

An Analysis of the Modi Government's "Global South" Strategy

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Abstract: Since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the Modi government has continually increased its focus and investment in the "Global South," driven by considerations of changes in the international landscape, India's role as a major power, national security concerns, and domestic factors for economic and social development. The Modi administration has ramped up strategic investments in countries within the "Global South," enhancing cooperation and promoting development among these nations, while also advocating for reforms in international multilateral cooperation institutions. This has elevated India's international influence and improved its diplomatic environment. However, India's hegemonic tendencies toward its neighbors are apparent, which may constrain China's proactive activities within the "Global South." As a natural member of the "Global South," China should maintain strategic stability and collaborate with India to safeguard the common interests of this group.

Keywords: "Global South"; India; Modi Government; Foreign Policy

Introduction

In the context of the collective rise of developing countries, the "Global South" has increasingly emerged as a significant geopolitical and economic force. As an emerging political entity, countries in the "Global South" participate in global games with an independent stance and a non-aligned position, becoming core elements in great power competition. Particularly following the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the "Global South" has consistently upheld strategic neutrality. India, as a key player in the "Global South," has shifted its diplomatic focus from emphasizing the Non-Aligned Movement to pursuing great power relationships, aiming to position itself as a "Southwest power" that connects with the West while representing developing countries. Since Modi's administration took office in 2014, India has continuously adjusted its foreign policy, strengthening interactions with Western nations while actively cultivating relationships with countries in the "Global South." This paper examines the specific content and motivations behind the Modi government's "Global South" strategy, aiming to understand and grasp its developmental trends.

1. Examination of Modi's Government's "Global South" Strategy

While India's "Global South" narrative has been evident in its foreign policy since independence, it became particularly prominent under Modi's government following the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Initially, India focused on developing ties with the Non-Aligned Movement, aiming to enhance its international influence as a leader among Third World countries. This narrative was crucial during the 1955 Bandung Conference, where India significantly contributed to defining the Non-Aligned Movement's goals, emphasizing economic development and unity.

The establishment of the Group of 77 (G77) in 1964 marked a collective effort by "Global South" countries to build a new international economic order, protecting their interests in the global political landscape. India seized this opportunity to assert leadership within the G77, aligning its interests with those of Third World countries and influencing key documents like the "Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order" adopted by the UN in 1974. This laid the groundwork for Modi's "Global South" strategy.

However, early in his administration, Modi attempted to downplay traditional "Global South" narratives to strengthen ties with Western powers, notably by absenting India from the 17th and 18th Non-Aligned Movement summits. This shift indicated India's transition from a non-aligned stance to

what has been described as multi-alignment. Scholars argue that Modi's multi-alignment policy aims to establish a world order centered on India rather than simply responding to international shifts. In essence, India sought to redefine its role from that of a small nation focused on independence to that of a major power shaping a new global order.

This shift diverges from the "Global South" principles advocating for a multipolar world and independence. Modi's government posits that India's rapid growth hinges on partnerships with Western nations, thereby prioritizing "pro-Western" diplomacy and diminishing its commitment to its "Global South" identity. As a result, India has integrated more closely into frameworks like the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), forming strategic partnerships with countries such as Japan, the U.S., and Germany while downplaying its role as a leader of developing nations.

This approach contradicts the "Global South's" aspirations for a multipolar world free from great power domination, seeking equality rather than mere compliance with Western directives. As a significant representative of developing countries, India's emphasis on ties with developed nations has overshadowed its engagements with other "Global South" nations, thereby weakening its identity within this group.

However, the emergence of "Global South" countries following the Russia-Ukraine conflict, characterized by their commitment to diplomatic independence and strategic autonomy, has prompted Modi's government to recognize the strategic importance of the "Global South." It began actively seeking to reconnect with these nations, striving to revive India's image as a spokesperson for the Third World reminiscent of the Nehru era, with the goal of transitioning from a regional power to a global one.^[1]

In January 2023, India hosted the inaugural "Voice of the Global South" summit, inviting over 120 leaders from developing countries and reaffirming the foundational values of the Non-Aligned Movement. Modi committed to advocating for the welfare of developing nations and declared the arrival of the "Global South" era. Later in November, India held the second summit, focusing on sustainable development goals, climate finance, and multilateral reforms. India asserted that Southern countries seek "autonomy" and are prepared to take on significant responsibilities in international affairs, announcing plans for an annual conference prioritizing Global South issues starting in 2024. Modi also inaugurated a center for excellence for Global South nations and leveraged India's G20 presidency to amplify the voice of the "Global South."

2. Analysis of the Motivations Behind Modi's "Global South" Strategy

In the early years of Modi's administration, the government attempted to distance itself from the traditional "Global South" narrative, weakening India's relations with these nations. However, as the significance of the "Global South" strategy grew, India reevaluated its value and elevated this strategy to a key position in its foreign policy. This shift was primarily driven by changes in the international landscape and the continuous strengthening of India's own economic power.^[2]

The volatility of international relations provided an opportunity for India to renew its focus on the "Global South." The ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict has severely disrupted global energy and food markets, posing greater energy security challenges and food crises for developing countries compared to developed ones. India has been affected by these issues as well. In addressing these challenges, India shares common interests with "Global South" nations. Modi's government seized the opportunity presented by India's G20 presidency to advocate for the collective interests of these countries, thereby enhancing India's international voice. The G20 platform allows India to amplify the voices of "Global South" nations and bolster their bargaining power.

By aligning itself with the interests of the "Global South" on issues such as multilateral cooperation, climate change, and trade, India aims to solidify and expand its international influence. In this favorable context, India has redirected its focus towards the "Global South," actively seeking to strengthen ties to achieve its strategic objectives. Modi's "Global South" strategy functions as a hedging mechanism, essential for adjusting to the dynamics of major power relations while maintaining strategic autonomy. The hedging strategy entails minimizing risks associated with uncertainties in international relations and diversifying diplomatic options.

The geopolitical tensions resulting from the Russia-Ukraine conflict have positioned India amid the strategic competition between the U.S. and Russia. India must balance its economic and security reliance on Russia with its strong security alliance with the U.S., navigating the uncertainties arising from this intensified competition. Influenced by this binary power dynamic, India adopts a position of diplomatic

independence, neither fully aligning with one side nor the other. In this context, Modi's government seeks to diversify foreign relations by strengthening ties with "Global South" nations, thus reducing over-reliance on any single power and enhancing its strategic autonomy in decision-making.^[3]

This strategy reflects the core tenets of a hedging approach, which aims to mitigate uncertainty risks by broadening the scope of diplomatic engagement. By emphasizing its identity as a "Global South" nation with an independent foreign policy, India seeks to avoid entanglement in great power rivalries. When faced with pressure from the West, India can assert its identity as a victim of competition among major powers, thereby justifying its refusal to impose sanctions on Russia.

Moreover, by promoting multilateral discussions on development issues and uniting the majority of "Global South" nations that have maintained a neutral stance during the Russia-Ukraine conflict, India not only enhances its positive image in the international arena but also garners more support in adjusting its relations with major powers. This hedging strategy enables India to secure both security and economic benefits. The conflict poses potential threats to India's energy security and regional stability; therefore, collaboration with "Global South" nations allows India to diversify its energy supply channels, reducing dependence on single sources and thus safeguarding its energy security. This diversification exemplifies the hedging strategy's application in India's energy sector.

Another objective of Modi's "Global South" strategy is to counterbalance China's rising influence and enhance India's international standing. Threat perception is a critical variable influencing a nation's strategic choices and behavior. Factors such as territorial disputes, disparities in power, and historical memories contribute to India's perception of a "Chinese threat." India views China as a strategic competitor and the primary threat to its border security, even framing China as a "hostile nation" that endangers its national security. Given that India is the weaker party in the India-China dynamic, it struggles to achieve its aspirations for major power status while simultaneously addressing the perceived threats from China's ascent. Consequently, India resorts to a balancing strategy against China, seeking to mitigate the influence of its larger neighbor while fostering its own stature on the global stage.

3. Impact of Modi's Government "Global South" Strategy

Modi's "Global South" strategy has enhanced India's standing among Global South nations and positively influenced its international impact. India seeks to amplify the voices of developing countries on relevant issues, garnering their support to position itself as a leader in the Global South and to achieve its goal of becoming a regional power. Politically, Modi's administration has showcased its leadership and influence through events like the "Voice of the Global South Summit" and the G20 Summit, thereby increasing the visibility, voice, and impact of the Global South on the international stage, which indirectly elevates India's global standing. Bhutan's Foreign Minister Tandi Dorji noted that India's hosting of the G20 Summit and its contributions to the welfare of the Global South affirm its leadership role in international affairs.

Economically, Modi's government has strengthened India's trade and development aid to the Global South, securing essential minerals and energy for domestic stability while deepening partnerships with these nations. This approach enhances their recognition of India and attracts more foreign investment, fostering rapid economic growth. In cultural and humanitarian exchanges, the government supports around 4,000 students annually from over 100 countries in South Asia, Africa, and Afghanistan through scholarships, while organizing Indian arts festivals and exhibitions abroad to bolster cultural ties, thus enhancing India's soft power.^[4]

According to a Pew Research Center survey in August 2023, India garnered favorable views from 46% of citizens across 23 countries, particularly among allies in the US and Asia. Since coming to power in 2014, Modi's administration has enjoyed high domestic approval, with about 80% of Indian adults expressing favorable opinions, including 55% indicating strong satisfaction. This recognition is closely linked to the international influence gained through the "Global South" strategy.

Additionally, this strategy has improved India's diplomatic environment, increasing the attention it receives from major powers. For instance, Japan has deepened cooperation with India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka to promote a "free and open" Indo-Pacific strategy. In Africa, Japan and India have jointly developed the "Asia-Africa Growth Corridor" plan, establishing multi-tiered cooperation mechanisms. New Delhi-based think tank founder Happymon Jacob highlights the necessity for the US and Western countries to collaborate with India to facilitate economic and infrastructure aid for developing nations, viewing the Global South as a new geopolitical opportunity.

In practical politics, the US has aligned itself with India, backing Modi's "Global South" strategy. Under Biden's administration, India successfully released the G20 Summit joint communiqué and announced the initiation of the "India-Europe Economic Corridor." With US support, Western allies continue to elevate Modi's leadership role in the Global South, seeking deeper cooperation with India. Japan backs India's Global South initiatives by providing infrastructure and security assistance funds for the Indo-Pacific region. Additionally, India and Germany jointly support sustainable development goals in Africa and Latin America to combat climate change. Former South Korean President Moon Jae-in's "New Southern Policy" also focuses on ASEAN and India.^[5]

A report by the Institute for Security and Development Policy (ISDP) indicates that as a former recipient of aid now turned into a developed economy, South Korea can collaborate with India to promote Global South interests. International cooperation based on shared interests accelerates India's path to becoming a global economic power, creates a favorable diplomatic environment for its foreign strategy, and strengthens India's role as a bridge between the West and the Global South, providing crucial opportunities for Modi's government to accelerate India's socio-economic development.

Modi's "Global South" strategy has significantly contributed to the development of Global South nations. In recent years, India has actively promoted cooperation within the Global South, offering these countries greater opportunities for development and progress. Amid geopolitical tensions, India is positioned to assist Global South nations in tackling challenges such as economic downturns and climate and energy crises.^[6]

From an economic cooperation standpoint, India's economic strength and market potential make it an indispensable partner for Global South countries. Initiatives like the India-Africa Forum Summit and the implementation of the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program provide economic assistance and support infrastructure development in Africa and South Asia.

In the realm of climate cooperation, as global climate risks escalate, Global South nations face numerous challenges, including the adverse effects of climate change, increasing pressure to reduce emissions, and unmet financial commitments from developed countries. To fulfill its climate change and sustainable development commitments, India has not only implemented measures domestically to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and promote renewable energy but also offers these countries valuable experience. Modi's government actively participates in global climate negotiations, advocating for the concerns and interests of Global South nations, and proposes significant increases in climate financing—from billions to trillions of dollars—to better support these countries in addressing climate governance challenges.

In terms of technology and digital infrastructure, India shares expertise and solutions related to e-governance, digital connectivity, and cybersecurity with Global South countries. Through the G20, India has advocated for Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), establishing over 50 DPI repositories from 16 countries to assist Global South nations in building, adopting, and expanding DPI.

On the global energy transition front, India has formed the International Solar Alliance and the Global Biofuel Alliance, providing vital international cooperation platforms that accelerate energy transition for Global South countries and promote reforms in international multilateral cooperation institutions. Alok Mehta emphasizes that India's commitment to being a spokesperson and defender of the Global South, along with promoting reform of international multilateral institutions, is one of its foreign policy priorities, thereby enhancing India's status and role in global politics.

In recent years, the Modi government has played a significant role in advocating for reforms in international multilateral institutions, responding to the concerns and demands of Global South countries, and strengthening their fair representation in these bodies. India has hosted numerous conferences focusing on UN reforms, invited the African Union to become a permanent member of the G20, and championed the inclusion of developing countries' interests on the international agenda during the second "Voice of the Global South Summit." In response to the protectionist measures pursued by developed countries amid global economic digitization, Modi's administration revitalizes multilateral mechanisms like the G77 and G20, pushing for reforms in organizations such as the WTO and the World Bank to ensure fairer representation for Global South nations.^[7]

Furthermore, Modi's "Global South" strategy influences the geopolitical landscape in South Asia. Projects like China's Belt and Road Initiative, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor have spurred economic and social development in South Asia while enhancing China's influence in the region. Historically, India has viewed South Asia as its sphere of influence, perceiving China's involvement in infrastructure projects in Bangladesh and

Sri Lanka as a threat. Consequently, India has increased development assistance to South Asian countries to prevent them from drifting towards China. The budget for foreign development assistance for 2024-2025 indicates that South Asian nations will be major beneficiaries, with Bhutan receiving the largest allocation of 20.68 billion rupees and Nepal's assistance rising to 7 billion rupees.

Simultaneously, India has invited South Asian neighbors to participate as guest countries in the G20 process, showcasing its influence in the Global South. To counter China's growing influence, India criticizes the Belt and Road Initiative, accusing China of creating "debt traps" in the region. Former National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon has condemned China for exacerbating the debt issues faced by developing countries.

Under Modi's "Global South" strategy, it is expected that India will continue to compete with China in South Asia, consolidating its dominant position in the region and impacting China's collaboration with other Global South nations. This strategy not only enhances India's international standing but also contributes to the development of a multipolar world, potentially reducing the strategic pressure on China from the West. Both China and India seek to identify common interests in Global South issues, as highlighted by former Indian Prime Minister's advisor Sudheendra Kulkarni, who advocates for collaboration rather than falling into Western-induced divisions.

Conclusion

India's narrative surrounding the "Global South" has evolved significantly over different historical periods. Following the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the Modi government has actively sought to reshape its "Global South" strategy, integrating it into its foreign policy framework. This strategy serves several purposes: first, to counterbalance shifts in great power relations and maintain India's strategic autonomy; second, to rally Global South nations in an effort to check China's geopolitical ambitions; third, to pragmatically seek support from the Global South to achieve India's vision of becoming a global power and to act as a bridge between Western countries and the Global South; fourth, to enhance domestic economic development and ensure energy security through collaboration with Global South nations; and fifth, to reflect Modi's assertive governance style and the imperative to win the 2024 Indian general elections.^[8]

Whether driven by practical necessities or strategic calculations, the Modi government is likely to increase its investments in the "Global South" strategy, vying for leadership within this bloc on a global scale. Western nations' efforts to court India will also bolster its position as a leading voice for "democratic politics" among Global South countries, although it is crucial to be wary of the potential for India's strategy to evolve into a form of "group confrontation." However, it is important to recognize that the Modi government's "Global South" strategy faces multiple internal and external challenges. For China, a pragmatic assessment of Modi's "Global South" approach is necessary, alongside maintaining strategic composure and enhancing communication and cooperation with Global South nations to foster deeper development among developing countries.

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