



CHINA IS USING THE GLOBAL SOUTH'S AGITATIONS TO ITS ADVANTAGE: IT'S TIME FOR THE WORLD TO PAY ATTENTION.

BY KAZIMIER LIM

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Calls from the Global South for a better and fairer multilateral system are not new, but their growing agitations are reaching a tipping point, and the world should take them seriously.



Photo: Chinese leader Xi Jinping attends the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, with other leaders in June 2019. Credit: Sputnik / Pool / via Reuters

At every roundtable, dialogue, or state dinner, one will almost certainly hear calls from the Global South for better and fairer treatment in a more inclusive

multilateral system. These sentiments are not new. Yet, calls for change are becoming increasingly agitated, resonant, and unavoidable—if not because the Global South is worth listening to, then because some aspiring powers are already leveraging this discontent to their advantage.

The concept of the global south is a source of solidarity and usefulness for some, while attracting critique and ire from others. As the Economist aptly described it, the global south as “[everywhere and nowhere](#).” It is perhaps more pragmatic to understand the idea of the Global South by considering the in which its members engage with it.

Global South is a diverse group of non-Western countries with conflicting interests, diverse cultures, and disparate economic conditions. It is not a group that consistently finds [a unified voice or common position](#). However, these countries often share a common experience of historical exploitation, contemporary marginalization, and economic underdevelopment and have forged a sense of unity born out of necessity.

Many of its members view the Global South as the ‘global majority’ in its simplest form. Despite their demographic heft, these countries often find being marginalized a continuing experience beyond the economy—mainly in the global decision-making processes dominated by a few powerful nations in the so-called North—which is often identified by regional labels such as Western Europe, North America, and parts of Asia. Unlike the Global South, the North is unified primarily by its relative economic and political power. This power dynamic likely contributes to why calls for a more equitable global system from the Global South often fall on deaf ears.

Since the turn of the century, the Global South has moved from a focus on combating ‘economic powerlessness’ to becoming a geopolitical grouping of smaller players focused on issues of fairness, dignity, and freedom in addition to economic development. Beijing has keenly observed this shift and is using it to build its global influence. For example, [China is capitalizing on the perceived hypocrisy of the West](#), particularly highlighted by the

ongoing crisis in Gaza, and has been vocal in critiquing the West on its double standards, earning much applause in the global south.

Many members of the Global South view the West's responses to various global conflicts as inconsistent and self-serving. To them, the situation in [Gaza serves as a stark reminder of this perceived double standard](#). While Western nations frequently champion human rights and democratic values, their actions or inactions in conflicts involving their strategic interests often tell a different story. Despite common calls for peace and a two-state solution in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the West-Global South divergence can be seen in how each side frames the situation. Most strikingly, many in the Global South seem to view the conflict through the lens of colonialism, oppression, and the right to self-determination. This hypocrisy fuels discontent and strengthens the narrative that a new, fairer global order is necessary—[one in which China presents itself as a viable leader](#).

For many in the Global South, the plight of the Palestinians is a poignant reminder of their own struggles against colonialism and oppression. The devastation and humanitarian crisis in Gaza elicit profound empathy and solidarity and drive calls for justice and self-determination. Smaller players in the Global South understand their limited sway in the international order but use their voices to highlight these issues. Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim [echoed this sentiment](#) at the recent [37th Asia Pacific Roundtable](#) in Kuala Lumpur, stating, “Malaysia is not a major power, but we should use our freedom to stand with the Palestinians.”

These perceived double standards fuel discontent and strengthen the narrative that a new, fairer global order is necessary. It is therefore unsurprising that Beijing is attempting to position itself as a viable alternative—or even champion—of the Global South. China's appeal as an alternative to the West is growing. Its model of state-led development, which emphasizes economic growth without the typical democratic prerequisites demanded by Western countries, resonates with many Global South nations. These countries are attracted to China's promise of rapid development without the accompanying lectures on

governance and human rights. Moreover, China's success in lifting hundreds of millions out of poverty within a generation is an enticing blueprint for many developing nations.

China has positioned itself as an alternative to Western dominance in almost every sphere imaginable. One of its most recent endeavors was the launch of the C919, China's first domestically developed commercial aircraft, aimed at challenging the Boeing-Airbus duopoly. Beijing has touted it as both a [project of national prestige and a symbol of the Global South's](#) ability to stand independently from the West.

In aviation politics, many Global South leaders have called for a commercial aircraft manufactured outside of the United States and Europe. [Prime Minister Modi's growing ambitions](#) have placed developing India's first domestically developed [commercial aircraft as a national priority](#). Embraer, headquartered in Brazil, has already emerged as a notable success story in this context, showcasing the potential for Global South actors to produce competitive and innovative aircraft.

The C919, however, remains a challenging project for China. While it hopes to be a viable alternative to Western planes, and therefore a symbol of China as the rightful alternative to the West, purchasers of the plane remain limited to Chinese airlines and a Bruneian start-up airline owned by a Chinese businessman. At the time of writing, no foreign buyer has yet to announce plans to purchase the C919.

The countries of the Global South are not naive; they are acutely aware of China's motives and strategic interests. While they may engage with China, they do so with a clear understanding of the broader geopolitical game. Many will [continue to act based on their national interests](#), but without considerable engagement from the rest of the world, the Global South may not have a choice but to be increasingly swayed by Beijing.

This is why the world must pay attention to the agitations of the Global South. China's strategic maneuvers demonstrate that these calls for a fairer

multilateral system are not just idealistic dreams but potent tools in the hands of those willing to listen and act. Ignoring these calls risks creating a global order dominated by Beijing's influence—a reality that would reshape international relations for generations to come. It is time for the world to take these agitations seriously, for the sake of both fairness and global stability.

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