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POLICY BRIEF



GLOBAL SOUTH AGENCY

From Victimhood to Systemic Architecture

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For much of the post-war period, the Global South was framed as an object of history, defined by dependency, constrained by structural asymmetries, and confined to the margins of global decision-making. That narrative, once empirically grounded, is now no longer adequate. A profound yet uneven transformation is underway. The Global South is no longer only reacting; it is increasingly shaping rules, institutions, and narratives.

*This Policy Brief argues that the Global South is thus transitioning from victimhood to agency, and potentially from agency toward systemic authorship. However, authorship remains an aspiration, not an achievement. The transition is real but contested, reversible in parts, and complicated by deep internal divisions. To move beyond intuitive claims, the brief proposes a novel operational tool, the **Global South Agency Index (GSAI)**. This would be a composite annual measure of Southern influence over binding international rules.*

Central to this transformation is China, not as a new hegemon, but as a catalytic anchor with scale and strategic coherence that has expanded the room for maneuver for other Global-South actors. Yet China's rise also introduces new asymmetries and rivalries.

This Policy Brief advances three propositions. First, Global-South agency must be understood as the capacity to shape rules, not merely to participate. Second, this agency is real but fragmented, constrained by intra-Global South tensions (India-China, middle powers vs Least-Developed Countries, regional rivalries). Third, moving from agency to durable systemic architecture requires these internal divisions to be confronted, and strategic coherence to be built.

The emerging order is not a simple power transition but a normative pluralization. The Global South's growing influence has not yet translated into authorship of binding international rules. Whether it can do so depends on its ability to manage internal contradictions, and to convert episodic coordination into lasting institutions.

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1. INTRODUCTION: BEYOND VICTIMHOOD

There are times when inherited frameworks obscure more than they illuminate. The traditional narrative of the Global South, rooted in dependency theory, post-colonial critique, and structural asymmetry, is increasingly inadequate. But it would be a mistake to dismiss it as a 'straw man'. The best work in that tradition (e.g. Cardoso, Faletto, Amin) always recognized spaces for agency within constraints. What has changed is the scale and scope of that agency¹.

For decades, the Global South operated within a system largely designed elsewhere. Its role was reactive: to adapt, resist, or negotiate marginal improvements. The 1955 Bandung Conference was an early expression of collective agency, but it produced more solidarity than structural change. The Non-Aligned Movement, for all its moral authority, did not alter the basic architecture of Bretton Woods, or the UN Security Council. Dependency theory captured the reality of peripheral capitalism: the extraction of surplus from the periphery to the center, terms of trade that favored industrialized economies, and political elites whose interests were aligned with external powers.

Today, that picture has changed in fundamental ways. The demographic weight of the Global South is undeniable: by 2050, sub-Saharan Africa will account for more than half of global population growth. Its share of global GDP at purchasing power parity rose from 33% in 2000 to over 58% in 2024. Countries once described as 'developing' are now central nodes in global production networks. Vietnam is a linchpin in electronics supply chains. Brazil is a leading agricultural exporter and a producer of deep-water oil. India has become a space-faring nation and a pharmaceutical powerhouse. Indonesia controls the world's largest nickel reserves, essential for electric-vehicle batteries.

Yet the question is no longer whether the Global South can integrate into the existing order, but whether it can reshape it. To pose the question is to recognize a transformation, but also to acknowledge that the path from agency to authorship is neither linear nor guaranteed.

Operational definition: For the purposes of this brief, the 'Global South' refers to countries that are members of the Group of 77 plus China (G77+China), which self-identify as developing economies, and which share a history of structural marginalization in global governance. This encompasses approximately 130 countries across Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Oceania. The term is used analytically, not as a claim of political unity.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: AGENCY, AUTHORSHIP, AND RELATIONAL LOGIC

Agency in international relations is too often mistaken for presence. In isolation, being invited to the table, being consulted, even being heard, do not constitute power in any meaningful sense. Participation, while symbolically relevant, is not synonymous with influence, and influence itself remains distinct from authorship. True agency resides elsewhere: in the capacity not merely to react to the system's rules, but to define them.

1. The 'straw man' refers to the oversimplified characterization of dependency and postcolonial theories as frameworks that present the Global South as a purely passive object of history. Cardoso and Faletto recognized "*pockets of agency*" and internal dynamics within structural constraints. To dismiss these frameworks entirely is to ignore the persistence of real material and institutional asymmetries. For the foundational articulation of this perspective, see Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Faletto, *Dependency and Development in Latin America*, translated by Marjory Mattingly Urquidí (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

This distinction, while conceptually straightforward, carries profound analytical implications. It requires us to move beyond surface indicators of inclusion toward a more structured understanding of what agency entails in practice. At its core, agency operates across three interdependent dimensions: material, institutional, and narrative.

Material capacity remains the most visible yet often the most misunderstood. It is not reducible to aggregate economic size or headline GDP figures. Rather, it encompasses the structural foundations of autonomy: industrial diversification, technological capability, energy security, and control over strategic resources. Without these, diplomatic assertiveness risks becoming performative—visible yet ultimately inconsequential. Power, in this sense, must be underpinned by substance.

Institutional capacity, by contrast, concerns the ability to operate within and beyond the architecture of global governance. It encompasses not only the presence of skilled diplomats and legal expertise, but also the capacity to design, propose, and sustain alternative frameworks. Institutions are not merely arenas; they are instruments. The ability to staff them, shape their agendas, and, when necessary, circumvent them, is a critical part of agency. Coalitions that dissolve at the end of summits do not alter systems; those that endure begin to reshape them.

Yet perhaps the most subtle, and increasingly consequential, transformation has occurred in the realm of **narrative capacity**. The Global South has demonstrated a growing ability to frame debates, redefine legitimacy, and shape the language through which international issues are understood. Concepts such as ‘climate justice’, the defense of ‘policy space’, and the insistence on ‘sovereign equality’ are not rhetorical flourishes; they are instruments of contestation. They reconfigure the terms of engagement and, in doing so, shift the boundaries of what is considered acceptable or legitimate within the system.

Yet even when these three dimensions converge, they do not automatically produce authorship. Authorship represents a higher threshold. It is reached not when preferences are expressed, but when they are embedded in binding rules that govern behavior, even in the face of resistance. Authorship is observable when treaty provisions, resolutions, or adjudicated outcomes reflect positions initially opposed by established powers—positions those powers could neither dilute nor block. By this more stringent standard, the Global South has not yet crossed the threshold. But it is unmistakably approaching it.

To understand this trajectory more fully, one must move beyond conventional frameworks and adopt a relational perspective. This, drawing in part on Chinese intellectual traditions such as *guanxi*, shifts the analytical focus from hierarchical domination to networked influence. It prioritizes the density of relationships, centrality within networks, and the sequencing of interactions over formal institutional authority².

Within this framework, agency is exercised not through coercion but through positioning. It is the ability to become indispensable across multiple domains—trade, finance, infrastructure—thereby making exclusion costly for others. Influence accumulates not through singular, transformative moments, but through the gradual layering of bilateral and mini-lateral engagements that, over time, alter the distribution of bargaining power.

2. Relational theory in International Relations (IR) posits that the fundamental units of global politics are not individual states acting in isolation, but the ongoing relationships and social practices between them. This approach draws heavily on the Chinese concept of *guanxi* (relationality), which views social capital as a dynamic network of reciprocal obligations. By focusing on ‘network density’ and ‘transaction sequencing’, scholars move beyond a static view of power to examine how influence is built through the accumulation of social ties. For the primary theoretical adaptation of these concepts to IR, see Qin Yaqing, *A Relational Theory of World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

This is precisely what is being seen in the proliferation of alternative mechanisms across the Global South. Payment systems, currency-swap arrangements, infrastructure corridors, and technology-sharing platforms, in isolation, do not displace existing structures. But collectively, they begin to reconfigure the system's operating logic. They reduce dependence, expand options, and create parallel pathways that can be activated when traditional channels prove restrictive³.

What follows is a necessary recalibration of how progress is assessed. The question is no longer confined to whether legacy institutions have been reformed (a question that often yields pessimistic conclusions), but is whether new networks of coordination have emerged that reduce the practical costs of bypassing them. On this measure, the answer is increasingly affirmative, albeit uneven.

The architecture of the international system is not being dismantled. It is being quietly and incrementally supplemented. Within this space, between continuity and change, agency and eventually authorship will be determined.

3. THE PERSISTENCE OF ASYMMETRIES

While the rise of agency in the Global South can be recognized, momentum should not be mistaken for transformation. The language of emergence, while analytically useful, can obscure the persistence of structural constraints that continue to define the boundaries of action. If agency represents movement, structure represents gravity, which in international politics is neither easily escaped nor quickly reconfigured.

A serious assessment of the Global South's position must therefore resist both pessimism and premature celebration. It must instead confront, with analytical clarity, the enduring asymmetries embedded in the institutions, currencies, technologies, and governance frameworks that underpin the global order. These are not incidental features. They constitute the architecture within which agency must operate, and against which it must, over time, assert itself.

3.1. Financial Governance

The governance structures of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank remain among the most visible expressions of this asymmetry. Despite decades of reform discourse, decision-making power remains disproportionately concentrated in advanced economies. The United States, by virtue of its voting share, retains a *de-facto* veto over major IMF decisions, given the 85% supermajority requirement. At the World Bank, leadership selection has historically followed an unwritten rule reserving the presidency for an American. By contrast, at the IMF, the position is reserved for a European.

Even when reform has happened, the impact has been limited. The implementation of quota adjustments has not kept pace with the shifting weight of the global economy. The result is a persistent misalignment between economic reality and institutional representation, in which emerging powers remain structurally under-represented, despite their growing material significance.

3. For the Global South, this implies that building alternative payment systems (e.g. Russia's SPFS, China's CIPS), infrastructure corridors (BRI, IMEC, Lobito Corridor), and technologysharing arrangements (BRICS Remote Sensing Satellite Constellation) can gradually reconfigure the global order without directly confronting existing powers.

This paralysis is particularly evident with regard to China. Despite its emergence as the world's second-largest economy—and the largest by purchasing power parity (PPP)—China's voting power remains capped at 6.08%⁴. By contrast, several European economies with significantly smaller GDPs collectively wield far greater influence. The 16th General Review of Quotas, concluded in late 2023, notably failed to reallocate shares to emerging markets, opting instead for a proportional increase that preserved the current hierarchy. This persistent under-representation has prompted China to lead the development of alternative financial architectures, including the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank (NDB), which bypass traditional Bretton Woods constraints⁵.

3.2. Currency Hierarchies

If governance reflects power, currency embodies it. The U.S. dollar's enduring dominance (main reserve currency, primary unit of account for trade invoicing, central medium for global payments) continues to shape the contours of the international financial system. Discussions of de-dollarization, while increasingly frequent, have yet to translate into structural displacement. De-dollarization has been discussed particularly in the wake of sanctions on Russia. Nevertheless, the dollar's share of global reserves has fallen only gradually, from about 71% in 2000 to roughly 57% by early 2026.

Current data shows the euro accounts for some 20%, the yen for nearly 6%, sterling for 5%, and the renminbi for just under 2% of global reserves. The dollar's share of trade invoicing is about 40%–50% (comparable to the euro), while its share of international payments has recently peaked at over 51%. This leaves Global South economies exposed to exchange-rate volatility driven by U.S. monetary policy—a classic form of structural power⁶.

The hegemony of the dollar is not merely a matter of convention. It is anchored in the unparalleled depth and liquidity of U.S. Treasury markets, which provide a safe-haven asset that no other sovereign can currently replicate. However, this dominance is undergoing a gradual qualitative shift, as the dollar's share of global foreign exchange reserves steadily

4. The governance of the Bretton Woods institutions remains characterized by significant structural asymmetries. The United States maintains a *de-facto* veto over major strategic decisions at the International Monetary Fund because of the 85% supermajority requirement for such measures, combined with its current voting share of approximately 16.5% to 17.4%. Furthermore, the presidency of the World Bank continues to be held by a United States nominee under a longstanding 'gentleman's agreement'. Despite the implementation of the 2010 quota reforms in 2016, a disconnect persists between voting power and economic weight: as of 2025, China's share of global GDP (PPP) stands at nearly 20%, yet its voting share at the IMF remains limited to approximately 6.08%. For detailed data on current quotas and voting power, see International Monetary Fund, *IMF Members' Quotas and Voting Power*, and *IMF Board of Governors* (Washington, DC: IMF, 2026). For an analysis of the persistence of these governance imbalances, see Eric Toussaint, "IMF: Fake Good News," *Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt (CADTM)*, November 2024.

5. Robert H. Wade and Paulo Nogueira Batista Jr., "Will the IMF Survive to 100?" *Project Syndicate*, October 25, 2024. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/onpoint/imf-necessary-reforms-greater-influence-for-emerging-developing-economies-by-paulo-nogueira-batista-and-robert-h-wade-2024-10>.

6. International Monetary Fund, "Currency Composition of Official Foreign Exchange Reserves (COFER)," *IMF Data Brief*, last modified March 27, 2026, <https://data.imf.org/cofer>. The dollar's share of allocated reserves fell from about 71% in 2000 to approximately 57% by early 2026. For trade invoicing, the dollar's share is estimated at 40%–50% (comparable to the euro); the 80%+ figure commonly cited refers to dollardenominated trade finance. See Steven Beck, Ankita Pandey, Alisa DiCaprio, and Alexander Malaket, "ADB Global Trade Finance Gap Survey," *Asian Development Bank Brief No. 378* (December 2025), <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/1109006/adb-brief-378-ADB-global-trade-finance-gap-survey.pdf>. Serkan Arslanalp, Barry Eichengreen, and Chima SimpsonBell, "The Stealth Erosion of Dollar Dominance: Active Diversifiers and the Rise of Nontraditional Reserve Currencies," *IMF Working Paper No. 2022/058* (International Monetary Fund, March 24, 2022), <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WP/Issues/2022/03/24/The-Stealth-Erosion-of-Dollar-Dominance-Active-Diversifiers-and-the-Rise-of-Nontraditional-515150>.

declines. While this indicates a ‘diversification at the margins’, the transition has primarily benefited non-traditional reserve currencies, rather than a single systemic rival.

This decline is partly a response to the weaponization of financial sanctions, which has accelerated the growth of bilateral trade settled in local currencies, and the BRICS-led Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS). Yet structural displacement remains unlikely in the near term. For a competitor, such as the renminbi, to achieve true parity, China would need to dismantle capital controls and tolerate persistent current account deficits. Such actions would conflict with its current domestic economic model⁷.

Thus, for now, Global South economies remain exposed to exchange-rate volatility driven by monetary policy decisions made in Washington. Interest-rate adjustments in the U.S. reverberate globally, affecting capital flows, borrowing costs, and fiscal stability far beyond U.S. borders. This is structural power in its most subtle and most effective form.

3.3. Technological Dependence

Digital technologies have introduced a new layer of asymmetry. This is less visible than traditional forms of dependence, but no less consequential. Control over platforms, data, and technological standards has become a defining feature of contemporary power. Unlike earlier phases of industrial or financial dependence, digital asymmetries are embedded in the architecture of information itself, as well as in ownership structures.

The global digital economy remains highly concentrated. A small number of predominantly American firms continue to dominate critical segments, including cloud computing, artificial intelligence, and data infrastructure. This concentration is reinforced by the internet’s physical layer: most international data traffic flows through undersea cable networks owned or leased by a small number of Western conglomerates. At the level of platforms, operating systems, and foundational AI models, the asymmetry is even more pronounced.

Digital colonialism is evident in Africa’s reliance on foreign cloud infrastructure (AWS, Azure, and Google Cloud host over 70% of African data), AI models trained on Western data, and patent regimes that favor incumbents. The top five tech firms by market capitalization (Apple, Microsoft, Nvidia, Alphabet, Amazon) are all American. China’s Tencent and Alibaba dominate their domestic market, but have limited global reach beyond the Global South.

For much of the Global South, participation in the digital economy entails reliance on external systems, standards, and intellectual-property regimes. Data is generated locally but is often stored, processed, and transformed into predictive models elsewhere. The result is a structural imbalance in which value extraction occurs at the point of analysis, rather than at the point of production. In this sense, what has been described as ‘data colonialism’ is not merely a metaphor, but a contemporary configuration of dependency: human experience is captured as raw data in the periphery, and monetized in the core.

This dependency extends beyond infrastructure and ownership into the realm of knowledge production. AI models are predominantly trained on datasets that reflect Western linguistic, cultural, and historical contexts, while global patent regimes reinforce the position of established technological incumbents. Countries in the Global South are thus often reduced to consumers of proprietary systems they neither control nor meaningfully regulate. Without domestic capacity to store, process, and interpret their own data, they are effectively required to repurchase analytical insights derived from their own populations.

7. For a comprehensive analysis of digital and technological asymmetries, see Marcus Vinicius De Freitas, “Digital Sovereignty and Data Colonialism: Shaping a Just Digital Order for the Global South,” Policy Paper N° 38/25 (Rabat: Policy Center for the New South, October 2025), <https://www.policycenter.ma/publications/digital-sovereignty-and-data-colonialism-shaping-just-digital-order-global-south>.

Yet the most consequential dimension of technological dependence may lie not in infrastructure, but in the governance of information itself. Digital platforms are no longer neutral conduits of communication; they are curated environments in which algorithms determine visibility, relevance, and legitimacy. Control over these systems confers economic advantage and also the capacity to shape narratives, prioritize certain interpretations, and marginalize others.

Debates over, for example, the restructuring of TikTok's operations in the U.S. illustrate this dynamic. While formally framed as a matter of U.S. national security and data protection, the controversy revealed how domestic political constituencies may seek to influence platform governance to shape the circulation of politically sensitive narratives. Public statements by organized groups, including a September 2025 letter from the Jewish Federations of North America, which explicitly raised concerns about algorithmic treatment of content related to the Middle East, underscore the extent to which content moderation and recommendation systems have become arenas of political contestation⁸. The issue at stake is not simply ownership, but the power to define what is visible, what is suppressed, and what is presented as legitimate knowledge.

For Global South countries, the implications are profound. When digital infrastructures, algorithmic systems, and content governance frameworks are externally controlled, societies are not merely dependent on foreign technology; they are exposed to externally mediated hierarchies of information. What populations see, discuss, and ultimately believe may be shaped by decisions made far beyond their institutional or regulatory reach.

Technological dependence must thus be understood as a question of cognitive sovereignty, as well as a matter of digital infrastructure or economic capacity. The struggle for control over data, platforms, and technological standards is inseparable from the struggle over interpretation, narrative, and meaning within the international system.

Without the domestic capacity to store and process their own data, nations in the Global South are effectively digitally dispossessed. The result is a dependency that echoes earlier patterns of extraction, albeit in a more sophisticated guise, in which developing nations are consumers of proprietary algorithms and technological platforms they neither own nor regulate.

3.4. Institutional Lockin

Beyond finance and technology lies the deeper-seated constraint of institutional lock-in. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC), structured around a post-1945 distribution of power, in which the five permanent members retain veto authority, creates a gridlock in which substantive resolutions on atrocities or aggression are frequently blocked. The consequence is less trust and a shift towards a more fragmented, multipolar order. Despite the rise of emerging powers including Brazil, India, and South Africa, efforts to recalibrate representation have, for decades, encountered systemic resistance, as those who benefit from the current hierarchy are those tasked with reforming it.

8. Regarding pressure from organized groups for algorithmic adjustments, see Sapna Maheshwari, "Jewish Celebrities and Influencers Confront TikTok Executives in Private Call," New York Times, November 16, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/16/technology/tiktok-jewish-celebrities-private-call.html>; and for a more recent call to platform owners, see Jewish Federations of North America, "Jewish Federations to New TikTok Ownership: Remove the Online Hate," JFNA Public Statements, September 26, 2025, <https://www.jewishfederations.org/blog/all/jewish-federations-to-new-tiktok-owners-501907>.

Similarly, the paralysis of the World Trade Organization's (WTO) Appellate Body reflects the fragility of multilateralism when a hegemon disengages. By blocking the appointment of new judges, the U.S. has effectively dismantled the 'crown jewel' of global trade governance, replacing rules-based adjudication with a return to power-based negotiation⁹. In parallel, global debt management continues to operate through creditor-driven frameworks, such as the Paris Club and the IMF's sovereign debt protocols. Despite attempts to introduce more balanced, multilateral restructuring mechanisms (such as the UN's Basic Principles for Sovereign Debt Restructuring), these initiatives have struggled to gain traction in a system that prioritizes creditor rights over the Global South's developmental needs.

These institutional arrangements actively shape present possibilities, determining who can decide, who must comply, and who remains perpetually disempowered.

3.5. Environmental Asymmetry

Perhaps the most morally consequential of these constraints concerns climate change. The Global South, which has contributed least to historical emissions, bears a disproportionate share of the resulting impacts. This asymmetry is deeply political and economic, as well as environmental.

Efforts to address this imbalance, whether through climate finance or mechanisms such as loss and damage, remain insufficient relative to the scale of need. At the same time, emerging regulatory instruments, such as carbon border adjustments, risk imposing new forms of economic pressure on developing economies, effectively reconfiguring environmental policy as an instrument of trade competition.

These asymmetries translate into tangible constraints: higher borrowing costs, exposure to external shocks, technological dependence, and limited capacity to influence or enforce the rules that govern the system. Acknowledging them is not to negate the progress made, but to situate that progress within the enduring realities of power.

Agency, in this context, is not exercised in a vacuum. It is exercised within and against a structure that continues to privilege some actors over others. Recognizing this is not an act of resignation, but the first step towards strategic clarity.

4. INTRAGLOBAL SOUTH DIVERGENCES

The notion of the Global South as a coherent and unified actor remains one of the most persistent and analytically misleading assumptions in contemporary international relations. It offers rhetorical convenience, but obscures more than it reveals. Beneath historical experience and common grievances lies a complex landscape of competing interests, strategic divergences, and structural asymmetries that continues to inhibit the emergence of a cohesive bloc. To speak of the Global South as a singular entity is, therefore, more an exercise in projection than a reflection of reality.

Perhaps the most visible of these tensions is the strategic rivalry between India and China. Despite their shared membership of multilateral groupings, such as BRICS, their bilateral relationship remains marked by deep mistrust, as shown by recurring border tensions, including the 2020 Galwan clashes. Although India remains a middle power with a long-term positive outlook, it is also strongly influenced by the Western goal of deterring

9. Meeran Hameed, Nandang Sutrisno, and Frances Annmarie Duffy, "The Appellate Body Crisis: Challenges and Reforms to the World Trade Organization Dispute Settlement Mechanism," *Prophetic Law Review* 7, no. 1 (May 2025): 1416.

China. In addition, the rivalry extends beyond territorial disputes to competing visions of the regional and global order. India's refusal to join the Belt and Road Initiative is not merely a policy choice; it is a strategic signal of resistance to Chinese-led infrastructure and connectivity frameworks. The consequence is structural: collective action within BRICS, particularly in security coordination and infrastructure standard-setting, remains constrained by this underlying competition.

In Latin America, divergence takes a different yet no less consequential, form. The contrast between Brazil and Argentina reflects cyclical political shifts and fundamentally distinct economic philosophies. Brazil, under Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, has sought to revive a state-led, development-oriented model with an emphasis on regional integration, while Argentina, under Javier Milei, has embraced a radically liberal, market-driven agenda. This divergence undermines Mercosur's coherence, and weakens the prospects for coordinated South American positioning in global economic negotiations.

Africa presents yet another layer of complexity. Internal divisions—whether expressed in leadership rivalries between Nigeria and South Africa, or in the institutional fragmentation among regional organizations—limit its capacity to act as a unified negotiating bloc. The split between the Economic Community Of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), particularly following coup-driven political realignments, illustrates how domestic instability can reverberate into regional disunity. Consequently, Africa's ability to articulate common positions on critical issues such as climate finance, or reform of the UN system, remains constrained by its internal differences.

These differences are further accentuated by differing priorities between middle powers and least-developed countries. While countries such as India and Brazil seek greater influence within global governance frameworks—most notably through platforms such as the G20—many least-developed countries prioritize more immediate concerns, including debt relief and preferential treatment within the WTO. This divergence of agendas is often seen in multilateral negotiations, in which broader coalitions fracture along lines of developmental urgency and strategic ambition. For the most vulnerable states, there is growing concern that the rise of larger emerging powers may not necessarily translate into more equitable outcomes.

Geopolitical alignments add another layer of fragmentation. Gulf states including the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia increasingly pursue a dual strategy: maintaining close security ties with Western powers, while deepening economic engagement with China¹⁰. This duality, while rational from a national perspective, complicates the formation of consistent voting patterns in international forums, and weakens the notion of a unified Global South position on critical geopolitical issues.

Even in Southeast Asia, often cited as a model of regional cooperation, internal divisions persist. Members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) adopt markedly different strategic orientations. Countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines have moved closer to the U.S. in response to regional security concerns, while Cambodia and Laos remain closely aligned with China. Myanmar's political isolation further complicates regional cohesion. The result is an organization that, while institutionally robust, struggles to act in unison on issues such as the South China Sea, or the governance of emerging technologies.

10. Ali Bakir and Nayef AlShamari, "The Art of Hedging: Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE Manoeuvres amid US–China Great Power Competition," *Third World Quarterly* 46, no. 7 (2025): 773794, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01436597.2025.2509574>.

These are not minor frictions. Real effects include: (i) the failure to agree on a common candidate for WTO Director-General in 2021¹¹; (ii) the inability to issue a unified BRICS statement on the Ukraine war (the 2024 Kazan declaration carefully avoided direct condemnation)¹²; and (iii) the limited utilization of the African Continental Free Trade Area's dispute-resolution mechanism, which remains operational but underused¹³.

What emerges from this mosaic of divergences is a more sober, yet ultimately more accurate, understanding of the Global South. It is not a bloc but a field: a space of interaction, negotiation, and, at times, contestation. Its agency is real, but neither uniform nor uncontested. The challenge, therefore, is to amplify its voice while reconciling its internal contradictions so that coordinated, strategic action is possible. Until such coherence is achieved, the Global South will remain a powerful idea yet an incomplete actor.

5. BETWEEN INFLUENCE AND CONSTRAINT: THE EMPIRICAL RECORD

A deceptively simple yet analytically unforgiving question has increasingly surfaced in debates about the rise of the Global South: can one identify a specific, binding international rule, authored and enforced by a coalition of developing countries, in the face of opposition from major Western powers, within the past five years? It is a test not of rhetoric but of power. For that reason, it resists easy answers.

The honest response, at present, is *not yet*, at least not at the level of hard law. This is not a trivial admission but it is necessary. If agency is to be taken seriously as a structural transformation, it must be measured not by aspiration, but by its capacity to crystallize into binding norms that shape behavior beyond consent.

The empirical record, however, is far from empty. It is marked by a series of partial advances: moments when the Global South has influenced, reshaped, or co-produced outcomes, without yet achieving full authorship.

The 2022 agreement within the WTO on fisheries subsidies offers a telling illustration. A coalition of developing countries, including India, Indonesia, South Africa, and Argentina, succeeded in embedding provisions for special and differential treatment, particularly in favor of artisanal and small-scale fishers. This was a meaningful intervention in a domain historically shaped by industrial priorities. Yet the limits of this success are equally instructive. The agreement remained contingent on U.S. and European Union consent, and its central prohibition—targeting illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing—reflected norms long advanced by Western actors. Moreover, India and Indonesia have since become the

11. On the 2021 WTO DirectorGeneral selection, see World Trade Organization, "History Is Made: Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala Chosen as DirectorGeneral," WTO News, February 15, 2021, https://www.wto.org/english/news_e/news21_e/dgno_15feb21_e.htm.

12. For the BRICS 2024 Kazan Declaration's deliberate avoidance of direct condemnation of the Ukraine war, see XVI BRICS Summit, Kazan Declaration: Strengthening Multilateralism for Just Global Development and Security (Kazan: Russian Federation, October 23, 2024), paras. 3637.

13. On the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) dispute settlement mechanism, which is operational but underutilized, not collapsed, see African Union, "Dispute Settlement Mechanism," AfCFTA Secretariat, accessed May 2026, <https://au-afcfta.org/dispute-settlement-mechanism>. Olabisi D. Akinkugbe, "Dispute Settlement under the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement: A Preliminary Assessment," African Journal of International and Comparative Law 28, suppl. (2020): 13839, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3403745; and Trade Law Centre (TRALAC), AfCFTA Frequently Asked Questions – Updated May 2025 (Stellenbosch: tralac, 2025), <https://www.tralac.org/documents/resources/faqs/5889-afcfta-frequently-asked-questions-updated-may-2025/file.html>.

two principal holdouts on ratification, a reversal of roles that underscores the fragility of Southern coalitions. What emerged was not authorship in opposition, but co-authorship within constraints¹⁴.

A similar dynamic unfolded during negotiations between 2023 and 2025 on the post-pandemic global health architecture. Led by countries including South Africa and India, the Global South advanced a robust agenda centered on intellectual-property waivers and binding commitments to technology transfer. These demands were grounded in equity and strategic necessity. Yet as negotiations progressed, the outcome was progressively diluted. Developed countries narrowed the scope of any waiver to exceptional circumstances, and resisted binding obligations, leaving technology transfer largely voluntary. The result was a framework that acknowledged an imbalance but stopped short of correcting it. This was a case of blocked authorship, not a failure of engagement¹⁵.

The most compelling case—perhaps the closest approximation to genuine authorship—was the initiative to establish a UN framework convention on international tax cooperation. In 2024, a coalition of developing countries, led largely by African and Latin American states, secured a landmark resolution in the General Assembly to begin negotiations on a new global tax architecture. This move challenged the long-standing dominance of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, effectively shifting the center of gravity of global tax governance. The vote itself—decisive yet contested—revealed both the strength and the limits of this shift. While the resolution marked a clear breakthrough, the instrument remains a framework rather than a binding regime. Authorship, in this instance, is not achieved; it is underway.

Even within the domain of international security, where asymmetries are most entrenched, signs of procedural evolution are evident. The adoption of UNSC Resolution 2728 on March 25, 2024, calling for a ceasefire in Gaza during Ramadan, was drafted by elected members from the Global South. It passed with broad support, facilitated by a U.S. abstention. Yet the absence of enforcement, and the conditional nature of the U.S. abstention, underscored the limits of such achievements. The capacity to draft is not equivalent to the capacity to impose. This was authorship in form, but not in effect.

Taken together, these cases reveal a pattern that is both significant and incomplete. The Global South has advanced in agenda-setting, contesting dominant norms, and institutional innovation. It has demonstrated that it can no longer be marginalized. However, it has not yet secured decisive authorship in the core domains of global governance—security, finance, and trade—where rules are not merely negotiated but enforced, even in the face of opposition. It is precisely at this threshold between influence and authorship that the future of the international system will be decided.

14. For a detailed account of the 2022 WTO Fisheries Subsidies Agreement, including the role of Ambassador Santiago Wills of Colombia as chair, see World Trade Institute, “H.E. Santiago Wills Talks about WTO Fisheries Subsidies Negotiations,” WTI News, May 11, 2021, <https://www.wti.org/institute/news/803/he-santiago-wills-talks-about-wto-fisheries-subsidies-negotiations-in-4-global-economic-governance-seminar-of-2021>. The agreement entered into force in September 2025; see World Trade Organization, “WTO Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies Enters into Force,” WTO News, September 15, 2025, https://www.wto.org/english/news_e/news25_e/fish_15sep25_e.htm. However, India and Indonesia have since become the principal holdouts on ratification, a reversal that highlights intra-Southern fragmentation. See Kristen Hopewell, “India and Indonesia Undermine the WTO Fisheries Agreement,” East Asia Forum, January 1, 2026, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2026/01/01/india-and-indonesia-undermine-the-wto-fisheries-agreement>.

15. The initiative for a United Nations framework convention on international tax cooperation (2024) is documented in UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/78/230. The postpandemic health architecture negotiations are covered in WHO documents; for a concise analysis, see Ellen F. M. 't Hoen, Katrina Perehudoff, et al., “A Pandemic Treaty for Equitable Global Access to Medical Countermeasures: Seven Recommendations for Sharing Intellectual Property, KnowHow and Technology,” *BMJ Global Health* 7, no. 7 (2022): e009709.

6. EMERGING PILLARS OF AGENCY: EVIDENCE EXPANDED

With increasing clarity, a gradual but undeniable transition is underway from structural constraint to emerging agency across the Global South. This transformation is not occurring in a single domain, nor does it unfold uniformly. Rather, it manifests through a series of overlapping institutional, economic, normative, and strategic developments that, taken together, suggest a reconfiguration of the international system's underlying logic.

Nowhere is this shift more evident than in institutional innovation. The expansion of the BRICS membership to Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates in January 2024, followed by Indonesia becoming the first Southeast Asian member on January 6, 2025, was a statement of intent. Saudi Arabia was invited during the 2023 Johannesburg Summit but has not formally acceded; its status remains 'under consideration'¹⁶. With a combined population approaching 3.5 billion and a share of global GDP (in purchasing power parity terms) nearing 38%, BRICS now commands demographic and economic weight that cannot be ignored. Yet expansion brings complexity. The bloc's internal heterogeneity has increased substantially, introducing divergent strategic alignments and domestic priorities that complicate collective action. What appears, at first glance, to be consolidation may, in practice, evolve into a more intricate negotiation of interests.

In parallel, financial institutions associated with the Global South have begun to carve out their own spaces, albeit with measured progress. The New Development Bank, for instance, has approved tens of billions of dollars in projects, and has taken the significant step of lending in local currencies, an initiative that seeks to mitigate exchange-rate risk and reduce dependence on the dollar. Yet the pace of disbursement reveals the enduring tension between ambition and execution. Creditworthiness, institutional credibility, and operational discipline remain works in progress. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank offers a different, perhaps more hybrid model: conceived with strong Global-South leadership, yet capable of attracting a broad membership that includes Western economies. Its trajectory suggests that alternative institutions need not be exclusionary to be effective.

In Africa, the emergence of mechanisms such as the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System signals a more pragmatic and immediate form of agency. By enabling transactions in local currencies, and with an operational presence currently limited, though expanding, to a group of participating countries (17 as of July 2025), it reduces transaction costs and exposure to external financial systems historically dominated by Western intermediaries. In many ways, it is a quiet yet consequential act of financial sovereignty¹⁷.

The economic dimension of this transformation is equally revealing. South-South trade has reached unprecedented levels, overtaking North-North trade, though remaining below

16. On the expansion of BRICS: Indonesia became a full member on January 6, 2025. See Government of Brazil, "Brazil Announces Indonesia as Full Member of BRICS," Planalto News, January 6, 2025, <https://www.gov.br/planalto/en/latest-news/2025/01/brazil-announces-indonesia-as-full-member-of-brics>. Saudi Arabia's formal accession remains under consideration; see Oliver Stuenkel and Margot Treadwell, "Why Is Saudi Arabia Hedging Its BRICS Invite?" (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 21, 2024), <https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2024/11/brics-saudi-arabia-hedging-why>. For general background, see BRICS Brazil 2025 Presidency, "Frequently Asked Questions about the BRICS," accessed May 3, 2026, <https://brics.br/en/about-the-brics/frequently-asked-questions-about-the-brics>.

17. The Pan African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS) is operationally present in seventeen countries as of July 2025. See Pan African Payment and Settlement System, "Bank AlMaghrib Signs Up to PAPSS, Establishing Morocco as Its 17th Country of Presence" (PAPSS Media, July 7, 2025), <https://papss.com/media/bank-al-maghrib-signs-up-to-papss-establishing-morocco-as-its-17th-country-of-presence>.

North-South flows in absolute terms (roughly \$6.2 trillion versus \$8.7 trillion in 2024). This milestone, however, warrants caution. Much of this trade remains concentrated in commodities and intermediate goods, rather than in high-value sectors such as advanced manufacturing, technology, or services. The architecture of value creation, therefore, continues to exhibit asymmetries that favor more developed economies¹⁸.

Efforts to circumvent these asymmetries are evident in initiatives to de-dollarize and to use local currencies in cross-border transactions. China's network of currency-swap agreements and the incremental rise of the renminbi in global payments indicate a slow but deliberate diversification. Yet the dollar and the euro remain dominant, reaffirming that structural change in the monetary order is evolutionary rather than abrupt.

Normatively, the Global South has also begun to assert itself with greater confidence. The operationalization of the loss and damage fund following the COP28 climate summit in 2023 was a diplomatic achievement, even if the scale of financial commitments has fallen short of expectations. Similarly, the reassertion of sovereignty norms in multilateral forums reflects a growing resistance to interventionist doctrines that many view as selectively applied. In the digital domain, legislative initiatives in countries including Brazil, India, and South Africa, demonstrate a willingness to reclaim regulatory authority in spaces long dominated by external actors.

Finally, the landscape of strategic partnerships reveals a more plural and competitive environment. China's deepening economic engagement with Africa, India's expanding development initiatives, Brazil's technical cooperation efforts, and emerging connectivity projects linking the Middle East, South Asia, and beyond, all point to a diversification of pathways through which agency is exercised. Yet contradictions persist. Trade patterns often reproduce older hierarchies, and many initiatives remain constrained by limited resources or uneven implementation.

What emerges from this complex tableau is not a fully realized alternative order, but a transitional moment in which the Global South is no longer reacting to external structures but is actively seeking to reshape them. The movement from victimhood to agency is real but incomplete. It is defined as much by its ambitions as by its constraints, and it is precisely in this tension that the future contours of the international system will be decided.

7. CHINA AS CATALYTIC ANCHOR, WITH NEW ASYMMETRIES

To understand China's role in the contemporary international system is to move beyond simplistic binaries of dominance and dependence, and recognize it as a catalytic anchor, meaning a power that has fundamentally altered the constraints within which the Global South operates. This transformation has not eliminated asymmetries. Rather, it has reconfigured them, enabling new forms of agency while introducing new risks and complexity.

China's rise, and more specifically its outward economic strategy, has expanded the realm of the possible for many developing nations. Through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative, vast amounts of capital have been channeled into infrastructure projects across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, easing logistical bottlenecks and, perhaps more

18. See United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), *Handbook of Statistics 2025* (Geneva: United Nations, 2025), <https://unctad.org/publication/handbook-statistics-2025>; and Andrew Mold, "Why SouthSouth Trade Is Already Greater than NorthNorth Trade – and What It Means for Africa" (Brookings Institution, December 11, 2023), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/why-south-south-trade-is-already-greater-than-north-north-trade-and-what-it-means-for-africa>.

importantly, broadening the strategic options available to recipient countries. For the first time in decades, governments in these regions are no longer confined to a single source of external financing. The existence of a credible, scalable, and politically non-intrusive alternative has altered the dynamics of negotiation. The ability to signal that one can ‘turn to China’ if conditions elsewhere prove unfavorable is a form of power.

Equally significant is the nature of Chinese development finance. By largely eschewing the governance conditionalities historically associated with Western institutions, Beijing has enabled a reassertion of policy autonomy. Countries are no longer compelled to adopt privatization programs, austerity measures, or deregulation frameworks as preconditions for accessing capital. This has reopened the intellectual and policy space for state-led development strategies—an option systematically discouraged under the Washington Consensus orthodoxy.

China’s domestic experience reinforces this shift. The scale and speed with which it has lifted hundreds of millions out of extreme poverty provides a powerful counter-narrative to the notion that development must follow a single, liberal trajectory. For elites across the Global South, this is not merely an economic story; it is a psychological and ideological recalibration. It suggests that alternative pathways are conceivable and executable.

Yet it would be analytically insufficient and strategically naïve to interpret this catalytic role as inherently benevolent. The expansion of agency has been accompanied by the emergence of new asymmetries.

In the technological domain, dependence on Chinese infrastructure providers has raised a distinct set of questions. The widespread adoption of systems developed by firms such as Huawei and ZTE has accelerated digital connectivity, but has also raised concerns about data governance, security, and the lack of robust multilateral oversight mechanisms. In a world in which data increasingly constitutes a strategic asset, the implications of such dependencies are far from trivial.

Trade dynamics further illustrate this evolving landscape. While engagement with China has expanded export opportunities, it has also deepened structural imbalances. The persistence of commodity-based export patterns, together with the influx of competitively priced manufactured goods, has, in some cases, put pressure on local industries, reviving long-standing concerns about premature deindustrialization.

Overlaying these economic aspects is a growing sensitivity to geopolitical exposure. High-profile cases, such as long-term infrastructure leases, have, rightly or wrongly, shaped perceptions of strategic overreach. Even when such narratives are contested, their political impact remains undeniable. In international relations, perception often precedes and shapes policy.

What emerges, therefore, is a more nuanced reality. China’s role as a catalytic anchor is real, but does not amount to a new form of benevolent hegemony. Instead, it is a structural force that both enables and constrains. The Global South, increasingly aware of this duality, has begun to respond with greater sophistication.

The most strategically agile states are not those that balance rather than aligning uncritically. They engage with China when interests converge, extract tangible benefits from the relationship, and simultaneously cultivate alternative partnerships to mitigate risk. In this sense, agency is defined by the capacity to manage partners, as well as to choose them.

This may be the most consequential shift of all. The Global South is no longer simply reacting to external forces; it is learning, gradually but decisively, to navigate them.

8. EVIDENCE, CONTINGENCY, AND METRICS

The discourse on the rise of the Global South—often laden with analytical enthusiasm or political intentionality—risks becoming disconnected from reality when not anchored in concrete metrics and specific contexts. Agency, in this sense, should not be understood as a consolidated state, but as a process in formation: irregular, unequal, and deeply conditioned by domestic and systemic factors. It is precisely at the intersection of objective data, contingent political decisions, and stillasymmetric power structures that the true nature of this transformation is revealed.

Yet to acknowledge the need for metrics is not the same as providing them. The following subsection proposes an operational framework to move the debate from intuitive claims to empirically tractable indicators.

8.1. Towards an Operational Measurement of Global South Agency

Without measurement, concepts such as ‘authorship’ or ‘the capacity to shape rules’ risk remaining at the level of intuition or illustrative anecdote. To address this gap, we propose establishing a Global South Agency Index (GSAI). This would be a composite, annual measure that captures the ability of Global South countries (individually and collectively) to influence or co-write binding international rules. The index would focus on three core arenas: finance and regulation, trade and technology, and security and norms.

For years, scholars and policymakers have discussed the ‘rise of the Global South’, or the idea that developing countries are no longer merely rule-takers but are becoming rule-shapers. Yet when asked for concrete evidence, most people fall back on a few dramatic examples (such as China blocking a UN resolution, or India leading a coalition on vaccine patents), or on vague intuitions. There is no systematic way to track whether the Global South is gaining influence year on year, or to identify which factors help or hinder that process.

This lack of measurement matters. Without it, debates remain stuck at the level of competing anecdotes. One observer claims the Global South is increasingly powerful; another points to continued Western dominance. Neither can be proven wrong. More importantly, policymakers cannot identify what works: does building alternative institutions, such as the New Development Bank, boost agency more than strengthening internal unity? Does technological autonomy matter more than blocking power? These are empirical questions, but without a measurement tool, they remain guesswork.

8.2. What the GSAI Does

The GSAI is a proposed annual scorecard designed to address this gap. Rather than relying on a single indicator, it captures agency in six areas, each scored from 0 (no influence) to 10 (genuine authorship). Together, these scores provide a multidimensional picture of Southern power, from the ability to block unwanted decisions, to building parallel institutions, to making the West pay a price for ignoring Southern positions.

The Six Criteria Measured by the GSAI (each scored 0 to 10)

| What it measures | In simple words | Example |
|--|--|--|
| 1. Blocking power | Can a country stop a decision it doesn't like in forums such as the UN Security Council, IMF, G20, or WTO? | Using a veto or building a coalition to kill a resolution. |
| 2. Positive rulemaking against Western opposition | Has the Global South passed new binding rules (treaties, etc.) even when the U.S. or EU were against them? | A UN climate treaty approved despite U.S. hesitation. |
| 3. Alternative institutional density | Do Southern countries run their own banks, payment systems, and trade networks that bypass Western-led ones (e.g. World Bank, SWIFT)? | The New Development Bank (BRICS), China's CIPS payment system, or trading in local currencies instead of dollars. |
| 4. Internal coherence | How united is the Global South when voting on sensitive issues (finance, tech, climate, security) at the UN General Assembly? | Over 120 countries voting the same way on a digital rights resolution. |
| 5. Technological and narrative autonomy | Do Southern countries control their own data centers, AI, and digital content? Also, can they get their own concepts (such as 'climate justice' or 'digital sovereignty') into official international documents? | A Southern country hosting most of its data locally; the term 'digital sovereignty' appearing in a G20 communiqué. |
| 6. Cost of exclusion to the Global North | How financially painful would it be for the US/EU to ignore a coordinated Southern position? | If Southern countries hold a lot of Western debt, supply critical minerals, or offer alternative financing, ignoring them becomes expensive. |

How the Score is Calculated

For the first version of the GSAI, the composite score is calculated as the simple arithmetic mean of the six-dimensional scores (each on a 0–10 scale). This approach prioritizes transparency and ease of replication. Future refinements may introduce relevance weighting (e.g. giving greater weight to dimensions that statistically predict changes in binding rules), but the baseline index remains a straightforward average to avoid hidden assumptions.

A Quick Example (Illustrative Data for 2026)

| Country / group | Block-ing | Positive rulemak-ing | Alterna-tive insti-tutions | Coher-ence | Tech/nar-rative | Cost of exclu-sion | Final GSAI ((0–10 |
|--|-----------|----------------------|----------------------------|------------|-----------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| China | 9 | 7 | 8 | 4 | 6 | 8 | 7.0 |
| India | 4 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 4.8 |
| Brazil | 2 | 4 | 3 | 6 | 3 | 4 | 3.7 |
| South Africa | 1 | 3 | 2 | 7 | 2 | 3 | 3.0 |
| Global South average (excluding China) | 2.1 | 3.2 | 2.8 | 5.5 | 2.0 | 3.5 | 3.2 |
| United States (for comparison) | 10 | 10 | 10 | 1 | 10 | 10 | 8.5 |

What this tells us: China has high agency overall, but it is not very coherent with the rest of the Global South (score of 4/10). The average Southern country (excluding China) scores about 3.2, indicating real but still limited influence. True ‘authorship’ of rules would require scores above 7.

8.3. Why This Index is Useful

If the GSAI were built, researchers and policymakers could:

- **Track yearbyyear changes** in Southern agency: is it rising, falling, or stagnating?
- **Identify which factors drive progress (or regression)**, for example, whether gains in alternative institutions are offset by declining internal coherence.
- **Test concrete hypotheses**, such as ‘Does internal fragmentation harm agency more than a lack of technological autonomy?’ or ‘Does the cost of exclusion matter only beyond a certain threshold?’

8.4. Who Could Build the GSAI?

The index is not proposed as a definitive tool but as a starting point. A realistic next step would be for a consortium of Southern think tanks and research institutes to jointly develop an open-source methodology, pilot the index using 2026 data, and publish annual updates. This would ensure the metric is owned by the Global South, not imposed by external actors.

The overall value of the index is that, without it, the story of Global-South transition ‘from victimhood to systemic architecture’ remains just a story, rather than something that can be proved or disproved. The GSAI would be a first step toward grounding that narrative in evidence.

9. Risks and Contradictions

The emergence of agency within the Global South is one of the most consequential shifts of our time. However, the transition from agency to systemic architecture is neither linear

nor guaranteed. It unfolds within a landscape marked by competing pressures, structural vulnerabilities, and enduring asymmetries that continue to shape, constrain, and, at times, distort the exercise of that agency.

One of the most immediate risks is substitution rather than transformation. The erosion of Western dominance has not eliminated dependency; in many instances, it has merely diversified its sources. Countries that once relied primarily on Western finance and institutions now navigate complex relationships with new partners, including China, India, and Gulf states.

Equally significant is the risk of internal fragmentation. The Global South, often treated as a coherent analytical category, is marked by divergent interests, strategic priorities, and political alignments. Groupings such as BRICS embody both the promise and the limits of collective action. While they signal an aspiration for greater coordination, internal disagreements and geopolitical tensions frequently impede unified positions, reflecting a broader pattern of fragmentation within an increasingly multipolar system.

Domestic governance failures further complicate this trajectory. Agency at the systemic level presupposes a degree of internal stability, institutional capacity, and political legitimacy, which remain uneven across the Global South. In contexts in which corruption, conflict, or state fragility prevail, the capacity to translate external opportunities into strategic outcomes is severely constrained. The existence of agency in principle does not guarantee its effective exercise in practice.

At the same time, Western influence persists, manifesting in more subtle forms of co-optation. Selective inclusion within global governance structures—whether through expanded forums or incremental institutional reforms—often falls short of meaningful redistribution of power. The result is a form of managed adaptation, in which emerging actors are accommodated without fundamentally altering the system's rules.

This dynamic is further reinforced by an emerging backlash and securitization. As new centers of power gain prominence, established actors respond not only through competition, but also through strategic containment. Policies to reduce dependence, reshape supply chains and strengthen security alliances signal a broader recalibration of geopolitical strategy. The global system, in this sense, is not merely evolving—it is hardening along new lines of tension.

Finally, the accelerating pace of technological change introduces a more subtle yet potentially more disruptive risk. The traditional development model, anchored in low-cost labor and export-oriented industrialization, faces mounting pressure from automation and AI. Should these technologies erode the comparative advantage of labor-intensive economies, the pathway that underpinned the rise of several emerging powers may no longer be replicable.

Recognizing these risks is not to diminish the transformation underway, but to situate it within the enduring realities of power politics. The most plausible future is unlikely to be defined by the emergence of a cohesive 'Global-South order', but rather by a more contested, plural, and volatile system, in which new actors have greater voice yet still lack decisive authority, and in which institutions proliferate, but rule-making power remains unevenly distributed.

10. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: FROM FRAGMENTATION TO STRATEGIC COHERENCE

Moving from diagnosis to action, three priority recommendations arise from the analysis.

1. Establish a permanent GSAI Taskforce. A consortium of Southern research institutions should be funded to develop and publish the GSAI annually. The first edition (2026 baseline) would provide a transparent, falsifiable benchmark for measuring progress. This taskforce would also produce policy briefs that assess which elements of agency are most amenable to near-term improvement.

2. Create a Global-South coordination mechanism for key negotiating forums. The fragmentation documented in section 4 is most costly in the WTO, UN tax negotiations, and climate finance talks. A lightweight, rotating 'Southern Coordinating Group' could meet quarterly to align positions on no more than three priority dossiers per year. The goal is not unanimity on all issues, but strategic focus on those where a coordinated position can change outcomes (e.g. technology transfer, special and differential treatment, debt-restructuring principles).

3. Launch a technology autonomy fund for data localization and AI capacity. Technological dependence is the most rapidly closing window for Southern agency. A multilateral fund, capitalized by BRICS and Gulf states, should provide grants and low-interest loans for data-center construction, open-source AI model training on Southern datasets, and regulatory harmonization of digital sovereignty. The fund would be governed by a Southern majority, with technical assistance from existing institutions, such as UNCTAD.

Each recommendation is designed to be incremental, feasible, and directly responsive to the measurement gaps and asymmetry traps identified in earlier sections.

11. CONCLUSION: AUTHORSHIP AS HORIZON, NOT REALITY

The Global South stands at a historic inflection point. It is no longer defined by absence but by an increasingly undeniable presence in shaping international debates and outcomes. The central question is no longer whether it participates, but whether it can translate that presence into authorship: the capacity not merely to influence but to co-write binding international rules.

The honest answer, for now, remains: not yet. But the situation is no longer one of incapacity but of transition. The foundations are being laid with growing clarity. The Global South has moved beyond passive reception to active agenda-setting; it has engaged in sustained normative contestation; and it has begun to build institutions that reflect its priorities rather than inherit those of others. Alternative financial mechanisms, expanding South-South trade, and increasingly coherent positions on climate, technology, and sovereignty, all point in this direction.

What remains absent, however, is decisive rule authorship in the core domains of global governance—security, finance, and trade—particularly where authorship would require overcoming Western resistance. Even the most promising developments, such as emerging frameworks for global taxation, remain structurally incomplete. The question, therefore, persists, unresolved yet increasingly urgent: can the Global South impose, sustain, and enforce rules that do not depend on external validation?

Yet the trajectory is unmistakable. With each passing year, the material capabilities, institutional density, and narrative confidence of the Global South deepen. The cost of exclusion for established powers rises. The transition from victimhood to agency is no longer theoretical; it is empirically observable. The further transition from agency to systemic architecture has moved from abstraction to possibility.

But possibility is not inevitability. It will require strategic discipline, internal coherence, and, above all, a willingness to confront contradictions rather than obscure them. The path ahead will not yield a harmonious order. It will be contested, uneven, and, at times, destabilizing. Yet it may also be more representative, more plural, and more reflective of the diversity that defines the international system.

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