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China's Global South: Theoretical Framework, Narrative Identity, and Practical Governance

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Abstract:

In the current context of the growing importance of the Global South in the process of transforming paradigms in global governance, increasing attention is being paid to China's historical trajectory of building a theoretical/practical system with regard to the Global South, as well as to the way in which different approaches to governance are implemented through national identity and institutional policy. This work analyzes this from a constructivist perspective, combining it with global governance analysis in terms of the historical concept and practices associated with the three major institutional mechanisms: the BRICS, the BRI (Belt and Road Initiative), and the GDI (Global Development Initiative). To advance the research, we have considered four aspects: (1) China's theoretical discourse on this concept; (2) the construction of a narrative identity in this regard; (3) the analysis of the mechanisms for understanding this identity in relation to competitive narratives; and (4) the Chinese institutional logic in governance practices.

Keywords:

Global South, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Global Development Initiative (GDI), Narrative Identity, China.

*NOTE: The ideas contained in the Opinion Papers shall be responsibility of their authors, without necessarily reflecting the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defense.

Introduction

Chinese President Xi Jinping has frequently spoken at multiple international forums of developing countries and bilateral dialogues of the *Global South*, linking it to what he defines as a *Community of Shared Destiny for Humanity*. In October 2024, President Xi noted at the BRICS+ "Leaders' Dialogue" that: "the collective rise of the Global South is a hallmark of major global changes" (Xi, 2024). In November of the same year, he reiterated that "the sacred historical mission of the countries of the Global South is to promote the development of the international order in a more just and equitable direction" (Xi, 2024). In September 2025, while attending the BRICS leaders' summit held online, Xi again pointed out that BRICS countries, as the front line of the Global South, must persist in promoting the spirit of BRICS in a direction of openness, inclusiveness, and cooperation, in a win-win scheme, jointly defending multilateralism, maintaining the multilateral trading system, promoting "Great BRICS Cooperation," and jointly building a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind (Xi, 2025).

The concept of the *Global South* in international relations studies is usually related to developing regions that emerged from colonial and imperialist periods, including Mao Zedong's ideas about the *Third World* or the *Non-Aligned Movement of Less Developed Countries* (PNAEMD; Snyder, 1990). However, according to Chinese scholars, the Western interpretation of the Global South demonstrates a way of thinking based on the epistemological hegemony of what could be called the Global North. This hegemony is based on a binary structure of two relationships: one is that of competition, i.e., intra-state cooperation among Northern countries, and the other is based on dependence and/or domination between the North and the South (Yu, 2025).

In other words, the states of the North have managed to assume an identity of the *Global South* that is associated with a backward collectivity, which is heterogeneous and unstable (Grovogu, 2011). In turn, with this type of thinking, the broad strategic space currently enjoyed by the Global South, coupled with its dependence on the North, acts as a "buffer" in the conflicts of power or interests that arise in the states of the North.

Thus, the North-South relationship ends up constituting the foundation of the very existence of North-North relations (Li, 2023).

In fact, in the Western theoretical framework, the concept of the South is ultimately shaped by the North. The local experiences and knowledge of Southern states are considered lacking in universality and commensurability, incapable of influencing the practice and theoretical development of the world system (Lake, 1987).

With the rise of new regional powers in the Southern states, these countries have joined forces to strengthen new capacities to build their own identity. These states have managed to overcome the limitations of the initial concept of the *Global South* in geographical, political, and cultural terms by consolidating South-South cooperative mechanisms. As a result, this configuration of the *Global South* has become a key player in the international political system, weakening the idea of "me alone" constructed from the North (Dirlik, 2007). Since the 21st century, emerging economies and developing countries now account for more than 40% of global economic output and around 80% of global economic growth. As a result, the collective rise of the Global South has significantly increased its influence on the global political and economic landscape.

Today, the *Global South* has expanded its geographical dimension to become a shared identity among the countries that comprise it, as well as a platform for cooperation forged by developing countries within the international system, which is oriented toward the defense of common interests, resistance to Western powers, and the transformation of the international order (Gray, 2016). At the same time, there is a determined push to create multipolarity in international power, which has prompted Western countries to try to align the states of the Global South in order to maintain their dominant position. The evolution of the concept of the *Global South*, together with the activities of the states that have joined this movement, shows that these states have achieved a greater degree of autonomy in their narrative identity, as well as in the planning of international agendas and the construction of mechanisms for development cooperation.

Taking this context into account, the objectives of this paper are to understand how China constructs a theoretical framework of the Global South from its historical point of view, and how China recognizes this identity and its governance mechanisms within its "theoretical" and "practical" understanding of the importance of these countries on the international stage.

To analyze China's position, we have resorted to constructivism, that is, the interpretive analysis of different discourses on the Global South, complementing it with the theory of global governance in order to analyze the historical process of how China constructs the identity of the Global South from its point of view. To this end, it is important to examine the narrative discourse of Chinese leaders and review Chinese alternatives on global governance towards the South.

The theoretical and conceptual construction of the *Global South* in China

Since the reform and opening up in 1978 promoted by Deng Xiaoping, Chinese academics have systematically developed a complex theoretical framework that is an alternative to Western studies of international relations, based on the tradition of Chinese philosophy, Marxist internationalism, and their own experience of what this approach to the problem means in pragmatic terms. This constitutes a challenge both to Western research on the *Global South* and to global governance practices within Western international relations. From the concept of *The Three Worlds* proposed by Mao Zedong to the *Community of Shared Future for Mankind* promoted by Xi, the evolution of Chinese theory on the *Global South* has maintained strong consistency across different historical strategic contexts. Through the construction of various theories on international relations with a marked endogenous character, contributing the innovation of its own institutional mechanisms, as well as the systematic development of its own discursive power, China's understanding of the Global South and its conception of a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind have refined China's position on the Global South, while offering developing countries a genuine alternative beyond the frameworks defined by the West (Geng, 2025).

In the early 1970s, China was searching for a third way between the two superpowers (the United States and the Soviet Union) after the Sino-Soviet split. Nixon's official visit to China in 1972 symbolized the normalization of relations between the two countries, and at that time, China saw the need to construct a theoretical framework capable of justifying its unique position in the international system of government (Fu, 2021). Mao formulated the argument of *The Three Worlds*. The United States and the Soviet Union, as hegemonic and imperialist superpowers aspiring to global domination, made up the First World.

Western Europe, Japan, Canada, and Australia, as intermediate development states, made up the Second World, characterized by a certain autonomy, although susceptible to the influence of the other superpowers. The countries of Asia (except Japan), Africa, and Latin America, which had commonly experienced the processes of colonialism and imperialism, were considered developing countries and therefore constituted Mao's Third World (An, 2013).

The concept of the Three Worlds was based on the Marxist-Leninist analysis of international contradictions and laid the philosophical foundations for linking China with the Global South. According to Mao, the main contradiction at the international level was that between the superpowers and the Third World, while conflicts between capitalism and socialism, tensions between Third World countries, and internal divergences within each "World" were considered secondary contradictions. Through a process of identity construction, Mao's Three Worlds established a theoretical framework that placed the anti-hegemonic struggle above traditional criteria of political power, applying the method of historical materialism to world politics. From this perspective, the fundamental contradiction in global politics did not lie in the opposition between socialist and capitalist systems, but in that between superpowers and developing countries.

In the *Reform and Opening Up*, Deng Xiaoping inherited Mao's concept of *The Three Worlds* and further developed a theory of the *Global South* based on dialectical materialism. Through a strategy based on taoguang yanghui (keeping a low profile and consolidating one's own forces), Deng promoted pragmatic cooperation with Second World states, while preserving the central narrative of anti-hegemony (Sørensen, 2015). With the establishment of the socialist market economy, the creation of special economic zones in various coastal cities, and the implementation of the Open Door Policy, Deng's theory of the Global South was further developed preserving the central narrative of anti-hegemony (Sørensen, 2015). With the establishment of the socialist market economy, the creation of special economic zones in various coastal cities, and the application of the principle of *yi guo liang zhi* (one country, two systems) in Hong Kong and Macao, China began to gradually draw closer to Western countries in the economic sphere. As for China's own position in international society, Deng repeatedly emphasized that, *"as a socialist country, China belongs forever to the Third World and will never seek global*

hegemony" (Deng, 1978). Thus, in 1980, China joined the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund as a developing country.

In the 1980s, China offered limited international assistance to Africa to help developing African countries. Such practices allowed China to preserve its identity within the Third World, while laying the necessary foundations for its future projection as a leading global country.

Jiang Zemin institutionalized the participation of the Global South, establishing, in 2000, certain permanent cooperation mechanisms such as the China-Africa Cooperation Forum, based on his idea of the Three Represents and the foreign policy of going out. Jiang Zemin's theoretical contribution was based on moving beyond revolutionary rhetoric to focus on an institutional framework capable of generating tangible benefits in developing countries. At the same time, he promoted China's strategic interests through South-South cooperation. Next, Hu Jintao's *Scientific Development* and *Harmonious World* deepened a new articulation between Marxist methodology and Chinese philosophical tradition, proposing the theory of "peaceful development" as an alternative to the Western model of modernization. This approach explicitly linked Chinese scientific socialism with international cooperation as opposed to the market fundamentalism promoted by Western countries.

President Xi's proposal for a *Community of Shared Destiny for Mankind* combines Marxist internationalism with the Chinese concept of *Datong* (great harmony). Thus, this concept aims to build a Chinese proposal for global governance.

In this framework, for Xi, the concept of *Humanity* transcends the nation-state-centered study characteristic of the West, while the notion of *Destiny* emphasizes the idea of common wealth, analogous to the principles of *Datong* and *Great Unity* maintained by Chinese cultural tradition. both principles are oriented towards the construction of a world understood as *tianxia weigong* (the world as a common good) (Qin and Han, 2025). Within these concepts, the four courses of action that are fundamental to China converge: the BRICS mechanism, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the three Global Initiatives: the Global Development Initiative (GDI, 2021), the Global Security Initiative (GSI, 2022), and the Global Governance Initiative (GGI, 2025), which together offer developing

countries a systemic alternative that encompasses the economic, security, and political dimensions.

Currently, based on the so-called Beijing Consensus, the Chinese government has decisively promoted the Open and Inclusive Cooperation Initiative of the Global South, seeking to quickly lead international and regional cooperation platforms based on BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The aim is to provide a broader space for the formation of a collective identity and for the projection of the development demands of the states of the *Global South*.

China's strategies for recognizing the identity of the *Global South*

Constructivism, as a theory, proposes that the identity of a state is not a given material property, but rather a social fact that is generated and reproduced in a three-level cycle: meaning–interaction–practice (Sterling-Folke, 2012). China's trajectory in constructing its own identity in the Global South can be summarized as a dynamic process that moves through historical genealogy, normative claims, discursive practices, institutional provision, and recognition by others, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: China's trajectory in constructing the identity of the Global South[1]

Historical memory provides the starting point for the legitimacy of the identity of the *Global South*; normative claims give it a value-based orientation; diplomatic discourse raises the profile of the *Global South*, generating expectations among its target audience; mechanisms and the provision of public goods are "materialized" in tangible cooperation benefits; and, finally, this identity is consolidated or adjusted through positive or negative feedback from both Southern countries and the international community at large.

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[1] Model proposed by the authors.

1. *Historical-normative analysis as the foundation of the identity of the Global South*

In 1955, twenty-nine government delegations from different countries and regions of Asia and Africa gathered at the Asian-African Conference in Bandung, which was the first major international conference in which the countries and regions of Asia and Africa discussed their own vital interests without the participation of the traditional colonial powers. This event provided the new Chinese government with a platform and an opportunity to establish reciprocal ties and support with national liberation movements in Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Zhang, 2007). Premier Zhou Enlai proposed the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence as a norm for managing inter-state relations, which received support from developing countries such as India and Burma. Later, in the context of the Cold War, Mao Zedong relied on the Third World and the collective of the *Global South* as political and moral references, thus shaping China's own self-definition as the largest developing country (An, 2013).

2. Discourse—narrative as a configuration of identity

In constructivist analysis, state identity is not a pre-established ontological property, but rather a social fact that is continuously generated and reproduced within the cycle of production of different meanings of institutional insertion, which is understood as interactive reception (Sterling-Folker, 2012). Regarding the identity construction of the Global South, China's discourse and narrative generally follow a defined trajectory of norms, roles, and practices. First, the limits of legitimacy of the Global South's identity are established through values and norms; then, through a "three-way" relationship between "the self," "the other," and "the recipients," the roles of action and the necessary interlocutors of the interaction are defined; and finally, the institutionalization of initiatives and mechanisms transforms theoretical discourse into an empirically observable model of governance (Eun, 2020).

At the normative level, China defines the *Global South* as an open political community that embodies both shared historical memories and common development demands. Within this framework, China emphasizes the need to consider three dimensions: "genuine multilateralism" in the political sphere; "the right to development and

redistributive justice" in the economic sphere; and "equality within the framework of civilization," including "mutual learning in diversity," in the cultural dimension (Li, 2025).

Other concepts such as Xi's *Community of Shared Future for Mankind*, which include: "shared consultation, construction, and benefits," "mutually beneficial cooperation," and "harmony in diversity," lead to an understanding of the "subjectivity of the South" itself, which demands a moral vindication to develop a legitimate force that drives the democratization of the international order. to which is added his call for the decentralization of global governance; all of which allows, in this way, for the maintenance of an identity narrative of the *Global South* that enables a transmissible link between the various countries sharing values and actions.

At the level of roles, the identity narrative assigns different functions through a structured articulation of the aforementioned relationship of "I–other–recipients" (Guzzin, 2022). China, in this case, defines itself as a natural member of the *Global South* and as a promoter of its norms, highlighting the historical continuity and identity coherence of its countries. As for the "other," it applies a principle of differentiation. On the one hand, it emphasizes consultation and cooperation with partners willing to engage in dialogue and, on the other, it formulates demands for correction in the face of possible hegemonic behavior. The recipients of this model include the countries of the South, international organizations, and global public opinion, which correspond, respectively, to three channels of transmission: technical-institutional, representative-normative, and evaluative-identity. In this way, the identity narrative of the *Global South* is configured as an open story of unity and empowerment, rather than a closed narrative of alignment in blocs.

On a practical level, the Chinese model is not limited to mere definition, but is externalized and articulated through a chain of actions ranging from initiatives to institutionalization and the implementation of specific projects (McAdams, 2011). Thus, China now offers international public aid that combines norms and rules with resources through platforms such as the joint construction of the Belt and Road, the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, and the Global Civilization Initiative. These four initiatives drive quantifiable improvements in representativeness, capacity building, and project

performance, forming a closed circuit of ideas and mechanisms, with results that provide a verifiable empirical basis for the South's own subjectivity.

3. Institutional provision as the materialization of the identity of the Global South

Constructivism also maintains that, for identity to acquire a stable and perceptible reality, it must be transformed from a mere discursive statement into an operational, verifiable, and replicable institutional provision (Ernest, 2013). Its fundamental mechanism can be summarized as a dynamic cycle of ideas and mechanisms, the results of which are recognizable. In this way, the limits of the objectives are defined with normative ideas that are inserted into the institutional order through various organizations, which generates measurable effects through concrete projects that allow for the development of positive feedback among the recipients, who in turn consolidate their identity position (Linde, 2005). In other words, only when platforms, rules, and resources constitute sustained elements does the identity narrative cease to be a merely symbolic self-reference and become a model of governance endowed with cohesion and durability over time.

Within the framework of the BRICS cooperation mechanism, this logic manifests itself in two ways: representativeness and financial autonomy. In this regard, China has promoted both the inclusive expansion of the BRICS format with new countries from the Global South and the institutionalization of the New Development Bank, linking, de facto, the visibility of developing countries' agendas with their capacity for discursive interpretation, in addition to the use of instruments for implementing common objectives (Liu, 2025). On the one hand, the composition of the members and the design of the political agendas reinforce the collective visibility of Southern issues. On the other hand, development financing mechanisms, assuming risk sharing, improve access to external credit and strengthen negotiating power. In this way, the BRICS countries are not only a platform for political dialogue, but have become a true political-financial complex capable of providing sustained institutional dividends, which directly increases the agenda and capacity for action of the Global South.

The *BRI*, for its part, offers cooperative public goods that differ from traditional aid, which is conditioned by connectivity between the countries that use it and their cooperation in terms of economic and productive capacity. Its core does not lie in a mere injection of

capital, but rather in the creation of an institutional framework for cross-border interconnection through networked infrastructure, localized value chains, including replicable standards and procedures.

Added to this is the use of common policies, which in turn include harmonized regulations to reduce transaction costs, logistics infrastructure, and supply chains that optimize accessibility in terms of time and space, as well as coordinated industrial parks that drive the industrial modernization of participants. In this way, the identity of the South is "materialized" with measurable improvements in three dimensions: time, cost, and risk, which are expressed in a circulation of the different factors involved, so that cooperation is more fluid and results in a more resilient industrial integration.

The GDI has taken a further step towards its goal of focusing on the development agenda of the *Global South*. Through the redefinition of priorities, platform-based governance, and project implementation, development is transformed from an abstract notion into scalable and replicable policy outcomes, which in turn focus on key areas such as poverty reduction, food security, green transition, education, and health (Williams, 2018). At the operational level, the GDI seeks to reduce the fragmentation of governance policies by interconnecting political agendas through multilateral institutions and regional mechanisms. At the instrumental level, the GDI strengthens the implementation capacity of partner countries through a package of tools consisting of financing, technology provision, and mutual capacity building. And at the level of dissemination of objectives, it seeks to expand its reach and penetration through partner networks and a group of "friends of the GDI," thus promoting clear convergence between South-South and North-South cooperation.

In short, these institutionalized designs translate the "identity of the South" into a triple provision of representativeness, based on a set of regulations and resources.

Representativeness, for its part, is achieved by increasing participation with adequate visibility in the composition of members and the definition of common political agendas.

Regulations are implemented through the institutionalization and enforcement of common standards, procedures, and compliance provisions. And the use of resources takes the

form of support consisting of "hard and soft resources" through financing, technology, knowledge, and capacity building for participants. The coherence between these three dimensions not only shapes China's dual role as a normative entrepreneur (aimed at proposing values and principles) and an institutional provider (responsible for offering platforms and tools), but also transforms the identity of participants from a mere value statement to the achievement of tangible results in projects and governance.

4. Recognition—competitive as a game of identity

On a theoretical and practical level, the stability of identity in this context of the *Global South* depends on the interaction between the recognition of the other and competing narratives (Visoka, 2022). First, as already mentioned, the stability of identity essentially depends on the triangular interaction between "the self," "the other," and "the audience," where recognition of the other and competing narratives are two key variables. Theoretical constructivism emphasizes that identity is not a static attribute, but rather is confirmed, adjusted, and reproduced in a continuous process of meaning analysis and social interaction. In the case of the Global South, any claim about its collective identity can only be transformed from a "narrative claim" to a "social fact" when it is recognized by a sufficient number of external actors, in addition to finding verifiable external resonance at the institutional level and in the practice of its actions. Conversely, if external recognition is insufficient, or if competing narratives predominate, such identity will tend to be volatile, with a significant degree of contextual dependence (Zhang, 2025). This may be highly theoretical, but it is essential to understanding how this identity of the Global South is logically structured.

Secondly, the internal heterogeneity of the Global South and the competition between "narratives" about the leadership of emerging powers pose a real challenge to the cohesion of the Global South (Ye, 2025). This requires boosting transnational trust and maintaining a sense of community by designing open and inclusive cooperation agendas, as well as a sustainable provision of public goods and forms of cooperation between different countries that are geared toward empowerment rather than submission to a specific discipline.

Thirdly, the West has tended to devalue the Global South through its opinions, introducing it into the geopolitical agenda and attempting to divide the different countries of the South or, failing that, to integrate them into the different levels of the existing world order (Xu, 2025). This exerts constant pressure on the narrative focused on the development of the countries of the *Global South* promoted by China, forcing it to simultaneously advance in justifying its normative model and demonstrating the empirical results of that model, in order to maintain both its discursive advantage over what the *Global South* represents and the legitimacy of the resources contributed to its development (Varadarajan, 2004). In this sense, therefore, the identity mechanism is not only a product of moral aspects or history itself, but also the result of the current process of coordinating the different competencies that exist in the *Global South*.

It follows that, within the constructivist framework, China's identity with respect to the *Global South* constitutes both the continuation of a choice based on its history and a process that allows for the verification of the ongoing development of the Chinese model through communication, on the one hand, and institutional practice, on the other. Its theoretical significance lies in offering an interpretative approach to global governance with the "autonomy and subjectivity of the South" at the center of this new governance, as well as the justice to which its countries are entitled to be recognized in the international arena. The political relevance of the Chinese model consists of transforming the triad of "identity, discourse, governance" into a provision of measurable public goods, including a reinforcement of the representativeness of the countries of the *Global South*, thus promoting a scheme of democratization of the political order based on normative equity, coupled with a strategy of low confrontation. In other words, China's identity in the Global South is not a static label, but a dynamic assemblage of identity that, in practice, can be observed, evaluated, and optimized, whose strength depends on the balance between discursive legitimacy, institutional performance, and recognition by others.

The Chinese alternative to modernization and governance in the *Global South*

In order to enhance the effectiveness of the theoretical construct that defines the identity of the *Global South*, China has translated the concept of the *Global South* into an institutional provision of public goods through new governance practices that build key multilateral platforms in the global context. First, in organizations such as BRICS, BRI,

and GDI, the focus on leadership and empowerment of the Global South has been reinforced. Second, the implementation of global governance practices has enriched theoretical proposals on the Global South in the context of Chinese international relations.

BRICS, BRI, and GDI form the institutional triangle through which China promotes a triple provision of representativeness, regulations, and resources in the Global South (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Institutional triangle of the *Global South* by China[2]
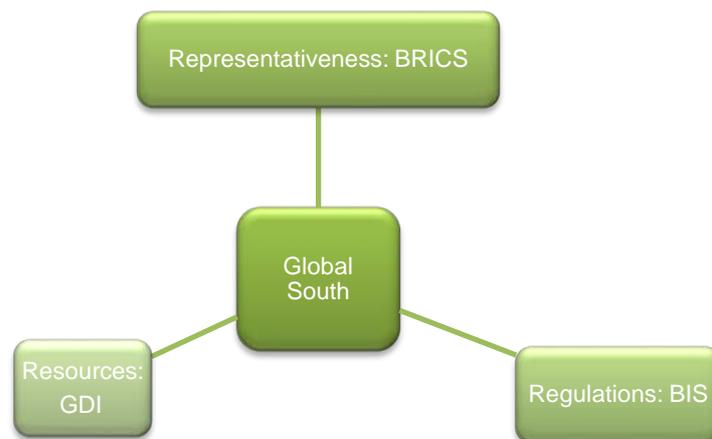
BRICS

The BRICS mechanism proposed by China constitutes a platform that, as mentioned above, articulates the triple provision of representativeness, regulations, and resources for the Global South (Zhong, 2025). As a vehicle for bringing together the main emerging economies, the BRICS, through regular summits and institutions such as the New Development Bank (NDB), have managed to establish coordinated positions with countries such as Brazil, India, and South Africa on economic development issues, issuing a relatively unified voice from the South in joint statements, political communication processes, and financial tools. In terms of regulations and instruments, China has fully incorporated the structural concerns of developing countries, arguing that global financial governance exercised by the IMF and the World Bank should be subject

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[2] Model proposed by the authors.

to a strategy of "complementarity and correction" rather than "substitution and confrontation." This involves promoting the redistribution of quotas and voting rights, optimizing the design of agendas, and improving financing conditions (Ren, 2025).

The New Development Bank (NDB), promoted by China, provides capital and risk-sharing mechanisms for infrastructure and sustainable development projects, increasing access to financing and financial autonomy for countries in the South through a set of instruments such as local currency loans, green financing, and co-financing. The logic behind the selection of projects "without political conditions" offers institutional support for the development-centered narrative of the South (Lin, 2024). In terms of representativeness, the "BRICS+" format, with its expansion process, has significantly raised the collective visibility of the Global South, as well as its ability to influence the global political agenda, promoting the coordination of policies and positions on a trans-regional scale.

At the normative level, the BRICS promote genuine multilateralism, playing a central role in the United Nations and incorporating, through ministerial declarations and dialogues, issues such as the right to development, climate policy financing, and global digital governance. In terms of resources, the New Development Bank (NDB), with its associated cooperation platforms, offers a sustained supply of public goods aimed at infrastructure connectivity, green transition, and capacity building (Nach and Ncwadi, 2024).

In general terms, BRICS cooperation does not follow a logic based on "hegemony," but is articulated around dialogue, consultation, and coordination as principles of governance (Liu, 2023). While continuously refining the system of rules and instruments that is considered unbalanced and dominated by the West, the development needs of BRICS countries are translated into executable financing mechanisms and concrete project results, thus gradually transforming the "subjectivity of the South" from a theoretical position to an institutional one. This demonstrates the real viability of the *Global South*, through unity and self-assertion, influencing the global governance agenda (Zhu and Wang, 2025). This goal is also a key pillar in China's efforts to promote the modernization of the *Global South*, including its global governance practices.

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

Since its launch in 2013, the BRI has been promoted by the Chinese government under a structured scheme of corridors, nodes, and networks, through an institutional architecture with five types of connectivity (policy communication, infrastructure interconnection, trade flow, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds). This has fostered greater intensity in the factors of productive integration between China and various developing countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

At the geoeconomic level, the BRI combines economic corridor projects with border nodes, which include industrial park platforms with coordination mechanisms, as well as customs management measures based on trade rules, forming a package of public goods that is an alternative to the Bretton Woods system.

This package includes transport, energy, and telecommunications infrastructure, as well as port and logistics hubs, coordination of industrial parks, and trade rules that, in contexts of economic difficulty, perform a function similar to that of a "lender of last resort." In the event of institutional overload for whatever economic reasons, quantifiable improvements are included in three dimensions: reduction of logistics times, reduction of cross-border transaction costs, and risk diversification. These three dynamics create favorable conditions for local industrial modernization, regional integration, and the optimal allocation of productive factors on a transnational scale (Casas-Klett, 2022).

In terms of financing and governance models, the BRI has set up a combined system that integrates multilateral development financing through specific market tools. With regard to local financing policies, including the Silk Road Fund itself, multilateral banks and mechanisms such as public-private partnerships (PPPs) are coordinated. In addition, instruments such as local currency loans, green bonds, and co-financing are used to strengthen the cash flow resilience of individual projects and their local acceptance.

In terms of complementary regulations, the interaction between "hard connectivity" and "soft connectivity" is articulated, based on cooperation at border crossings, the existence of a one-stop shop, inspection and quarantine, and mutual recognition of standards. All

of this is accompanied by programs to strengthen certain capacities, such as the operation and maintenance of works, professional training, and digital management.

In projects such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and African cross-border corridors, improvements are noticeable and can be quantified using indicators such as: reduction in total transport time, decrease in turnover and delays at port terminals, and increased visibility in supply chains. All of this reflects a governance model geared toward achieving quantifiable objectives.

At the same time, the BRI has responded to the concerns of countries in the Global South regarding global governance, optimizing the structure of different projects in recent years under a "small but high-quality" approach, guided by ESG (Environmental, Sustainability, Governance) criteria. In addition, China has strengthened the calculation of costs throughout the project life cycle, the assessment of environmental and social impacts, as well as anti-corruption and compliance mechanisms in procurement, increasing the participation of local companies and labor, emphasizing cooperation based on "empowerment rather than discipline" (Sun, 2024).

The Digital Silk Road and various vertical platforms in areas such as health and green sustainability have increased the scope of infrastructure towards data interconnection, public health, and energy transition, promoting forms of institutional cooperation, such as the mutual recognition of Authorized Economic Operators (AEO) or cross-border data governance pilot projects, or the recognition of green energies, which are moving from being collateral to being at the center of the political agenda.

Global Development Initiative

In 2021, China presented the *Global Development Initiative* to the United Nations, with the aim of moving development from the periphery of the political agenda to the core of macro governance, establishing logical consistency and functional correspondence with the objectives and implementation mechanisms of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. Its normative orientation, articulated around principles such as: *"priority to development, people-centeredness, universal inclusion, green and low-carbon sustainability, innovative momentum, and focus on action"*, has reconfigured a hierarchy

of values in the narrative on global development, transforming the "right to development" from a rights-based discourse to a practical foundation for prioritizing concrete policies and allocating resources (Sun, 2025).

The GDI is carried out following a sequence of priority redefinition, network governance of platforms, and project implementation. On the one hand, through the "Group of Friends of the GDI," the political commitment and policy coordination of nearly seventy countries has been brought together, forming networks with transregional and multisectoral themes and joint action plans. On the other hand, with the support of financing channels such as the "Global Development and South-South Cooperation Fund," through a package of tools that integrates knowledge, technology, and capacity building, more than 200 projects have been launched in more than 70 countries (Lei, 2022).

GDI also emphasizes a balance between "hard" and "soft" public goods. In addition to material resources in food security, public health, and interconnectivity, it also promotes data governance, poverty reduction methodologies, green financing standards, and human capital formation. Through policy alignment, regulatory interface, and capacity building, transaction costs and implementation thresholds in development cooperation are reduced. Furthermore, the GDI is complementary to and reinforced by the BRICS and the Belt and Road Initiative. While the BRICS offer a general framework based on a political agenda that is complemented by standards and projects geared towards sustainability goals, the Belt and Road Initiative provides replicable implementation tools in terms of infrastructure, industrial coordination, and financial instruments. The combination of the two increases the overall capacity of the *Global South* in three dimensions: representativeness (greater visibility of their agendas), regulations (more defined standards and procedures), and resources (more stable financing and technology provision) (Guo and Wang, 2025).

With regard to multilateralism, the GDI maintains that, through the United Nations, structural reforms in distribution and representativeness should be promoted, urging developed countries to recognize the demands of the South, fulfilling their commitments to assistance and technology transfer, and encouraging countries in the South to form "vertical alliances" through networks of partners that favor a paradigmatic convergence

between South-South cooperation and North-South dialogue, with the aim of reducing the development gap.

Ultimately, the GDI seeks to place the "right to development" in the realm of auditable provision of public goods, promoting the construction of a panel of indicators based on the logic of inputs in three directions: processes, products, and results (i.e., impacts). Additionally, it evaluates the availability of financing, the adequacy of different projects, and local mechanisms for sharing responsibilities at the input level, examining the alignment of different policies, regulatory compliance, and transparency at the process level; while also measuring immediate achievements in poverty reduction, food and health security, green sustainability, and interconnectivity at the level of the systems put in place. Similarly, medium- and long-term impacts are assessed in relation to progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals at the level of their outcomes.

Conclusion

This paper has systematically examined the genealogy of knowledge and political logic of China regarding the *Global South* through the threefold route of theoretical construction, the identity of the *Global South*, and governance practices. The prevailing Western discourse on the Global South presents four fundamental differences from the Chinese perspective. First, in the ontological realm, China emphasizes its view from a historical-cultural perspective of the components of the Global South, while the West tends to detach itself from the history of the South, reducing it to a geopolitical or public policy label. Second, regarding the normative sequence, China places the right to development, equity, and justice, as well as genuine multilateralism, at the center, while the West establishes a "rules-based order" as the threshold for its understanding, accompanied by conditions for compliance with those rules.

Third, in terms of governance trajectories, China favors dialogue, consultation, and coordination, promoting decentralized normative interoperability, as well as the provision of concrete goods. The West, on the contrary, tends to extend a security logic to the economic, commercial, and technological spheres, configuring compliance schemes characterized by "small circles and high thresholds." Fourth, in knowledge production, China insists on the value of local knowledge and the decolonization of paradigms that

are assumed without question, while the West operates mainly with assumptions within frameworks that are already established a priori.

In this way, two distinct sets of analyses have gradually taken shape. The Chinese proposal focuses on increasing representativeness, regulatory interoperability, and instrumental public goods, thus forming a continuum in which the political agenda, norms, and projects are interconnected. In contrast, the West relies on conditional assistance, the export of standards, and performance-based accountability to maintain the stability of the existing order and dependence on activities. There is no zero-sum relationship between the two approaches. About global issues such as climate change, public health, and digital governance, there is complementary space between the regulatory rigor emphasized by the Western model and the accessibility of public goods highlighted by the Chinese proposal.

In conclusion, at the normative level, China has transformed the concept of the *Global South* from a mere geographical label to a political-normative community articulated around the history of anti-colonialism and anti-hegemony, as well as the development demands of the countries of the *Global South*. At the narrative level, China consolidates its self-identification as "the largest developing country, which is a natural member of the Global South" through the common construction of the axes that mark the history of peoples: norms, discourses, and practices. China also proposes a hierarchy of values centered on the development of international public goods through the triangular structure of transmission between proponents and recipients. And, at the level of concrete practice, China configures an institutional triangle of representativeness, which is transformed into resources and norms through the BRICS, the BRI, and the GDI, changing political discourse into a verifiable institutional framework and benefits among the members of these institutions through a circuit that goes from ideas to concrete mechanisms with recognizable results.

In this framework, BRICS focuses on increasing the visibility of the political agenda and financial autonomy through the New Development Bank, including local currency loans and green financing. The BRI contributes to reducing transport times, transaction costs, and operational risks through logistics corridors, ports, industrial parks, and commercial transactions. The GDI, for its part, promotes the development objective, converting its

actions into auditable results to prioritize objectives, consolidate effective governance frameworks, and ensure the implementation of concrete projects. The interaction between the three mechanisms means that China's proposal for the modernization of the Global South with a proposal for the democratization of global governance is characterized by an empowerment approach rather than a discipline-based scheme, with mechanisms of complementarity rather than confrontation.

In conclusion, this paper has shown that China's theoretical approach, based on identity, narrative, and governance practices in the Global South, presents, from its point of view, a logical coherence that provides institutional operability and a performance evaluation framework, offering a verifiable alternative for advancing toward pluralistic modernization and democratization of the international order. Its effectiveness, if sustained, will depend on the dynamic convergence between representativeness, normativity, and resources, as well as on a virtuous cycle of internal and external recognition in a complex scenario of different messages and narratives. These considerations are key elements for future analysis and evaluation of competing policies.

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