stability based on democratic norms. However, critics argue that this order has systematically favored the Global North, maintaining a status quo that benefits former colonial powers and large industrialized economies at the expense of less-developed nations.

In recent decades, the legitimacy of the existing international order has been called into question by rising powers from the Global South, who argue that it no longer reflects the geopolitical, economic, and demographic realities of the 21st century⁴. This discontent has spurred efforts to reform global governance institutions, expand decision-making spaces, and recognize diverse models of development and political organization.

Redefining/Redistribution of Power

Redefining or redistribution of power refers to the ongoing process by which influence within the international system is becoming more diffused and contested, especially as countries from the Global South challenge traditional power structures⁵. Historically, global power was centralized in the hands of Western colonial empires and, later, industrialized democracies in Europe and North America. This imbalance was institutionalized through global financial systems, security alliances, and political decision-making platforms that systematically excluded or marginalized Southern voices.

However, globalization, technological diffusion, and demographic trends have disrupted this concentration of power. Countries such as China, India, Brazil, Indonesia, and South Africa have gained economic strength and political influence, and are increasingly asserting their interests on the global stage. These nations, along with others in the Global South, are forming strategic alliances and regional blocs such as BRICS, the Group of 77 (G77), the African Union (AU), and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to press for reforms in the global system.

Moreover, Global South actors are investing in alternative institutions—such as the New Development Bank and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank—that offer financial resources without the stringent conditionalities imposed by the IMF or World Bank. They are also shaping global discourse on issues such as climate change, digital governance, and migration, emphasizing equity, sustainability, and mutual respect.

This redistribution of power does not necessarily mean a complete erosion of Western dominance, but rather a shift toward multipolarity—a world in which power is more evenly distributed across regions, cultures, and economies⁵. In this emerging global landscape, the Global South is not merely seeking inclusion in existing frameworks but is actively contributing to the construction of new norms, practices, and institutions that better reflect its interests and values.

Theoretical Framework

Post-Colonial Theory

Post-colonial theory provides a critical lens through which the legacy of colonialism in international relations can be understood. It contends that the formal political independence achieved by most Global South countries did not translate into equal participation in the global system⁶. Instead, structural inequalities and neocolonial tendencies remain embedded in international institutions, financial systems, trade regimes, and normative discourses. The perpetuation of Eurocentric values and decision-making structures in global governance, especially in institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the United Nations Security Council, underscores the systemic exclusion of Southern perspectives.

This theory draws attention to how the supposed universality of liberal internationalism often disguises the dominance of Western priorities and power structures. The Global South's increasing resistance to these frameworks—seen in their refusal to blindly adopt Western-drafted trade agreements, environmental accords, or digital regulations—reflects a conscious effort to recalibrate global norms and contest epistemological hierarchies and through forums such as the Non-Aligned Movement and G77, and more recently BRICS+, Southern states are asserting alternative visions rooted in pluralism, sovereignty, and collective memory of historical injustice⁷.

Dependency Theory

Dependency theory emerged as a critique of modernization theory, particularly in Latin America and Africa, highlighting the structural constraints that inhibit development in peripheral nations. It argues that the global capitalist economy is inherently exploitative, as the wealth of core (developed) countries is built on the underdevelopment of peripheral (developing) nations⁸. This structural dependency is maintained through unequal trade relations, capital flight, technological monopolies, and the imposition of neoliberal reforms via international institutions.

Global South countries are frequently relegated to supplying raw materials and primary commodities, while value-added production and technology remain concentrated in the North. The terms of trade are systematically unfavorable to the

South, locking them in a cycle of dependency. To address this, many countries have turned to import substitution industrialization (ISI), regional trade alliances, and South–South cooperation strategies to reclaim economic agency and the rise of intra-African trade through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), and investment flows among BRICS nations, are examples of such attempts to circumvent traditional dependency routes and foster endogenous growth⁹.

Global Governance and Non-State Actors

Traditional theories of international relations placed emphasis almost exclusively on the role of states. However, contemporary global governance increasingly involves a diverse array of non-state actors, including multinational corporations, civil society organizations, international NGOs, and regional institutions. Uvere and Adiele emphasize that these actors have not only gained formal recognition in international policy forums but have also become agenda-setters and norm entrepreneurs in their own right¹⁰. Their influence ranges from climate governance and human rights advocacy to digital regulation and transnational justice movements.

This dispersion of authority marks a shift from a state-centric to a polycentric global order, where power is negotiated in multi-level arenas. For the Global South, this shift creates both challenges and opportunities. On one hand, non-state actors from the North often dominate global civil society and philanthropic sectors, potentially replicating global hierarchies. On the other hand, Southern-based NGOs, think tanks, and private firms are increasingly leveraging their local legitimacy to shape global narratives and platforms such as the South Centre, the Pan-African Lawyers Union, and even informal diasporic networks exemplify how non-state actors from the South contribute to global discourse and influence governance outcomes beyond traditional diplomatic channels¹¹.

Regional Integration and Collective Security

Regional integration theories underscore the importance of collective agency in reshaping international power dynamics. Unlike earlier regionalism focused solely on economic integration, contemporary Global South regionalism encompasses security, political solidarity, cultural assertion, and institutional innovation.

Institutions such as ECOWAS, the African Union (AU), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and BRICS exemplify how regions are emerging as key nodes of power rebalancing¹².

These regional bodies serve as platforms for coordinated responses to shared challenges—such as terrorism, pandemics, financial crises, and diplomatic isolation. They also provide frameworks through which Southern states pool sovereignty, negotiate with external powers, and craft independent development agendas. Uvere's study on ECOWAS under President Bola Ahmed Tinubu highlights how leadership within such organizations can amplify the geopolitical relevance of member states and Under Tinubu's chairmanship, ECOWAS navigated several regional crises, including political instability in Niger and Guinea, using a blend of economic sanctions, diplomatic engagement, and regional mobilization that reflected a proactive assertion of African agency¹³.

Moreover, the BRICS expansion (with potential inclusion of states like Argentina, Iran, and Egypt) signifies a move toward multipolarity rooted in regional legitimacy and developmental priorities of the Global South. Through initiatives like the New Development Bank (NDB) and the BRICS Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA), Southern states are constructing financial and political alternatives to Western-dominated institutions. These developments illustrate the evolving nature of power in international politics—away from hegemonic control toward distributed, networked influence.

Climate Multilateralism and Norm Entrepreneurship

Climate change has evolved into a pivotal arena where the Global South asserts its agency through norm entrepreneurship, reshaping global discourse and institutional practices. Historically marginalized from agenda-setting in climate policy, Southern states—especially Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and African coalitions—have become vocal advocates for climate justice, loss-and-damage compensation, and equitable energy transitions¹⁴.

This assertiveness directly aligns with Post-Colonial Theory, which emphasizes the lingering structural inequalities inherited from colonialism. Many of the Global

South's environmental vulnerabilities are rooted in colonial extraction and marginalization from industrialization. Hence, their calls for climate reparations are not merely demands for aid but for historical redress, justice, and recognition of unequal contributions to global emissions.

From a Global Governance perspective, these states are leveraging both formal multilateral institutions (e.g., COP summits) and informal coalitions (e.g., AOSIS, African Group of Negotiators) to shift global norms. Their ability to shape discourse and demand structural reforms reflects an emerging polycentric climate order—one no longer monopolized by Northern powers but influenced by moral leadership from the South. These actors are also building alliances across regions, demonstrating increasing South–South norm diffusion and agenda setting. Countries of the Global South are no longer content to operate on the margins of global decision-making. Increasingly, they are forging alliances that span across continents—linking Africa, Asia, Latin America, and parts of the Middle East—based on shared histories, common developmental challenges, and a mutual desire for a more equitable global system. These cross-regional partnerships, often referred to as South–South cooperation, go beyond mere economic collaboration; they represent a deeper strategic alignment aimed at redefining the global order.

Through forums such as BRICS, the G77, the Africa-South America Summit, and other regional mechanisms, these nations are working collectively to pursue their own development agendas. This cooperation fosters what is known as South–South norm diffusion—a process by which values, practices, and policies are exchanged and adapted among countries in the Global South. Instead of depending solely on models imposed or borrowed from the West, these actors are learning from each other's experiences in governance, poverty reduction, environmental management, and economic innovation.

Moreover, this growing solidarity is empowering the Global South to set the agenda in international affairs. No longer passive recipients of external policies, these countries are increasingly shaping conversations on global trade, climate justice, digital sovereignty, and institutional reform. They are calling for a restructuring of international bodies like the IMF, World Bank, and United Nations to reflect more

inclusive representation and fairer governance. In some cases, they are building new institutions—such as the New Development Bank—that embody alternative values and priorities.

In essence, the Global South is not merely seeking a seat at the existing global table but is actively involved in reimagining the table itself. Through mutual support, shared vision, and strategic collaboration, these nations are asserting themselves as co-creators of a new international reality—one rooted in equity, justice, and collective agency.

Financial Architecture and South–South Institutions

The creation of financial institutions like the New Development Bank (NDB) by BRICS, the African Export–Import Bank, and regional currency swap arrangements represent deliberate efforts by Southern states to reconfigure the international financial architecture¹⁵. These institutions provide alternative sources of credit, reduce dependence on Western-led Bretton Woods institutions (e.g., IMF and World Bank), and support development strategies aligned with local priorities.

According to Dependency Theory, the Global South's continued reliance on Northern capital and financial institutions perpetuates a cycle of underdevelopment. The new Southern-led financial institutions are attempts to break this pattern by funding infrastructure and development through interest rates, conditions, and currencies that better reflect the developmental aspirations of Southern economies.

Moreover, Post-Colonial Theory views these institutions as decolonial mechanisms—rejecting financial norms imposed during the colonial and Cold War eras. By asserting fiscal sovereignty and creating new avenues for credit and trade, Global South countries reclaim economic agency and challenge epistemic domination embedded in Western financial orthodoxy.

This transformation also has implications for Global Governance, as these institutions gradually gain legitimacy and recognition as alternative nodes of global economic coordination. Rather than merely resisting the global order, the South is actively reconstructing it in its image through plural financial architectures. Rather

than simply opposing or resisting the existing global order—often dominated by Western powers and institutions like the IMF, World Bank, and WTO—the Global South is now taking proactive steps to reshape that order in ways that reflect its own values, needs, and priorities. One of the most significant ways it is doing this is through the creation of plural financial architectures.

Plural financial architectures refer to the development of alternative financial systems, institutions, and frameworks that exist alongside (and sometimes in competition with) the traditional Western-led financial structures. These new architectures allow Southern countries to reduce their dependence on the rules and conditionalities of global financial institutions, which have often been criticized for enforcing austerity, limiting sovereignty, and perpetuating inequality.

For example, the establishment of the BRICS New Development Bank (NDB) offers an alternative source of development financing that is not tied to the same stringent conditions as those from the IMF or World Bank. Similarly, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) provides massive infrastructure investment to many developing countries, reshaping patterns of economic influence and connectivity. Other examples include regional banks like the African Development Bank, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and even the use of regional currencies or currency swap agreements to facilitate trade outside the dollar-dominated system.

Through these institutions, the Global South is not just asking for inclusion in the existing system—it is constructing a new one, where financial power is more dispersed, conditionalities are less coercive, and development goals are more aligned with domestic needs. This marks a shift from resistance to reconstruction: from challenging Western dominance to actively building a parallel order that offers countries more choice, control, and collaboration.

The Global South is using plural financial architectures as tools of empowerment. Rather than waiting for reform from above, it is creating new pathways from below—redefining what global finance looks like and who gets to control it.

Digital Sovereignty and Technological Governance

Global South actors are increasingly demanding representation in digital governance and technological standard-setting. They contest the dominance of Western tech firms and the values embedded in internet regulation, artificial intelligence, and data privacy regimes¹⁶. Nations such as India, Nigeria, Brazil, and South Africa are developing indigenous data protection laws and advocating for equitable access to digital infrastructure.

This trend aligns with Dependency Theory, which recognizes that technological dependence can reproduce economic subordination. Many Southern economies are digital consumers but lack sovereignty over infrastructure, cloud services, and data management systems. Consequently, the push for digital sovereignty represents a rejection of technological neocolonialism and a quest for endogenous innovation.

Within Post-Colonial Theory, this movement reflects epistemic resistance. Western digital platforms often encode biases and values alien to local contexts. By reclaiming control over data and digital norms, Global South states resist cultural homogenization and assert alternative visions of digital modernity rooted in local realities.

From a Global Governance angle, Southern participation in forums like the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), the ITU, and regional digital unions marks a redistribution of rule-making power. Rather than passively accepting global tech norms, the South is reshaping them—advocating for ethical AI, indigenous tech innovation, and data localization strategies. The Global South is no longer a passive observer in the evolution of global technological standards. Rather than simply adopting digital norms crafted by powerful Western nations and multinational corporations, it is now actively reshaping these norms to align with its own interests, values, and developmental needs. This shift marks a significant transformation in the South's role in global tech governance.

One of the key areas where this change is evident is in the advocacy for ethical artificial intelligence (AI). Countries in the Global South are increasingly demanding that AI systems reflect principles such as fairness, transparency, and inclusivity.

Unlike earlier periods when AI technologies were often imported without question, today there is a growing insistence on ensuring that these tools do not reinforce existing inequalities or replicate biases rooted in foreign contexts. For example, many African and Asian countries are developing national AI strategies that emphasize the protection of human rights and social justice.

In addition to ethical concerns, there is a renewed emphasis on indigenous technological innovation. Rather than relying entirely on imported solutions, several countries are investing in local tech ecosystems that are better suited to their unique challenges. Initiatives like Kenya's M-Pesa, which revolutionized mobile banking for underserved populations, illustrate the potential of home-grown innovation to address development gaps more effectively than foreign technologies designed for different environments.

Another significant development is the push for data localization. Governments in the Global South are increasingly enacting policies that require data generated within their borders to be stored and processed locally. This move is aimed at strengthening digital sovereignty, enhancing cybersecurity, and promoting domestic tech industries. For instance, India's data protection laws and Nigeria's efforts to boost local data infrastructure reflect a broader trend of asserting control over national digital spaces.

In summary, the Global South is no longer content with playing a subordinate role in the digital world. Through initiatives focused on ethical AI, indigenous innovation, and data localization, it is actively contributing to the creation of new global tech norms. This growing assertiveness signals a broader transformation in international relations, where the South is not just reacting to global changes but is increasingly helping to define them.

Security and Crisis Management within Regional Blocs

Security governance in the Global South is undergoing redefinition through regional organizations, particularly in Africa. Interventions by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in political crises in Mali, Niger, and Guinea show a significant shift from externally-driven to regionally-led peace enforcement¹⁷.

These actions emphasize political independence and conflict resolution grounded in African norms and consensus.

This dynamic illustrates Regional Integration Theory, which posits that regional blocs can serve as loci of horizontal cooperation and collective security. ECOWAS, like the African Union, acts not merely as a bureaucratic club but as a security community with operational capacity. Through sanctions, diplomatic missions, and peacekeeping efforts, it reinforces norms of constitutionalism, democracy, and civilian rule within West Africa.

Uvere's work on ECOWAS leadership under President Tinubu provides insight into how regional diplomacy is now being shaped from within rather than dictated by former colonial powers¹⁸. ECOWAS' insistence on restoring democratic order in these states, even when it contradicts Western inaction or indifference, exemplifies Post-Colonial agency and Southern strategic autonomy.

Furthermore, these interventions reflect a Global Governance evolution wherein Southern-led regional bodies are no longer peripheral but central to peace and security outcomes. They challenge the monopoly of NATO, the UN Security Council, and other historically Northern-dominated actors in global security management.

In sum, across these domains—climate justice, financial architecture, digital governance, and security—the Global South is asserting a redefinition of power within the international system. These actions are deeply embedded in theoretical understandings that critique historical dependencies, resist neocolonial dynamics, and propose alternative structures for collective action. By framing their efforts through Post-Colonial Theory, Dependency Theory, Global Governance, and Regional Integration Theory, Southern actors are not only participating in world affairs—they are transforming them.

Conclusion

The Global South is no longer content with merely occupying a seat at the table of international politics. It is now actively participating in reshaping that table—its

form, its rules, and even its purpose. Through a potent combination of resistance, innovation, and solidarity, states and actors across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean are redefining the contours of global order. This transformation is not simply about being included in systems originally crafted by the West; it is about reimagining those systems entirely, making them more reflective of the Global South's histories, priorities, and visions for justice and equity.

This emerging order is being forged through both institutional and normative means. Southern states and coalitions are no longer merely reacting to the dictates of global governance—they are setting agendas. Whether in climate diplomacy, digital sovereignty, financial architecture, or regional security, the Global South is asserting new principles and practices. For instance, their leadership in climate multilateralism, particularly on issues like loss-and-damage financing, reflects a push for moral legitimacy and historical accountability. Similarly, the development of South–South financial institutions such as the New Development Bank signals a clear intent to create alternatives to the Bretton Woods system.

Importantly, this movement is not driven by a single ideology or uniform strategy. Rather, it reflects a diverse and decentralized effort rooted in shared experiences of colonialism, economic dependency, and marginalization. Yet, this diversity is a strength—it allows for flexible, context-specific solutions that challenge the supposed universality of Western models. Initiatives like the African Union's Agenda 2063, ASEAN's multilateral diplomacy, and ECOWAS-led interventions demonstrate how regional integration and cooperation can become powerful vehicles of agency and collective self-determination.

In this context, the Global South is no longer a passive periphery. It is emerging as a co-creator of new global realities—realities that seek not only to redistribute power but to redefine what power means. This involves rebuilding the foundational values of international relations around inclusivity, justice, reciprocity, and mutual respect. By doing so, the Global South is contributing to the birth of a multipolar world order—one that challenges the dominance of any single narrative or model and instead embraces plurality as a foundation for global coexistence.

Recommendations

1. Multilateral Institutional Reform: Reform UN Security Council and Bretton Woods institutions to reflect demographic and economic realities of the Global South.
2. Support South–South Financial Architecture: Scale-up capital and lending via New Development Bank, Afreximbank, and regional swap lines.
3. Encourage Regional Governance Platforms: Strengthen blocs like ECOWAS, AU, ASEAN, UNASUR as independent actors in global diplomacy.
4. Normative Coalitions for Climate and Digital Justice: Build cross-regional South coalitions to influence negotiations in COP, ITU, and digital forums.
5. Promote Inclusive Global Governance with Non-State Partners: Leverage civil society, regional NGOs, and transnational actors to elevate Southern perspectives

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