Guest Column

India's Increasing and Challenging Engagement with the Global South

By Raj Verma


Image Credit: Flickr/MEAphotogallery

In the early twenty-first century, particularly under the Modi governments (2014–2019 and 2019–2022), India placed less emphasis on the Global South as it focused on building stronger relationships with major and emerging powers. However, during Modi's second term, following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and India's preparation to assume the G20 presidency in November 2022, New Delhi stated that it will enhance its engagement with the Global South.

Why India needs the Global South

Under the Modi government, New Delhi sees the Global South as important for several reasons. First, it views cooperation with the Global South countries as a way to counterbalance US dominance and promote a more equitable, multipolar world order. Second, India seeks to reshape the Western-led liberal system, which it considers biased and limiting to its ambitions of becoming a leading power. Third, New Delhi supports the creation of a more stable, predictable, and diversified global economic framework, including reforms to international financial institutions. Finally, India aims to boost its international status and secure broader recognition as a leading power.

Modi government's three-pronged Global South strategy

Since 2022, the Modi government has followed a three-pronged strategy to deepen India's engagement and influence in the Global South. First, India has sought to position itself as the voice of the Global South. On November 30, 2022, Modi wrote an article in **The Hindu** outlining India's vision for the G20. In it, he noted that India's G20 priorities would be shaped not only through consultation with fellow G20 members but also with countries of the Global South, whose perspectives are often overlooked. He further argued that India's development journey could serve as a model for these nations, emphasising its status as the world's fastest-growing major economy and highlighting its bottom-up, rather than top-down, approach to governance and development.

In January 2023, Modi government hosted a virtual "**Voice of the Global South Summit**," inviting participation from more

than 120 countries. The meeting was held under the theme "Unity of Voice, Unity of Purpose," reflecting India's guiding philosophy of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" ("the world is one family"). Its central objective was to underscore India's continuing role as a leading champion of the Global South. Follow-up editions of the summit were later organised—one in New Delhi in **November 2023** and another in **April 2024** in a virtual format—where India reaffirmed its strong commitment to representing and advocating for the interests of Global South countries.

Second, India has sought to position itself as a leading champion of the Global South's interests. The government of Narendra Modi has used major international institutions and forums, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), G7, G20, Non-Aligned Movement, Group of 77, United Nations General Assembly, United Nations Security Council, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change processes, the Commonwealth of Nations, BRICS, and the Indian Ocean Rim Association, to reinforce its claim of leadership within the Global South. Advocating for the priorities of developing countries and highlighting the challenges they face has become a consistent theme of India's engagement across these global platforms.

Third, India has emphasised the provision of public goods to the Global South. In recent years, especially since 2022, India has expanded its role in delivering development-oriented support, including supplying COVID-19 vaccines, promoting solar energy, strengthening technological cooperation, and sharing its development experience and best practices. It has implemented numerous projects across **seventy-eight countries, including 208 projects in Africa.** These efforts are designed through a consultative process and are intended to be transparent, demand-driven, empowerment-focused, and environmentally sustainable.

Since India is recognised as a first responder in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, it has also committed to sharing its **expertise and capacity-building programs** with partner countries and international organisations. Prime Minister Modi has further highlighted **India's readiness to extend public goods** through the Global South Science and Technology Initiative, aimed at supporting research and skill development. He has underscored India's willingness to share knowledge in advanced sectors such as nuclear energy and space technology, where the country has achieved notable progress. In addition, India has offered to **provide transformative digital public infrastructure**—already deployed domestically in areas like universal identification, healthcare, education, e-governance, logistics, commerce, industry, and electronic payments—to benefit countries across the Global South.

Sino-Indian rivalry for leadership of the Global South

Both China and India are striving to position themselves as leaders of the Global South in order to advance their national interests. However, India faces a significant disadvantage in this competition. First,

China secured a head start. While the government of Narendra Modi has intensified its engagement more recently, China under Xi Jinping has consistently prioritised and invested in the Global South over a longer period. Second, New Delhi does not possess the same level of financial and economic resources that Beijing can mobilise for investments and funding across the Global South. Beijing has pursued a comprehensive strategy that combines diplomatic outreach, economic initiatives, cultural diplomacy, and soft power to broaden its influence throughout the region.

China has established a range of alternative or parallel institutions, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the New Development Bank, and various overseas development funds, including the China-Latin America and Caribbean Industrial Investment and Cooperation Fund, the Silk Road Fund, and the China-Africa Development Fund. These initiatives are aimed at providing loans and investments to developing countries, thereby increasing China's influence in the Global South. Through the Belt and Road Initiative, China has built a global network of institutional influence, leveraging high-profile infrastructure and investment projects. Additionally, China has worked to win the support of the Global South by founding Confucius Institutes, promoting cultural exchanges, and offering scholarships to students from these countries, all of which serve to strengthen its soft power.

New Delhi is well aware of China's advantages and has set out to counter them by establishing normative legitimacy as the preferred partner of countries in the Global South, especially in Africa. **Indian media** has repeatedly referred to China's activities in Africa as extractive and exploitative. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, India's Minister of External Affairs, has also repeatedly targeted China's BRI and China's engagement with the Global South. At the 2025 Japan-India-Africa Business Forum, **Jaishankar stated** "Unlike extractive models of engagement, India believes in capacity-building, skill development and technology transfer, ensuring that African countries not only benefit from investments but also develop self-sustaining growth ecosystems."

India's challenges for leadership of the Global South

New Delhi should recognise that its efforts to claim leadership of the Global South could be constrained by several factors.

First, the rise of "**non-alignment 2.0**"—where many countries are prioritising strategic autonomy to maximise their geoeconomic, geopolitical, and geostrategic interests. This implies that states in the Global South may be reluctant to accept leadership from major powers such as India or China.

Second, many developing countries rely simultaneously on Western nations and non-Western powers like China and Russia for economic growth, development, and responses to global economic challenges. Given India's relatively limited material

resources, it may struggle to meet these countries' economic and developmental expectations or to assume a leadership role.

Third, India faces **lingering resentment in some parts of the Global South**, partly because its positions in international forums, especially the WTO, have at times conflicted with the interests of other developing nations.

Finally, India's leadership ambitions may also encounter resistance from neighbouring Global South countries. Some of these states remain cautious about India's regional dominance and have expressed concerns over what they perceive as interference in their domestic affairs and policies that they believe encroach on their sovereignty and national interests.

Dr Raj Verma is a Visiting Fellow at the Sigur Center for Asian Studies, Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University. Dr Verma has an MPhil and PhD in International Relations from London School of Economics and Political Science. He is the author of four books/edited volumes, editor/co-editor of eight special issues/sections and the author of almost 50 per reviewed articles published in journals. Dr Verma's research is focused on India's and China's foreign and security policy, India's and China's political economy, Sino–Indian–US-Russia-Pakistan relations, Asian security issues, Global South and the emerging world order and International Relations theory. He has worked in think-tanks in the UK, India, and China, and also worked as an economist and consultant with a focus on emerging markets in Asia, especially India and China. He has received fellowships from universities and research institutes in India, China, the UK, Taiwan, Philippines and other countries. He has been regularly interviewed by media in India, China, the UK and Europe, and has been invited by universities and think-tanks in India, China, Taiwan, the Philippines and the UK to deliver lectures.

The views expressed in the article are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy or the National University of Singapore.