

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CHINA AND THE EU'S CONCEPTUALISATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF POLICIES TOWARDS THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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Abstract

The concept of the Global South originates from developing countries and the idea of the Third World. Additionally, the international influence and power of the Global South have increased significantly in global governance discussions. China, which has evolved from a position in the 'middle ground' to becoming the 'largest developing country,' is considered part of the Global South. China is contemplating the prospect of strategically intensifying its collaboration with the Global South, conceptualising and orchestrating the Global South as a cornerstone of its diplomatic strategy. The EU must adapt to the changing multipolar global landscape and address the rising influence of the Global South. Current academic discussions focus on the emergence of the Global South and its impact on the international arena. These conversations also examine the policies of major powers – such as China, the United States, Russia, and India – toward the Global South, as well as the political and economic importance of the Global South's development. This has enhanced the international politics and political economy implications of the Global South, but a comparison of the Global South policies of different countries is lacking. Accordingly, this article will elucidate the discrepancies in China and Europe's conceptualisation of the Global South and investigate the divergences in strategic objectives, methodologies, and priorities for collaboration between China and the European Union in this region. Theoretically, this approach can facilitate the expansion of research into China-Europe relations. From a practical standpoint, the Global South represents a novel avenue for China-EU collaboration and a crucial instrument through which China can pursue its objectives in conjunction with the EU.

Keywords

Global South; global governance; international order; China; EU

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1. Introduction

The Global South is becoming an increasingly significant emerging force in the global political landscape. Concurrently, the Global South's share of global gross domestic product (GDP) has surpassed that of developed economies.² A growing influence accompanies the collective emergence of countries in the Global South on more strategic and political matters, including international security, regional conflicts and multilateral diplomacy. For example, Latin American countries have collectively articulated their positions on global governance issues through the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC). In September 2023, at the Group of 20 (G20) summit in India, the African Union (AU) was granted a permanent seat on the G20.³ South Africa initiated legal proceedings at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on 29 December 2023, filing a genocide lawsuit against Israel on behalf of the Palestinian people in Gaza.⁴ Despite considerable pressure from the United States and other Western countries, South Africa has remained steadfast in its position, reflecting the growing autonomy and commitment of the Global South as a political force on the international stage.⁵

China and the European Union espouse disparate views and adopt divergent responses to the ascendant Global South. China has proposed and promoted the implementation of several significant international cooperation initiatives, including the Belt and Road Initiative, the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, and the Global Civilisation Initiative. China has provided substantial endogenous impetus, cooperation platforms, and economic assistance for the development of the Global South. In his speech at the closing ceremony of the BRICS (group of Brazil, Russia, India, and China) Business Forum 2023 in South Africa, Chinese President Xi Jinping observed that, as a developing country and a member of the Global South (a broad term encompassing a diverse group of countries, primarily in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean), China has historically shared a similar trajectory with other developing countries. He underscored that China has consistently championed the collective interests of developing countries and has been a pivotal force in promoting greater involvement of emerging market countries and developing countries in global affairs⁶ (Bunde – Eisentraut – Schütte, 2024).

The ongoing Russian-Ukrainian and Palestinian-Israeli conflicts are contributing to the erosion of the existing international political, security, and economic order. Concurrently, relations between the Global South and the European Union are significantly transforming tone and content. The EU has acknowledged the growing significance of the Global South as a collective of developing countries⁷ (Caulcutt, 2022). Nevertheless, there are discrepancies between the two parties concerning established commercial trade, debt relief, climate change and multilateralism reform. The European Union has aligned itself with the Biden administration in demanding that the Global South publicly condemn and impose economic sanctions on Russia. Furthermore, the EU has been accused of adopting a “double standard” in its approach to the Israeli-Palestinian and Russian-Ukrainian conflicts, a stance

that has attracted criticism from the Global South. French President Emmanuel Macron has accused countries that have remained neutral in the Russia-Ukraine conflict of “complicity” with Russia, characterising their stance as tantamount to supporting the actions of the Russian Federation.⁸ There is a divergence of perspectives and policy options between China and Europe concerning the Global South.

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The current academic discourse on the Global South predominantly encompasses the ascendance of the Global South and the concomitant evolution of the international landscape,⁹ the foreign policies of major powers such as China, the United States, Russia, and India towards the Global South,¹⁰ and the political and economic import of the development of the Global South¹¹ (Debin – Dongqi, 2023). This has enhanced the Global South’s international politics and political economy implications. However, a comparative analysis of the policies of different countries in the Global South is lacking. Accordingly, this article will elucidate the discrepancies in the conceptualisations of the Global South by China and Europe and investigate the divergences in strategic objectives, methodologies, and priorities for collaboration between China and the European Union in the Global South. Theoretically, this approach can facilitate the expansion of research into China-Europe relations. The Global South represents a novel avenue for China-EU collaboration and a crucial instrument through which China can pursue its objectives in conjunction with the EU.

This paper employs a comparative analysis methodology to examine the conceptualisation and implementation of policies towards the Global South by China and the European Union. The research integrates qualitative and quantitative approaches, drawing from primary and secondary sources, including official policy documents, speeches, academic literature, and data from international organisations. Content analysis is applied to assess narratives, policy objectives, and the strategic orientation of both actors towards the Global South.

The study is divided into two primary stages. First, we conduct a historical and conceptual analysis to understand the origins and evolution of the Global South as perceived by China and the EU. Second, we evaluate the implementation of policies through case studies, focusing on specific initiatives like China’s Belt and Road Initiative and the EU’s Global Gateway. Comparative indicators such as economic engagement, political partnerships, and institutional norms highlight similarities, differences, and areas of potential cooperation.

The paper is structured into the following sections: (i) the introduction provides an overview of the Global South’s increasing prominence and the research’s relevance; (ii) the conceptualisation of the Global South, which analyses the historical and ideological frameworks through which China and the EU conceptualise the

Global South. (iii) The comparative analysis of policy approaches investigates both actors' economic, political, and institutional strategies, with case studies illustrating practical applications. (iv) The Autonomy of the Global South discusses the growing independence of Global South countries and their interactions with China and the EU. (v) Finally, the conclusion summarises the key findings and offers insights for future research and policy considerations.

By systematically comparing China's and the EU's approaches, this paper aims to contribute to the academic discourse on international relations and global governance, offering perspectives on potential avenues for cooperation in the evolving geopolitical landscape.

2. A Comparative Analysis of the Conceptualisation of the Global South in China and Europe

The majority of countries in the Global South have a history of colonialism by countries in the Global North, primarily European nations. Subsequently, these countries emerged from colonial or semi-colonial situations and became newly industrialised nations. The concept of the Global South initially emerged from the context of developing countries and the "third world," as a contrast to the terms "former colonies" and "underdevelopment." In contrast to these, the Global South espoused a more neutral and open-ended set of values.

The term Global South is currently debated in academic, political, and economic circles, yet there is no consensus on its scope. Three principal definitions have emerged: geopolitical, political, and economic¹² (Oglesby, 1969).

In its earliest usage, the term Global South was employed as a geographical metaphor for underdevelopment and as a substitute for the term 'Third World.' The term was first employed in 1969 by Carl Oglesby, an American left-wing political activist who coined the term Global South. In his argument, Oglesby posited that the domination of the Global South by the Global North had resulted in the emergence of an intolerable social order over centuries.¹³ The term Global South is used as a generic designation for the low- and middle-income countries of Africa, Asia, Oceania, Latin America, and the Caribbean (per the World Bank's classification). This usage implies a post-colonial legacy and its associated consequences and burdens.

Secondly, the term Global South is imbued with a particular set of political connotations. The term Global South is not geographically defined and is used to refer to a group of countries that encompass a diversity of values, cultural traditions, levels of development, and interests. The most common characteristics of countries in this region are non-Western, anti-interventionist, and development-oriented.

Thirdly, economic attributes serve as pivotal indicators of the division of the Global South. Concurrent with the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement, leaders of developing countries sought to effectuate alterations in the global economic order. In 1964, representatives of 120 countries, international organisations, and civil society groups convened in Geneva for the inaugural United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). A group of 77 non-aligned countries issued

the Joint Declaration of 77 Developing Countries, which established the Group of 77 (G77). In alignment with the tenets of the theory of dependence, the G77 seeks to reduce reliance on developed countries by limiting the export of raw materials to industrialised nations and strengthening the manufacturing capabilities of low-income countries to meet the economic needs of developing countries. The Finance Centre for South-South Cooperation defines the “Global South” as the “Group of 77 and China.”¹⁴ Furthermore, it is emphasised that the objectives and actions of the G77 aim to rectify and ultimately eradicate imbalances within the global economic system.

China and the EU have markedly disparate internal development logics and foreign policy trajectories, leading to markedly disparate ontological understandings of the Global South. China has consistently regarded itself as a constituent of the Global South, a position it has striven to actualise. In contrast, the European Union perceives the Global South from the vantage point of a position of otherness, passively accepting the political and economic implications of the Global South.

2.1. China is a member of the Global South

The concept of China’s interpretation of the Global South can be traced back to the idea of a “middle ground.” This concept was followed by China’s declaration as the “largest developing country.” Mao Zedong first introduced this latter idea during a conversation with the left-wing American journalist Anna Louise Strong in 1946. His statement came in response to the post-World War II Cold War tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union, as well as the looming civil war in China. Mao suggested that there was a “middle ground” amidst these superpowers, which included the capitalist countries of Europe, Asia, and Africa, alongside colonial and semi-colonial nations. Furthermore, he emphasized that China was the “largest developing country.”¹⁵ As the Cold War intensified in the 1950s and 1960s, national liberation and decolonisation movements flourished, with new countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America gaining prominence. Concurrently, several “middle ground” national organisations were established, including the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Group of 77 (G77).

Considering these circumstances, Mao Zedong proposed the concept of the “two middle zones.” The term “two middle zones” describes two distinct geographical areas: the first encompasses the vast, economically backward countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, while the second includes the imperialist and developed capitalist countries of Europe. Both regions are in opposition to the United States’ exertion of control. In Eastern European countries, the question of opposition to Soviet control arises.¹⁶ In 1974, in the context of a significant deterioration in Sino-Soviet relations and the emergence of a pattern of competition between the United States and the Soviet Union, Mao Zedong proposed the theory of the ‘three worlds,’ characterising China as a third-world country¹⁷ (Xiaoping, 1993).

In the 1980s, developing countries emerged as the dominant political and economic force on the global stage. Concurrently, China initiated a new phase of reform

and opening up, representing a significant shift in the country's diplomatic orientation, with developing countries becoming the primary focus of its foreign policy. In his remarks, Deng Xiaoping emphasised the crucial importance of peace, economic advancement, and development in addressing the global strategic challenges of our time. The issue of peace is pertinent to both the Eastern and Western hemispheres. In contrast, the development issue is pertinent

to both the Northern and Southern hemispheres. In conclusion, the key terms are 'East-West' and 'North-South.' "The North-South issue represents the core issue, in terms of both its intrinsic importance and its capacity to inform and shape the other key issues"¹⁸ (Wang Yi, 2023). The East-West issue primarily concerns the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union and does not include China. China's reform and opening up are confronted with the development challenge, which naturally aligns with the North-South issue.

With the conclusion of the Cold War and the dissolution of the bipolar system, the East-West issue has receded from the historical stage. In consequence, the concept of the "Third World" has been superseded by that of developing countries. China has consistently maintained its status as the world's largest developing country, a diplomatic position that has remained unchanged despite shifts in its comprehensive national strength.

In July 2023, Wang Yi, in attendance at the thirteenth meeting of BRICS Senior Representatives on Security Affairs in Johannesburg, articulated that the Global South constitutes a group of emerging market countries and developing countries. Furthermore, he asserted the necessity of continuously deepening the conceptualisation of the 'Third World' and 'developing countries.' China should persist in deepening South-South cooperation, spearheading the Global South towards unity and self-improvement, collectively safeguarding national security and stability, and facilitating the construction of an equitable and orderly multipolar world¹⁹ (Shada Islam, 2024). A review of the history of Chinese diplomacy reveals that from occupying a "middle ground" position to becoming the "largest developing country," China now belongs naturally to the Global South. The case of BRICS cooperation and enlargement provides an illustrative example of China's resolve to reinforce its ties with other countries in the Global South.

2.2. The EU's Global South Narrative

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the European Union has had to adjust and adapt to an unpredictable multi-polar world on the one hand and face up to the rising Global South on the other²⁰ (Dworkin, 2023). This has constituted a challenging period for the EU, which has had to navigate a shifting global landscape and the

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complexities of its internal and external relations. At this time, the European Union employs the terms “third world,” “developing countries,” and “least industrialised countries” to refer to the Global South, thereby perpetuating a clear “developed-backward” and “rich-poor” dichotomy.

During the Cold War period, Europe’s Global South policy was not a comprehensive policy towards all countries of the Global South. Instead, it was a policy that originated from and was shaped by the European policy towards specific regions, particularly those countries that had been colonised, namely those in the Organisation of African, Caribbean, and Pacific States (OACPS). From the outset of the European integration process, the European Community, through the Association Agreements, established special economic, trade, and political ties between the Western European countries and the former colonised countries of the ACP (African, Caribbean and Pacific). This entailed the unilateral preferential trade of Western European countries with the ACP region. Moreover, the bonds between these nations and the European Community are reinforced through various means, including providing development assistance. The continuation of the special relations established during the colonial era is evidenced by the strengthening of ties with these countries, including the provision of development assistance.

European policy towards the ACP countries can be seen as a successor to the Southern policy of the Cold War. While material assistance was initially provided to former colonies on a bilateral basis, from the 1960s onwards, it gradually reached developing countries worldwide. Concurrently, several multilateral aid agencies were established, including the UNDP, the World Food Programme, the World Health Organization, the African Development Bank, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. These organisations were established to provide developing countries with personnel training, concessional loans, and specialised technical assistance on a large scale.²¹ In 1980, the Independent Commission on International Development published the Brandt Report, which proposed a “Brandt Line” to divide the world into North and South based on GDP per capita. Furthermore, the report proposed the 30th parallel as a geographical boundary between the Global South and the Global North.²²

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the international order underwent a significant transformation, evolving from a bipolar and predominantly United States-led unipolar structure to a multipolar configuration. The European Union (EU) has progressively underscored the influence of the ascendance of the Global South’s role in global affairs. In light of this analysis, the EU has devised and enacted a strategy of pragmatic cooperation between the two parties. Nevertheless, the EU continues to adhere to a perspective that is both “West-centred” and “Eurocentric” in nature. The concepts of “Orientalism” and “post-colonialism” are still perpetuated by the EU, which is deeply rooted in Western and European ideologies. This reflects these ideas’ long-standing and pervasive influence in the West and Europe. The ‘us and them’ distinction, which is ingrained in Orientalism and post-colonialism, still has significant influence. In a speech delivered to a group of young European diplomats

in October 2022, Josep Borrell, the Vice-President of the European Commission, drew a comparison between Europe and a garden, describing it as “the optimal synthesis of political freedom, economic prosperity, and social cohesion that humanity can construct,” and “a garden surrounded by a jungle”²³ (Iveson – McNair, 2023).

In addition to the straightforward “dichotomy of identities,” the EU’s initiatives towards the Global South are designed to “choose one side.” The EU has deliberately excluded China from the Global South in an effort to polarise China’s relations with the broader developing world and diminish China’s influence within this region. The European Union’s dialogue with the Global South focuses on a limited range of issues, including illegal migration, the fight against corruption, and climate change. Notably, calls from the Global South for reform of multilateral institutions, accelerating the implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, and eliminating North-South inequalities have been largely ignored.²⁴

Concerning the international order, China, in collaboration with countries in the Global South, opposes the polarisation and confrontation of the international community. Conversely, China is dedicated to diversifying global influence and advancing this objective. Several European countries and the United States do not acknowledge China’s status as a developing country and are attempting to revoke its designation as a country in the Global South. Moreover, they are pursuing a calculated strategy of estrangement and marginalisation of China from other countries in the Global South.

3. A comparative analysis of the policy approaches of China and Europe towards the Global South

China and the European Union engage in collaborative endeavours with the Global South. However, their strategic objectives, approaches, and priorities diverge considerably, reflecting the influence of their respective geopolitical interests, goals, and values. In general, China’s policy towards the Global South can be said to emphasise three aspects. The objective is to establish a “community of interests,” “community of responsibility,” and “community of destiny” between China and the Global South, based on the principles of “common development, shared destiny, and shared dignity.” The European Union’s approach can be characterised as one of economic primacy, geopolitical competition, and historical interdependence. This has led to a strategy of “strengthening economic ties, polarising and confronting politically, and regulating norms and regulations.”

3.1. Economic cooperation

China’s cooperation with the Global South has primarily concentrated on economic development and infrastructure projects. As a developing country that had successfully lifted millions of people out of poverty, China’s development model could provide instructive examples for the Global South. Firstly, through the South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund (SSCAF) and the South-South Cooperation and Development Academy (SSCDA), China has facilitated developing countries’

capacity-building, enabling them to pursue autonomous development. The South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund, in close collaboration with United Nations agencies, funds, and programmes, has initiated a significant number of humanitarian and development projects efficiently and sustainably. The South-South Fund and the South-South Academy have evolved into significant public goods for China's engagement with countries in the Global South. Concurrently, China's collaboration with the Global South is frequently typified by extensive infrastructure initiatives, investment agreements and trade arrangements that prioritise economic expansion and the acquisition of natural resources. The promotion of new mechanisms, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the BRICS New Development Bank, as well as the construction of the Belt and Road Initiative, has provided a new source of impetus for economic growth and the improvement of people's livelihoods in developing countries. China's Belt and Road Initiative has become a significant platform for advancing global infrastructure development and economic collaboration. Its scope has expanded beyond Asia and Europe to encompass Africa and Latin America, with over 150 countries and 30 international organisations signing the Belt and Road Initiative cooperation agreement. Three Belt and Road Initiative cooperation summits have been held, and more than 20 multilateral cooperation platforms in specialised fields have been established.²⁵

At the series of summits marking the 70th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations, President Xi announced the launching of six 100-project initiatives over five years. These initiatives encompass 100 poverty reduction projects, 100 agricultural cooperation projects, 100 trade promotion assistance projects, 100 ecological protection and climate change projects, 100 hospitals and clinics, 100 schools and vocational training centres, the establishment of a South-South cooperation assistance fund, the implementation of 100 "maternal and child health projects" and 100 "happy school projects," and the establishment of a South-South cooperation assistance fund. Furthermore, a South-South cooperation assistance fund has been established, the China-United Nations Fund for Peace and Development has been set up, training and scholarships have been provided to China, the debt of interest-free loans to the countries concerned has been forgiven, and assistance in the form of loans and scholarships has been provided to the countries concerned. From 2013 to 2018, China assisted 122 countries and 20 international and regional multilateral organisations in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Oceania, and Europe. The countries and territories receiving assistance included 53 in Africa, 30 in Asia, 22 in Latin America and the Caribbean, 9 in Oceania, and 8 in Europe.²⁶

Most developing countries demonstrated a limited capacity for technological innovation, necessitating the importation of foreign technology. China has a long history of transferring technology to other developing countries. This has involved sharing its experience in governance and appropriate technology, directing more resources to the sustainable economic and social development of developing countries, and supporting the majority of developing countries in removing bottlenecks to their development. To illustrate, China has developed a highly sophisticated high-

speed railroad technology, which has been successfully deployed domestically and is now being actively exported overseas. This has attracted considerable attention and recognition from the international community. In October 2023, the Yawang High-Speed Railway, the first high-speed railway in Southeast Asia, the inaugural project of the Belt and Road Initiative, and a national strategic undertaking for Indonesia, was inaugurated. From the Tanzan Railway, the Aceh Railway, and the China-Laos Railway to the Yawan High-Speed Railway, China's railroads and high-speed railways have become the flagship of the joint construction of the Belt and Road Initiative and international production capacity cooperation. The Belt and Road Initiative has reshaped the interconnection of countries in the Global South in the areas of infrastructure and logistics, science and technology, and innovation. It has led to the development of countries in the Global South in the areas of infrastructure and logistics, science and technology, and innovation.

The European Union's engagement with the Global South encompasses trade and aid. Concerning trade and economic matters, the EU has entered into Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with the African, Caribbean, and Pacific Island States (ACP) since the signing of the Cotonou Agreement in 2000.²⁷ The aforementioned agreements have been concluded with these regions and countries, as well as with the ACP. These efforts aim to diversify external economic and commercial relations, to gain a competitive advantage in terms of values and standards, and to strengthen the reliance of these markets of the South on the EU. Additionally, these agreements are intended to advance the strategic objectives related to geopolitical competition and confrontation. Since signing the Cotonou Agreement between the EU and the African, Caribbean and Pacific Island States (ACP) in 2000, significant advancements have been made in the negotiations between the EU and these regions and countries for the conclusion of Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) between them. Furthermore, in addition to basing its unilateral trade preferences for the ACP on reciprocity, intending to establish a so-called "partnership of equals," the EU has accelerated its negotiations on FTAs (Free Trade Agreement) with several other developing countries. Additionally, the EU is moving ahead with negotiations with ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), and some of its member states attempting to resume FTA negotiations with India. The EU is pursuing negotiations with ASEAN and several of its member states, as well as with the Common Market of the South (MERCOSUR) in Latin America intending to resume FTA negotiations with India.

Regarding international aid, the European Union (EU) typically espouses a multilateral approach to development assistance, actively disseminating Western ideals of democracy, human rights, and good governance to developing countries and regions. In December 2021, the EU announced the launch of its "Global Gateway" programme, which aims to support global infrastructure development. The programme will mobilise 300 billion euros for various projects between 2021 and 2027, 150 billion euros for the Europe-Africa investment programme, and 45 billion euros for the Asia-Pacific, Latin America, and Caribbean regions. In a recent statement,

the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, asserted that the Global Gateway is a program and strategy that is in direct competition with China's Belt and Road Initiative²⁸ (Tagliapietra, 2024). By extending collaborative efforts on economic and social infrastructure initiatives, the European Union can leverage its capacity to advance its values and vision of sustainable development.²⁹ The European Union considers the Global Gateway to be an instrument for implementing its foreign and security policy. At the bilateral level, the EU cooperates with target countries on matters pertaining to transport, trade, and networks. At the regional level, it fosters regional cooperation with ASEAN and countries in Central Asia, Latin America, and Africa. At the international level, it enhances collaboration with international organisations on the fundamental rules framework for connectivity. Since its inception in December 2021, the Global Gateway Initiative has facilitated the implementation of several projects with a focus on sub-Saharan Africa, as well as Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East, Asia, and the Pacific. However, the efficacy of these projects remains to be seen, particularly in light of the relatively short period since their inception.

3.2. Political relations

China has developed a set of policy concepts for collaboration with countries in the Global South. The country is committed to following the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which is a platform for comprehensive and sustainable development in these nations. The Global Security Initiative provides a platform for regional security governance mechanisms to resolve border conflicts and combat cross-border crime and terrorism. Additionally, it establishes multi-lateral cooperation mechanisms for non-traditional security issues, including food security, energy security, and climate variability. The Global Civilization Initiative serves as a platform for cross-civilization pluralistic exchanges, mutual appreciation, and intercommunication. This initiative responds to the needs of countries in the Global South to move beyond the dominance of Western civilisation, develop their international discourse, and foster cultural self-confidence.

China has successfully established several “1+N” dialogue and cooperation mechanisms with Southeast Asia, Africa, Latin America, Central Asia, the Arab States, and the Pacific Island countries. This has led to an enhancement of mutual trust with countries in the Global South through implementing various measures, including “policy communication, facility connectivity, trade facilitation, financial integration and people-to-people exchanges.” China has also been an active proponent of multilateral mechanisms, including BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and ASEAN+1, which are designed to facilitate common development and cooperation among countries of the Global South. The BRICS countries have garnered increasing attention and support from a growing number of countries, thereby becoming a pivotal driving force for fostering collaboration within the Global South. In the wake of the 2022 Ukrainian crisis, the BRICS countries refrained from unconditional participation in the West's comprehensive sanctions against Russia.

Instead, they largely maintained a neutral stance in the series of votes adopted by the United Nations against Russia. In a recent proposal, Brazilian President Lula da Silva suggested the formation of a “peace club” comprising China, India, and Brazil to facilitate a peaceful resolution to the ongoing crisis³⁰ (Javorceková, 2023).

As a nation that has experienced repeated incursions by external powers throughout its history, China has consistently demonstrated its unwavering solidarity with developing countries in their quest to safeguard their sovereignty, security, and developmental interests. It has also been a vocal advocate for their cause on the global stage. China has repeatedly exercised its right of veto in the United Nations Security Council, created peaceful conditions and provided humanitarian assistance and support to countries and regions such as Zimbabwe, Syria, and Bolivia. With regard to the question of Palestine, China’s position is that the “two-state solution” should be supported and that the historical injustices suffered by the Palestinian people should be rectified. Furthermore, China advocates that conflicts and disputes should be resolved through peaceful means, such as negotiations, to achieve peace and stability in the region. China has consistently advocated for establishing a more equitable and just international order while also striving to protect the collective interests of countries in the Global South.

In contrast, the European Union has been the subject of criticism from the international community on account of its purported “double standards” in the Russian-Ukrainian and Palestinian-Israeli conflicts³¹ (Gwyn Jones, 2024). Furthermore, the moral and ethical standards espoused by the EU have been called into question in the context of mounting disagreements over debt relief, climate change, and multilateralism reform. Additionally, the “Black Lives Matter” campaign has prompted international reflection on the long history of systemic racism in European colonial history, the slave trade and European Union immigration policies³² (De Genova, 2020). From the perspective of the European Union, geopolitical competition and confrontation have become a reality for the international community³³ (Dixson-Declève et al., 2023). The EU is pursuing a policy of strengthening its trade and economic ties with the majority of countries in the Global South, including India, while simultaneously attempting to significantly reduce its relations with other important countries in the Global South, such as China. Therefore, based on geopolitical competition and confrontation, the Global South policy of the EU and some of its member states cannot be considered truly “globalised.”

3.3. Institutional norms

China’s diplomatic approach has consistently been oriented towards the Global South, focusing on fostering a community of shared human destiny. This approach has been characterised by a commitment to non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries and the provision of assistance without conditions. China is a member of the Global South and will continue to be regarded as a developing country. China has consistently demonstrated its unwavering support for the countries of the Global South in pursuing their independent and autonomous development path. It has also

taken a firm stance against external interference and has worked to safeguard the Global South's independent and autonomous political character. In addressing international and regional flashpoint issues, China has consistently advocated for regional countries and organisations to resolve challenges through peaceful and autonomous means and has opposed external interference under the pretext of humanitarian assistance. China has consistently demonstrated a commitment to advancing and rejuvenating the Global South. China has proposed global development initiatives and spearheaded international development cooperation to address global development challenges. Presently, over 100 countries and international organisations have expressed support for this initiative, with nearly 70 countries having joined the Group of Friends of the Global Development Initiative.³⁴

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Since assuming the presidency of the Security Council in 2017, China has spearheaded the convening of open debates on a number of critical issues pertaining to the security and stability of the African continent. These include discussions on “Strengthening Africa’s peace and security capacity,” “Strengthening peacekeeping operations in Africa,” and “Peace and security in Africa.” Additionally, China has hosted a series of high-level meetings, including one on “Peace and security in Africa: promoting post-epidemic reconstruction and eliminating the root causes of conflict in Africa” and another on “Peace and security in Africa: promoting post-epidemic reconstruction and eliminating the root causes of conflict.” China has actively participated in United Nations-led peacekeeping missions and played a pivotal role in escorting vessels in the Gulf of Aden and peacekeeping operations in Mali, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It has consistently upheld the principle of “Africa’s initiative, Africa’s consent, and Africa’s leadership” and has opposed unilateral actions by Western countries. The aforementioned actions have facilitated the realisation of lasting peace in Africa.

In order to facilitate cooperation in infrastructure connectivity, international production capacity, standardisation of equipment manufacturing, trade facilitation, technology standardisation and other pertinent topics related to the construction of the Belt and Road Initiative, China has organised over 4,000 training programmes for officials from relevant countries. The training programme has established an exchange platform for policy communication among countries, and the participants have proposed recommendations for the integration of the Belt and Road Initiative

into regional development plans, including the African Union's Agenda 2063, the ASEAN Connectivity Master Plan 2025, and the European Union's Euro-Asian Connectivity Strategy.

The European Union, which has long claimed to be a "normative force," has increasingly emphasised binding the Global South in areas such as human rights, environmental protection and immigration. In pursuit of its interests and geopolitical goals, the EU has sought to transfer and tie up developing countries through the transfer of benefits in the economic, political, scientific, and technological fields. The European Union has adopted a series of legal instruments, including the Decision on Restrictive Measures against Serious Violations of Human Rights, the Green Pact, the Carbon Border Mechanism, and the Anti-Forced Labor Act. These instruments collectively provide a framework for the "legalisation" of the European Union. This represents a case of Europe's "legal" intervention in the internal affairs of the Global South. The EU's rigorous standards in the green sector may impede industrial growth in countries undergoing industrialisation. In the domain of immigration, the intensifying use of coercive tactics by border and coast guard personnel against migrants has given rise to considerable resentment in countries from which migrants are emigrating.

4. The autonomy of the Global South and its implications for international relations

The Global South is currently undergoing a process of increasing autonomy in pursuing its interests and asserting its right to speak. It is actively pursuing its efforts in global governance, such as climate change, regional security, and public health. Furthermore, it has changed its previous passive acceptance of the established arrangements of the Western developed countries and has become more proactive in launching concepts and programmes conducive to its development. The autonomy and influence of the Global South in international affairs is reflected, in particular, in its reluctance to align with the West in responding to the Ukrainian crisis³⁵ (Aiden, 2023). At the United Nations General Assembly in April 2022, over 80 member states voted against or abstained from expelling Russia from the Human Rights Council.³⁶ The then President of Senegal, Maki Sal, cautioned that Africa's "burden of history" meant the continent was disinclined to become a hotbed of new cold wars and side shifting.³⁷ India's External Affairs Minister, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, urged Europe to "move away from the mindset that 'Europe's problems are the world's problems, but the world's problems are not Europe's problems'"³⁸ (Larson, 2022). In the context of the complex and volatile international situation, most countries in the Global South are demonstrating a new trend of non-alignment. The Global South was initially reluctant to choose sides among the major powers and has since preferred cooperation based on development issues.

The Global South views relations with China and the EU as a means of diversifying partnerships and reducing dependence on traditional Western powers. While there is a willingness to engage with China and the EU, there is also a desire to

protect national interests and initiatives. The Global South views China as a crucial economic partner. China's Belt and Road Initiative has provided these countries with substantial infrastructure investment and development opportunities, resulting in notable improvements in local facilities such as transportation, energy, and communications.³⁹ Concurrently, the Global South espouses China's stance on an expanding array of international matters and articulates a unified set of demands for an enhanced global governance structure. The European Union plays an important role as a partner of the Global South in a number of areas, including trade, education, and environmental protection.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, its protectionist and conditionality-laden trade policies and aid have been met with resentment by the majority of countries in the Global South. In some instances, the legacy of historical colonialism and cultural dissimilarities may impede the exchange and collaboration between the two parties.

Furthermore, the specific circumstances of individual countries within the Global South may give rise to disparate perceptions of the relationship between China and the European Union. There are considerable variations within the Global South in terms of levels of economic development, political institutions, social structures, cultural backgrounds and so forth. The Global South comprises countries with relatively high GDPs and large economies, including Brazil, India, and South Africa, as well as least developed countries (LDCs) with lower income levels. Some countries rely mainly on agriculture and resource exports, such as Angola and Niger, and some countries have diversified economic structures, such as Malaysia and Mexico. These countries have disparate international trade and economic concerns. Regarding politics, some countries are still experiencing political instability in the form of religious conflicts, armed struggles, inter-ethnic conflicts, and even civil wars. This makes it challenging for them to form a unified opinion and voice. Concerning the social sphere, countries with disparate population sizes, human development indices (HDI), and levels of science, education, culture, and health diverge, resulting in the countries of the Global South "exhibiting their own perspectives" on the international agenda. Culturally, there is considerable linguistic and religious diversity among countries, and the legacy of colonial history has profoundly impacted the trajectory of modernisation. These differences not only affect the trajectory and rate of development in different countries and regions but also present challenges to cooperation and coordination in the Global South.

5. Conclusions

The term Global South is used to describe a group of developing countries that are undergoing industrialisation. It is not, however, an organisation with a clearly defined scope, tight organisational structure, or institutional constraints. There are evident discrepancies in the conceptualisation of the Global South between China and Europe, as evidenced by their disparate definitions, historical backgrounds, and policy practices. China perceives itself as a member of the Global South, underscores its shared historical trajectory of development and the common challenges it

confronts, and is dedicated to advancing the growth and revitalisation of the Global South through collaborative efforts. In contrast, the European Union has approached its assistance and cooperation with the Global South from the perspective of an external observer and supporter. This has entailed the export of values and a demand for institutional norms.

The discrepancies between China and Europe in the conceptualisation and implementation of Global South policies are a consequence of their disparate historical backgrounds, developmental trajectories, and geopolitical interests. These differences will affect not only how China and Europe engage with one another and their policies towards the Global South but also their far-reaching impact on the international status and development trajectory of the Global South in the future. The distinctive nature of the differences between countries within the Global South means that its impact on China and the EU is multifaceted and complex. In order to understand these dynamics, it is necessary to carefully analyse geopolitical and economic factors, given the different perspectives and interests of the various stakeholders. The Global South is more preoccupied with economic and infrastructural development than with aligning with one side.

In light of the EU's "strategic anxiety" towards China and its collaboration with the US to exclude China from the Global South, it is imperative that China proactively engages with the values and norms underpinning the Global South as espoused by the EU. In light of the growing centrifugal tendencies of the EU towards the US, driven by the latter's unilateral hegemony, China should proactively engage with the values and norms underpinning the Global South agenda advanced by the EU. This entails identifying areas of mutual interest between China and the EU in the Global South and fostering third-party cooperation. ✨

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