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POLICY PAPER

DEVELOPMENT AS DIPLOMACY

China's Economic Model and the
Rewriting of Soft Power

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This policy paper explores how China's economic development model—rooted in pragmatism, long-term planning, and civilizational renewal—has become its most compelling soft power asset, particularly in the eyes of the Global South. While critically engaging with Joseph Nye's original conception of soft power as a primarily cultural and normative force, the paper argues that China's ability to transform itself from an impoverished postimperial state into the world's largest trading nation constitutes a far more persuasive and concrete form of attraction.

Drawing on the historical context of China's "Century of Humiliation", the paper emphasizes the distinctiveness of the Chinese response—not one of nostalgic paralysis, but of strategic rejuvenation. Rejuvenation, as opposed to mere modernization, is presented as a deeply internal, spiritual, and civilizational force that animates the Chinese development project and distinguishes it from other postcolonial experiences.

Additionally, the paper identifies key lessons from the Chinese model, including the strategic role of the state, the necessity of long-term and quantifiable development goals (such as GDP per capita targets), the centrality of public education and national security, the importance of meritocratic leadership, and the cultivation of national industries aligned with strategic vocation. These insights are positioned as highly relevant for countries in Latin America and Africa seeking to move beyond dependency and reclaim their development trajectories on sovereign and dignified terms.

Ultimately, the paper calls for a new grammar of global development—one that places excellence, integrity, rejuvenation, and purpose at its core, and where multipolarity is not just a geopolitical condition but a civilizational imperative.

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INTRODUCTION

In a world increasingly weary of imposed prescriptions and ideological impositions, China's economic development model has emerged not merely as a national achievement but as a powerful instrument of soft power. This compelling narrative captivates much of the Global South. It is a story of stability, pragmatism, and evolution that starkly contrasts with the often-disappointing results of the neoliberal orthodoxy of the Washington Consensus. The stark contrast between the two models highlights the diverse approaches to economic development. In place of structural adjustments and austerity, Beijing offers infrastructure, growth, and predictability. Moreover, in an era defined by uncertainty, such virtues resonate loudly.

Since the late 1970s, when Deng Xiaoping boldly steered China away from the ideological rigidity of Maoism toward the economic rationalism of reform and opening up (*gaige kaifang*), the nation has undergone an unparalleled transformation. In four decades, China lifted over 800 million people out of poverty, expanded its GDP from approximately US\$149 billion in 1978 to over US\$18.8 trillion in 2024, and became the world's largest trading nation. This success is not merely a tale of numbers—it is a lesson in adaptive governance, state-guided capitalism, and long-term planning.

Indeed, one of the most overlooked yet profound elements of China's rise is that it was not imposed on others. Unlike the United States and the Bretton Woods institutions, which sought to universalize a particular path of liberal democracy and market fundamentalism, China made no such claim to universality. Instead, it presented a living example of what can be achieved when a nation tailors development to its context, culture, and constraints. In doing so, it provided an invaluable alternative for countries in Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia that had long been disillusioned with external models that had often generated debt, dependency, and despair.

The Washington Consensus, heralded in the 1990s as the blueprint for prosperity in the post-Cold War order, promised macroeconomic stability, privatization, and trade liberalization. Yet the record, particularly in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa, remains disheartening. Growth was uneven, social inequality deepened, and democratic institutions proved brittle under economic stress. China, by contrast, placed the state at the heart of its development, orchestrating industrial policy, protecting infant industries, and investing heavily in human capital and infrastructure. Crucially, it did so without succumbing to the volatility of global financial markets or the capricious whims of foreign investors.

This pragmatic model—the so-called “Beijing Consensus”—is not without criticism. But for many in the developing world, these concerns are eclipsed by China's ability to deliver. The gleaming skylines of Shenzhen, the high-speed railways linking vast provinces, and the digital innovation hubs of Hangzhou and Beijing speak louder than any ideological argument. China did not lecture the world on success; it built it, brick by brick.

Moreover, the power of this developmental narrative is now being scaled through China's strategic diplomacy. Its growing rapprochement with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is illustrative of this next phase. These are not mere bilateral engagements—they are the scaffolding of what could soon become the world's largest trade agreement, one that eclipses the EU and United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) in size and reach. The prospect of a GCC-ASEAN-China trade architecture, encompassing over 3.5 billion people and trillions of dollars in economic output, redefines the global commerce landscape.

What binds these diverse partners is not a shared political system, but a mutual interest in stability, economic growth, and strategic autonomy from Western hegemony. China offers capital and technology; the Gulf states contribute energy and investment capacity; ASEAN supplies manufacturing dynamism and consumer markets. The synergy is profound, offering a template of cooperation rooted in mutual respect rather than ideological alignment. This potential for Global South partnerships should lead to a more balanced and inclusive future of international relations. If successful, this model could become one of the most influential geopolitical configurations of the coming decades.

For Africa and Latin America, the evolving global framework presents a significant opportunity to diversify international partnerships beyond traditional centers of power in Washington and Brussels. The Belt and Road Initiative exemplifies this shift, having delivered tangible infrastructure such as Kenya's standard-gauge railway, ports in Djibouti, and digital networks in Brazil. However, this pivot is complex. While it offers an alternative path for development, it also brings challenges, including concerns over debt sustainability and strategic influence. The critical task for these regions, therefore, is not merely to accept infrastructure, but to master the 'software' of strategy—crafting sovereign development models that leverage global partnerships while safeguarding long-term national interests and autonomy.

In this light, development itself becomes a form of diplomacy. China has mastered the art of exporting confidence, not through coercion, but through competence. The message is simple yet profound: there is more than one path to prosperity, and sovereignty need not be sacrificed on the altar of globalization. By forging deep, mutually beneficial partnerships and by demonstrating that economic transformation is possible outside the Washington framework, Beijing has rewritten the rules of engagement.

That said, this moment is not merely for admiration but for adaptation. African and Latin American nations must study the principles underpinning China's success—not to replicate its system, but to internalize its logic: long-term vision, national planning, investment in education and infrastructure, a strong yet accountable state, and a willingness to shield strategic sectors until they are globally competitive. These principles, tailored to local realities, can deliver far more than the one-size-fits-all recipes that have too often failed the Global South. China's greatest soft power triumph is not its Confucius Institutes or media narratives, but the concrete and steel of its development—an achievement that speaks louder than any speech.

As a new global consensus emerges—one shaped not in the corridors of Washington, but along the trade corridors of Asia, the Gulf, and the Global South—developing nations must seize this opportunity not as passive recipients of a new order, but as active co-architects. In embracing the principles of adaptive development, strategic autonomy, and cooperation without coercion, they may finally write a chapter of globalization on their terms.

To fully grasp the appeal and applicability of China's development journey, one must move beyond admiration and extract the critical lessons that underpin its remarkable rise. While the Chinese model cannot be transposed wholesale onto other contexts, especially those with differing political, social, and institutional fabrics, it can indeed offer an invaluable set of strategic insights—a development compass—that nations in Africa and Latin America can adapt to craft sovereign, coherent, and practical development strategies.

RETHINKING SOFT POWER: BEYOND NYE'S AMERICAN NARRATIVE

The term “soft power” was first coined and popularized by Harvard political scientist Joseph Nye in the late 1980s. Nye defined soft power as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment.”¹ According to Nye, a country's soft power arises from three primary sources: its culture, its political values, and the legitimacy of its foreign policy.

At first glance, this definition appears benign—indeed, even noble. It suggests a world where influence can be wielded not through force, but through the compelling nature of ideas, institutions, and social appeal. However, on closer inspection, Nye's construction of soft power is deeply embedded in the United States' ideological self-perception. It is not a neutral analytic tool; rather, it is a normative framework, consciously or unconsciously, designed to reassert American primacy at a time when its hard-power supremacy was beginning to show signs of fatigue.

Nye's theory emerged at a pivotal moment: just as the Cold War was ending and the US was being positioned as the lone superpower in a supposedly unipolar world. Soft power, in this narrative, served as the velvet glove on the iron fist, framing the United States's cultural, academic, and political projection as universally attractive and morally superior. Implicit in this was the assumption that American liberal democracy, Hollywood, Ivy League universities, and global media were inherently desirable to others, and that their dissemination would lead not only to admiration but to alignment. America was the best system in history, and it needed to be imitated.

Nye's concept of soft power is less a neutral analytical category than a refined continuation of American exceptionalism. It conflates global influence with ideological convergence. It suggests that attraction flows naturally from liberal norms rather than being shaped by structural realities or historical contingencies. It also presumes that cultural and political appeal can be uncritically separated from economic and geopolitical dominance—a proposition that reality increasingly challenges.

Yet, for all its shortcomings, Nye's concept remains a useful heuristic. It provides a vocabulary to discuss influence without force, admiration without imposition, and aspiration without coercion. And it is precisely on these grounds that China's most excellent soft power is not its ancient culture, its Confucian values, or even its diplomacy, but instead, its economic development story.

While China may not yet possess the narrative apparatus of the West—no Hollywood, no global news empires—what it does have is something far more compelling: proof of transformation. The lifting of more than 800 million people out of poverty, the creation of modern megacities from rural provinces, the unprecedented rise from a marginal global player to an industrial superpower in four decades—these are facts that resonate far more deeply than slogans or symbols.

In every corner of the developing world—from the ministries of finance in Nairobi to the universities of Bogotá—there is one question that dominates conversations: “How did China do it?” Not how it conquered, but how it developed. Not how it preached, but how it planned. China's development narrative has become the object of fascination, curiosity, and aspiration. Even in places where suspicion toward Beijing's strategic intentions runs high, admiration for its achievements remains undeniable.

1. Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), 31–33.

Thus, while Joseph Nye may have positioned culture and values at the heart of soft power, in today's world, particularly in the Global South, nothing is more attractive than success. The idea that a nation can modernize without surrendering sovereignty, that it can engage global markets while maintaining domestic stability, that it can escape poverty through planning rather than prescriptions—this is the story that captivates. This is China's true soft power.

Despite its rich civilization, its philosophy, and its increasingly refined diplomacy, China's most significant source of admiration is its economic miracle. It is a narrative that remains under communicated, yet deeply felt. A development trajectory that suggests there is an alternative to the disillusionment of the Washington Consensus. And for many, that alternative is not merely pragmatic—it is essential.

In sum, China's economic development is its most persuasive soft power instrument—not because it dictates what others should do, but because it shows what might be possible. That, in this multipolar era, may be the most potent form of attraction of all.

Following are some of the lessons China's development model can offer to guide countries in the Global South on their path to development.

Lesson 1: Long-Term Strategic Planning Anchored in National Priorities

One of the most underappreciated facets of China's developmental state is its unwavering commitment to long-term planning. The Communist Party of China (CPC), through its Five-Year Plans, has enshrined a philosophy of continuity, purpose, and state-led strategic direction that has guided economic transformation since 1953 and gained renewed focus post-1978. These plans are not mere bureaucratic formalities; they are deeply integrated into the machinery of governance, aligning public investment, industrial policy, technological advancement, and urbanization with clear, nationally determined objectives.

In Africa and Latin America, the absence of stable development planning has often left nations vulnerable to external shocks, fluctuations in commodity prices, and sudden political transitions. By contrast, China demonstrates that development is not an accident—it is engineered, monitored, and refined over the course of decades. For countries seeking sustained growth, this implies the urgent need to institutionalize strategic planning agencies, depoliticize economic policy, and build technical capacity to monitor and evaluate national progress. Election calendars or IMF directives should no longer shape strategic plans; instead, a sovereign vision for the next 30 to 50 years should guide them.

Lesson 2: The Developmental Role of the State

China's economic miracle was not the fruit of laissez-faire capitalism; it was the outcome of deliberate, dynamic state intervention. The Chinese state has operated not only as a regulator but as an investor, owner, innovator, and planner. It has nurtured national champions—and the corresponding ecosystem—in steel, telecommunications, energy, and railways; established sovereign wealth funds and development banks; and used land and finance strategically to guide urbanization and industrial growth.

For Latin America and Africa, which have long been exposed to the rhetoric of state retrenchment and liberalization, this lesson is both provocative and liberating. It challenges the orthodoxy that the market is always the best allocator of resources. While not advocating an uncritical embrace of state capitalism, the Chinese model demonstrates that meritocratic state capacity, when insulated from corruption and incompetence, can be a

powerful force for transformation. Policymakers must reconsider the role of state-owned enterprises, reinvest in industrial policy capabilities, and design legal frameworks that allow the state to act decisively in strategic sectors.

Lesson 3: Infrastructure as the Backbone of Economic Transformation

China's infrastructure revolution is legendary, and its infrastructure transformation is unprecedented in its scale and speed. The country has built a high-speed rail network exceeding 47,000 kilometers, connecting its remote provinces with a vast expressway system, constructed world-class aviation hubs, and modernized its port facilities, making it the logistical backbone of global trade.² What is striking is not merely the scale, but the intentionality behind it: infrastructure is not built for prestige, but for productivity, efficiency, and connectivity.

In contrast, African and Latin American countries often suffer from infrastructure deficits that inflate the cost of doing business, isolate rural communities, and discourage investment. The lesson from China is clear: infrastructure is not a consumption cost; it is a precondition for industrialization and regional integration. Development banks must be revitalized or created to fund these investments, sovereign capabilities in project management must be upgraded, and public-private partnerships must be structured to serve the public interest. The path to export diversification and rural transformation begins with roads, railways, energy grids, and digital backbones.

Lesson 4: Education, Technology, and Innovation as National Priorities

As China moves up the global value chain, its leadership in artificial intelligence, e-commerce, clean energy, and advanced manufacturing reveals a strategic shift from being the "world's factory" to becoming a global innovator. This did not happen by chance. It stemmed from sustained investments in STEM education,³ support for research universities, subsidies for high-tech firms, and ambitious initiatives like "Made in China 2025."⁴

Africa and Latin America must not only universalize access to education but must also focus on quality, alignment with industry needs, and research commercialization. Governments should establish technology parks, promote innovation clusters, and incentivize digital entrepreneurship. China's example demonstrates that technological sovereignty is not only about owning intellectual property but also about mastering the capacity to adapt, develop, and lead in emerging sectors. In a knowledge-based economy, human capital is the ultimate currency of national power.

2. State Council of the People's Republic of China. "China's operating high-speed railway hits 47,000 km." News release, December 26, 2024. https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/statistics/202412/26/content_WS676d359cc6d0868f4e8ee49a.html

3. STEM education is a discipline-integrated education, emphasizing an interdisciplinary unified approach, aimed at developing talent with comprehensive capabilities. Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, "STEM教育就是……学科融合教育," news release, December 20, 2023, in 光明日报 https://www.moe.gov.cn/fbh/live/2023/55669/mtbd/202312/t20231220_1095537.html

4. "Made in China 2025" is an industrial policy initiative launched by the Chinese State Council in 2015 with the stated goal of comprehensively upgrading Chinese manufacturing. It aims to move the country's industries up the value chain, transitioning from a producer of low-end goods to a global leader in high-tech fields such as artificial intelligence, robotics, new-energy vehicles, and biotechnology. The strategy concentrates on enhancing innovation, integrating information technology and industry, and achieving a high degree of self-sufficiency in core technologies, which aims to build resilience and long-term stability for China's industrial future. Since around 2018–2019, the Chinese government repackaged Made in China 2025 under broader themes like "high-quality development" due to the trade tensions China has experienced. State Council of the People's Republic of China. Made in China 2025. Beijing: State Council, 2015. http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2015-05/19/content_9784.htm

Lesson 5: Pragmatism over Ideology—Adapt, Do Not Import

Perhaps the most philosophical lesson from China is its radical pragmatism. It did not fall into the trap of ideological rigidity. Instead, it blended market mechanisms with socialist ideals, decentralization with central control, and opening-up with internal discipline. Deng Xiaoping's adage, "cross the river by feeling the stones," encapsulates this spirit of experimentation, learning, and adaptation.

Ideological binaries have too often paralyzed Latin America and Africa—left versus right, public versus private, liberal versus populist. However, the real question is: what works? China's experience encourages countries to build hybrid models tailored to their social contracts and historical legacies. Policy experimentation zones, pilot programs, and gradual reforms must be embraced to test ideas before scaling them up. Sovereignty, in this framework, is not about isolation; it is about the freedom to choose, combine, and innovate.

From Lessons to Leadership: A New South–South Paradigm

The aggregation of these five lessons points to a broader, civilizational proposition: that development is not a gift bestowed by donors, nor a script to be followed, but a sovereign project to be authored. China's example is not a model in the rigid sense; it is a provocation, an invitation to think strategically, act patiently, and build courageously. For the Global South, this ethos is nothing short of revolutionary.

TOWARD A NEW TRADE GEOGRAPHY: CHINA, GCC, AND ASEAN IN CONVERGENCE

As the West grapples with internal crises, protectionist tendencies, and political polarization, China is quietly but decisively forging a new trade geography that pivots around Asia, the Gulf, and increasingly the Global South. Among the most promising yet underexplored developments in contemporary international economics is the burgeoning alignment between China, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

This triadic constellation is not merely economic—it is strategic. It represents a vision of interdependence based not on ideological conformity but on mutual benefit, shared growth, and diversified risk. The economic potential is staggering: over 3.5 billion people, a combined GDP approaching US\$25 trillion, and dominance across key sectors—energy, logistics, manufacturing, and digital innovation.

China's increasing engagement with the GCC reflects not just an energy calculus but a broader political and infrastructural agenda. Beijing has positioned itself as a reliable partner in energy transition financing, innovative city development, and sovereign investment collaboration. At the same time, it has built deep institutional ties with ASEAN, culminating in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the world's largest trade agreement by population and combined GDP.

What makes the potential GCC–ASEAN–China framework so compelling is its implicit challenge to the Euro-American trade architecture. While the European Union and United States remain entangled in regulatory rigidity, political contention, and declining demographic dynamism, the emerging triad in the East is fluid, expanding, and, above all, pragmatic. It does not seek to impose values but to create value.

This framework is especially notable for its inclusive logic: China brings capital and production capacity, the GCC contributes energy resources and sovereign wealth, and ASEAN supplies dynamic labor and market access. What binds them is not ideology but complementarity. This tripolar cooperation is being reinforced by regional infrastructure integration, digital connectivity, and currency swap agreements that increasingly bypass the dollar and the euro, heralding a quiet but powerful shift in global financial sovereignty.

IMPLICATIONS FOR AFRICA AND LATIN AMERICA: PARTICIPATION, NOT OBSERVATION

For nations in Africa and Latin America, the emerging trade geography offers a powerful example—and a warning. The lesson is not merely to admire from afar but to engage, innovate, and integrate.

Africa, with its rapidly growing population, vast resource base, and increasing digital penetration, must see in this triad a model for continental consolidation. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is a promising start. Still, it must be strengthened through the development of intra-African infrastructure, the adoption of shared standards, and the exercise of collective negotiation power. The Chinese approach to integration offers several actionable lessons: harmonization of customs regimes, shared development financing mechanisms, and regional planning institutions that align national interests with continental goals.

Similarly, Latin America, often fragmented and ideologically polarized, has in the GCC–ASEAN–China dynamic a mirror in which to confront its lack of economic coherence. Institutions such as the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) must transcend their diplomatic symbolism and adopt an agenda of genuine integration, including investment in cross-border logistics corridors, shared digital infrastructure, and sovereign credit institutions. Engagement with the China-led trade networks must be pursued not as dependent appendages but as strategic co-creators.

A MULTIPOLAR BLUEPRINT FOR THE FUTURE

What emerges from the growing alignment between China, the GCC, and ASEAN is a practical and ideological counterweight to the faltering liberal order. It is not an anti-Western coalition, but a post-Western one—one that embraces diversity of models, mutual benefit, and strategic pluralism. For Africa and Latin America, the choice is no longer between Washington and Beijing, but between passivity and participation.

As the gravitational center of the global economy shifts toward the East and South, the time has come for the Global South to stop asking for a seat at the table and start building its own. The China–GCC–ASEAN triad is not just a model to emulate, but a coalition to engage with—diplomatically, commercially, and intellectually.

REIMAGINING GLOBAL GOVERNANCE: FROM UNIPOLAR INSTITUTIONS TO MULTIPOLAR PLATFORMS

The challenge ahead is not merely economic, but institutional. The existing architecture of global governance—the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, (IMF), World Trade Organization (WTO), and even the United Nations Security Council—reflects the power dynamics of a bygone era. These institutions have struggled to adapt to the needs and voices of emerging powers, often preserving hierarchies that inhibit equitable representation and development-oriented agendas.

China's role in proposing alternative institutions, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the New Development Bank (NDB), and the BRICS+ framework, signals a shift towards a more diversified global institutional ecosystem. These bodies do not seek to dismantle the old order, but rather to complement it with mechanisms that are more responsive to the demands of the Global South.

For African and Latin American countries, active engagement with these platforms is essential, not as junior partners, but as co-authors of the next chapter of global governance. This entails intellectual investment: producing policy thought, negotiating new rules, and shaping norms that favor resilience, sustainability, and inclusive development. It also requires institutional imagination, including the establishment of continental arbitration bodies, climate funds, and knowledge exchanges that bypass traditional hierarchies and foster solidarity among the South.

MULTIPOLARITY AS A CIVILIZATIONAL ETHOS

Beyond policy and trade lies a deeper philosophical proposition. Multipolarity is not merely a distribution of power—it is a recognition of the legitimacy of multiple paths to modernity. It affirms that there is no single model of democracy, no uniform development script, no monopoly on economic growth. It values pluralism not as tolerance, but as a structural principle.

China's soft power lies in its ability to embody this ethos. By transforming itself without evangelizing its system, it offers a powerful narrative: that sovereignty, prosperity, and global engagement are not contradictory. A nation can modernize without Westernizing, and development is, ultimately, an act of self-definition.

For nations in Africa and Latin America, this is a call to action. The infrastructure of influence is no longer built solely in Washington or Brussels; it now flows through Nairobi, Rabat, São Paulo, Jakarta, Abu Dhabi, and Beijing.

THE SPIRIT OF REJUVENATION: FROM HISTORICAL TRAUMA TO NATIONAL RENEWAL

To understand the depth and determination of China's rise, one must begin with the weight of its history. China is not a young nation-state finding its place in the world; it is a 5,000-year-old civilization, once the most prosperous and advanced on earth, whose economy accounted for nearly one-third of global GDP until the early 19th century. Its science, governance, philosophy, and infrastructure led the world for centuries.

History itself reminds us of China's quiet civilizational influence. If the West celebrates its ascent to global prominence, it should never forget that its economic power only flourished after the "discovery" of the New World—and that such discovery was only possible because Christopher Columbus carried with him three fundamental Chinese inventions. Without paper for maps and records, without the compass to navigate the unknown, and without gunpowder for protection and signaling, no European ship would have crossed the Atlantic. Even as Europe began its narrative of triumph, it did so supported by technologies patiently developed by Chinese civilization. Without these legacies, the Western reality would never have come into being.

The period from 1839 to 1949, which the Chinese refer to as the "Century of Humiliation", was marked by foreign invasions, territorial dismemberment, imperial plunder, and a profound loss of sovereignty. From the Opium Wars to the Boxer Rebellion, from unequal treaties to Japanese occupation, China was forced into a subordinate status that could easily have shattered its national psyche. Many civilizations, after such trauma, descend into nostalgic inertia—glorifying the past while becoming paralyzed by it.

But China chose a different path. Unlike other nations with illustrious histories that now cling to memories of former grandeur, China refused to be imprisoned by nostalgia. Instead of gazing backwards, it looked inward. And in this introspection, a profound transformation emerged.

This transformation, especially in the past decade, has been framed not merely as modernization but as rejuvenation. While modernization implies a mechanical adaptation to contemporary norms—technology, governance, markets—rejuvenation speaks to something more profound: the internal renewal of spirit, purpose, and destiny. As articulated by President Xi Jinping, it is a core component of the "Chinese Dream". It is a return to greatness not by replicating the West, but by rediscovering and reenergizing China's historical mission and identity.⁵

Rejuvenation is not nostalgia. It is a rebirth. It draws from the past, but does not dwell in it. It celebrates continuity, but propels transformation. It is the spiritual scaffolding of China's development miracle. Without this renewed sense of civilizational purpose, the highways, railways, and innovation hubs would be mere infrastructure achievements, not instruments of national resurrection.

This idea carries profound implications for the Global South. Latin America and Africa, having also endured centuries of colonialism and exploitation, often remain mentally colonized—their elites and populations looking northward for validation, while underestimating their civilizational potential. There is a psychological fatigue and a learned inferiority that still haunt much of the postcolonial world.

China's message, implicit but powerful, is that recovery is possible, not through mimicry, but through inner renewal. The belief that the best is yet to come is not exclusive to the American ethos. It is alive in China's journey as well, but in a different frame. It is not about conquering others, but about regaining one's rightful place. The future is not seen as a departure from the past, but as its rightful continuation.

This rejuvenated spirit is arguably the driving force behind China's economic development model. It allows the Chinese people to see themselves not as victims of history, but as

5. Xi Jinping, "Achieving Rejuvenation Is the Dream of the Chinese People", speech delivered at the exhibition "The Road to Rejuvenation," National Museum of China, November 29, 2012. Chinese Government, English translation, <https://www.neac.gov.cn/seac/c103372/202201/1156514.shtml>.

authors of a new chapter. And it is this confidence, rooted in pain but reimagined as purpose, that gives Chinese development its extraordinary momentum.

If the Global South can adopt this ethos—of learning from the past without being shackled by it, of viewing development as both external transformation and internal renewal—then a new era of modernity may begin.

LEADERSHIP, INTEGRITY, AND THE MERITOCRATIC CHALLENGE

No model of development can succeed, regardless of its design or strategic brilliance, without strong leadership. Institutions matter, plans matter, but what ultimately determines whether a nation rises or falters is the caliber and commitment of those entrusted to lead. And here lies one of the defining characteristics of the Chinese model: the conviction that leadership is a function of merit, responsibility, and tested capacity, not inheritance, popularity, or fleeting charisma.

Leadership, at its core, must be an act of national stewardship. This requires a deep commitment to the nation itself—a sense that the leader is not above the system but accountable to it, and ultimately to history.

In this context, corruption is not merely a vice; it is a structural sabotage. When individuals enter public life for personal enrichment, rather than national service, the very logic of governance is undermined. The system becomes hollow, institutions brittle, and development erratic. That is why anticorruption measures must be uncompromising. And here, China's model offers another powerful lesson.

Under President Xi Jinping, China has launched one of the most extensive anticorruption campaigns in modern political history. But beyond punishment, what has emerged is a governance ethos that seeks to identify, promote, and empower leaders of substance. The Communist Party of China does not leave leadership to chance. It actively scouts the brightest minds from its top universities, places them in demanding roles, tests them in challenging situations, and promotes them based on their performance. Only those who deliver and who have demonstrated loyalty and excellence over time are considered for the highest offices.

This principle is not new. Even in Brazil's history, the importance of committed leadership was understood at the moment of independence. When King Dom João VI returned to Portugal, he left behind his son, Dom Pedro I, with a solemn warning: "*Pedro, se fores digno, tomaí conta do Brasil. Não o deixeis cair nas mãos de aventureiros.*" ["Pedro, if you are worthy, take care of Brazil. Do not let it fall into the hands of adventurers."] The fear was not of foreign invasion or economic hardship, but of internal erosion caused by those who, lacking any genuine commitment to the land, would exploit it for personal gain and leave it poorer.

This challenge remains tragically relevant in many countries of the Global South. Politics becomes a career for the ambitious, not a calling for the devoted. Parties fail to recruit the best, becoming echo chambers of factional interest rather than incubators of national excellence. And governance becomes, too often, the realm of the mediocre.

China's example reminds us that governance must be built upon merit, and that national leadership must be entrusted only to those who have demonstrated both ability and devotion. This is a message for political parties everywhere: bring excellence back into politics. Reform your internal selection processes. Identify talent early. Create pathways for

the capable. Make governance an honor once again, not a transaction. Development does not come from documents; it comes from disciplined, visionary, and capable leadership that treats the nation not as a means to an end, but as an end in itself.

In the era of multipolarity, where no single model dominates, the most valuable export any nation can offer is the ethic of leadership: those who seek to lead must first prove they are worthy to serve.

EDUCATION AND SECURITY: FOUNDATIONS OF A SOVEREIGN FUTURE

No nation can aspire to greatness without investing deeply and consistently in education. It is the most enduring form of sovereignty. As Deng Xiaoping once wisely stated, “We must trust that future generations will solve the problems we cannot yet resolve.” But such trust is not blind. It is predicated on the assumption that future generations will be equipped with logic, historical understanding, political acumen, and scientific rigor. In short, it is an investment in tools, not merely hope.

The Chinese leadership understood this early on. While economic reforms brought capital, what sustained transformation was human capital: millions of engineers, doctors, urban planners, educators, and technocrats trained to imagine and execute a national project. This is not accidental. It is the fruit of a systematic commitment to education as a national pillar.

Public education, especially, plays a critical role. It is not only a means of creating equal opportunity; it is a social contract—a declaration that the state recognizes the potential of all its citizens and intends to empower them. When public education is robust, inclusive, and excellence-driven, the nation is not only more just; it is more resilient, innovative, and competitive.

Equally foundational is the guarantee of public security. The very first duty of the state—before roads, before hospitals, before markets—is the protection of its citizens. This is the original covenant in any society: individuals relinquish personal retribution in exchange for collective safety. The state, in turn, assumes the monopoly on legitimate force to ensure peace and stability. If this compact is broken—if citizens no longer feel safe—then no economic miracle, however ambitious, can be sustained.

A well-educated population, combined with a secure society, forms the foundation of a meritocracy. When education and safety are guaranteed, the best minds emerge, and public institutions can draw from a broader, deeper, and more diverse pool of talent. This is where governance becomes not only effective but excellent.

China, through its civil service exams, party recruitment processes, and emphasis on education as a national strategy, has shown how security, education, and merit can function as mutually reinforcing pillars. For the Global South, this triad—educate, protect, empower—is not a luxury; it is a necessity. Without them, sovereignty becomes a slogan. With them, it becomes a system.

MEASURABLE AMBITIONS: THE POWER OF TANGIBLE GOALS

One of the most effective features of China’s development model is its insistence on setting measurable, time-bound objectives. Development is not an abstract concept; it must be

translated into numbers, milestones, and progress charts that citizens can understand, track, and internalize. From the outset of reform and opening up, Chinese leaders framed their ambitions in terms of GDP per capita, productivity targets, urbanization rates, and poverty reduction thresholds.

This clarity of vision empowers both policymakers and citizens. When China says it intends to become a “moderately prosperous society” or to reach a GDP per capita of US\$20,000 to 25,000 by 2049, these are not rhetorical flourishes—they are national compasses. Citizens know what is expected and what benefits will accrue when those targets are met: better healthcare, increased access to education, improved infrastructure, and a rising quality of life. This progression from low-income to middle-income, and from middle-income to high-income status, is not left to aspiration but tied to specific economic markers.

For Latin America and Africa, the lesson is profound. Economic transformation must be quantified, not merely hoped for. Nations must define what it means to “succeed” by the numbers: per capita income, sectoral productivity, export diversification indexes, and rural electrification rates. This turns development into a national mission, not an elite conversation.

A GOVERNMENT THAT SERVES: DIGNITY THROUGH PUBLIC LABOR

Another fundamental component of China’s rise is the ethos that the government exists to serve the people. This is not merely a slogan, but a practice. Public servants in China are held to high standards of performance, often working long hours and facing intense scrutiny. With great privilege comes great responsibility.

Public employment in China is well compensated, offering competitive salaries, housing benefits, and comprehensive retirement packages. But these benefits are not unearned. They are tied to the expectation that public workers are the custodians of national development, and that their daily tasks contribute directly to the betterment of society. This mindset reinforces the principle that the state is not a private enterprise, but a public instrument of transformation.

For developing nations, this calls for a cultural shift in public service. The civil servant must be seen as a nation-builder, not a bureaucratic placeholder. Governments must demand performance, incentivize excellence, and weed out inefficiency. Those in power must embody a culture of hard work, not entitlement. When the state demonstrates seriousness, the public reciprocates with trust.

FINDING NATIONAL VOCATION: THE STRATEGIC USE OF COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGE

Each country must ask a foundational question: *What is our national vocation?* Not every nation will lead in semiconductors or pharmaceuticals, but every country has latent strengths—geographical, demographic, ecological, and cultural. The Chinese success rests in part on its shrewd understanding of where to begin. In the 1980s and 1990s, China did not produce high-end goods. However, its leaders recognized that the global market had an appetite for affordable, basic products. And they filled that demand.

As a result, China earned foreign currency, generated employment, and accumulated capital. This capital was reinvested in education, infrastructure, and technology. Over time, the Chinese moved up the value chain, mastering complexity. The journey began with a clear understanding of what could be done now to prepare for what must be done later.

Countries in Latin America and Africa must conduct a ruthless assessment of their strengths. Do they have minerals? Then they must not only extract, but process. Do they have sun? Then they must lead in solar energy. Do they have arable land? Then they must secure food sovereignty. Vocation is not destiny; it is strategy. The key is to start somewhere competitive, then invest to become transformative.

VALUING NATIONAL CAPITAL: BUILDING COMPETITIVE INDIGENOUS ENTERPRISE

Lastly, no nation can hope to lead economically without a strong, dynamic domestic business sector. Foreign investment is essential, but it must not become a substitute for national enterprise. A healthy economy depends on the rise of homegrown firms, innovators, and capital holders who are invested not just in profit, but in national development.

China has balanced this effectively. While it has welcomed Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) – which must be paid back eventually several times – it has always prioritized nurturing Chinese companies that can compete globally, such as Huawei, BYD, and Alibaba. These firms did not emerge by accident, nor were they shielded from competition. They were challenged, supported, and expected to perform. National capitalism, in the Chinese experience, is not protectionism—it is purposeful cultivation.

Countries must, therefore, avoid the twin errors of over-protection and over-exposure. Their domestic industries must be supported, but they must also deliver. The private sector must be seen not as an adversary to the state, but as an extension of national policy goals. This synergy between public purpose and private drive is what enables countries to scale from stagnation to prosperity.

POLICY ORIENTATIONS FOR THE GLOBAL SOUTH

The evidence is clear: genuine transformation springs not from mimicry nor the passive adoption of global orthodoxies, but from a disciplined alignment of statecraft, national purpose, and public aspiration. For the Global South, the paramount challenge is not merely to grow, but to rebuild coherence, reclaim the dignity of long-term planning, and forge institutions capable of stewarding change across generations.

The following orientations, distilled from our analysis, outline a deeper grammar of sovereign development—principles that transcend specific models.

1. Rebuilding the Architecture of the Long Term

Development stumbles when held hostage to short-term electoral cycles. Structural transformation requires institutionalizing the long horizon. This means establishing permanent, non-partisan planning bodies; creating cross-government coordination mechanisms; and embedding strategic priorities in national compacts that survive changes in administration. While these structures must allow for pragmatic review, their core function is to provide stability, mitigate volatility, and signal that development is a collective, multigenerational undertaking rather than a series of political improvisations.

2. Elevate Governance by Embedding Merit, Integrity, and Continuity

No national project can surpass the quality of its institutions. The imperative is to build governing systems that prize competence over patronage, integrity over expedience, and continuity over factionalism. Achieving this requires more than edicts; it demands deep-seated reform of the public sector: professionalizing civil services, creating transparent, meritocratic recruitment processes, strengthening accountability mechanisms, and fostering an ethos of stewardship. When governance becomes predictable, ethical, and strategically capable, development transitions from slogan to attainable reality.

3. Infrastructure as a Strategic Tool for Sovereignty

A nation's prosperity is inextricably linked to the fluid movement of its people, goods, data, and energy. Transport networks, digital backbones, and power grids are not just economic inputs but the physical foundation of territorial integration, national resilience, and opportunity. Consequently, infrastructure must be conceived not as mere expenditure, but as fundamental statecraft—the decisive tool for binding peripheries to the center, reducing regional inequality, and securing a strategic position within global production and logistics networks.

4. Make Knowledge, Science, and Technology the Core of National Power

The 21st century stratifies nations by their ability to master complexity. The strategic priority for any aspirational state must be to invest relentlessly in its people: building education systems that foster scientific literacy and critical thinking; creating vocational pathways that produce a dynamic, skilled workforce; and nurturing research institutions and innovation ecosystems that allow domestic enterprises to compete on their own terms. Mastery of knowledge is, in effect, mastery of destiny—the key to escaping low-value equilibria and shaping a self-determined future.

5. Govern through Pragmatic Experimentation, Not Ideological Fidelity

The most successful development strategies are ruthlessly outcome-oriented. Nations must resist the siren call of prefabricated models and ideological purity, cultivating instead a culture of adaptive policymaking—one that experiments, learns from results, corrects course, and scales what works. This pragmatic ethos requires intellectual humility and a willingness to blend tools judiciously: deploying markets where they are efficient, assertive state direction where it is necessary, and strategic partnerships wherever they advance the national interest. Development, in this light, is a craft, not a creed.

In sum, these orientations offer a compass, not a map. They reflect a fundamental truth: nations advance by cultivating internal coherence, discipline, and a sovereign sense of purpose. The emerging multipolar world, with its diffusion of power and plurality of models, presents a historic opportunity for the Global South. When development is anchored in long-range vision and civilizational self-confidence, it becomes more than an economic program—it becomes a declaration that a nation's destiny is, at last, back in its own hands.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD A NEW GLOBAL GRAMMAR OF DEVELOPMENT

In the decades to come, the defining question will no longer be whether nations align with the East or the West, but whether they possess the institutional courage to forge their path. China's development journey is not a prescription but a provocation. It challenges the premise of dependency, offers a grammar of sovereign development, and insists that soft power can be built not through slogans but through results.

In embracing long-term planning, capable states, infrastructure investment, innovation, and pragmatic pluralism, China has not only changed its destiny but also extended a hand to others. It has shown that diplomacy can be made of steel and silicon, railways and research, ports and policies. In doing so, it has invited the Global South not to imitate, but to imagine.

Development is diplomacy. Multipolarity is essential. Sovereignty, if reclaimed with vision and discipline, may yet become the highest form of global leadership.

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ABOUT THE POLICY CENTER FOR THE NEW SOUTH

The Policy Center for the New South (PCNS) is a Moroccan think tank aiming to contribute to the improvement of economic and social public policies that challenge Morocco and the rest of Africa as integral parts of the global South.

The PCNS pleads for an open, accountable and enterprising "new South" that defines its own narratives and mental maps around the Mediterranean and South Atlantic basins, as part of a forward-looking relationship with the rest of the world. Through its analytical endeavours, the think tank aims to support the development of public policies in Africa and to give the floor to experts from the South. This stance is focused on dialogue and partnership, and aims to cultivate African expertise and excellence needed for the accurate analysis of African and global challenges and the suggestion of appropriate solutions.

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