

A Study on the Discourse Construction of “Global South” and Its International Communication

Un estudio sobre la construcción discursiva del «Sur Global» y su comunicación internacional
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Abstract

This paper explores the discourse construction of the term “Global South” and its implications for international communication. It examines how the concept has evolved in academic and political contexts, tracing its origins and the various interpretations that have emerged over time. By analyzing texts from a range of sources, including international organizations, media outlets, and scholarly articles, the study identifies key themes and narratives associated with the Global South, highlighting the power dynamics inherent in these discourses. Furthermore, it investigates the impact of this terminology on global perceptions and interactions, considering how it shapes the identities and agency of nations within this group. The findings reveal that the discourse surrounding the Global South not only reflects socio-economic and political realities but also influences diplomatic relations and cultural exchanges. Ultimately, the paper argues for a more nuanced understanding of the Global South that acknowledges its diversity and complexity, advocating for a shift in communication strategies that better represent the voices and experiences of countries within this framework.

Keywords: “Global South”; discourse analysis; international communication; cultural exchange

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Resumen

Este artículo explora la construcción discursiva del término «Sur Global» y sus implicaciones para la comunicación internacional. Examina cómo ha evolucionado el concepto en contextos académicos y políticos, rastreando sus orígenes y las diversas interpretaciones que han surgido a lo largo del tiempo. Mediante el análisis de textos procedentes de diversas fuentes, como organizaciones internacionales, medios de comunicación y artículos académicos, el estudio identifica temas y narrativas clave asociados al Sur Global, destacando la dinámica de poder inherente a estos discursos. Además, investiga el impacto de esta terminología en las percepciones e interacciones globales, considerando cómo moldea las identidades y la agencia de las naciones dentro de este grupo. Las conclusiones revelan que el discurso en torno al Sur Global no sólo refleja realidades socioeconómicas y políticas, sino que también influye en las relaciones diplomáticas y los intercambios culturales. En última instancia, el artículo aboga por una comprensión más matizada del Sur Global que reconozca su diversidad y complejidad, abogando por un cambio en las estrategias de comunicación que representen mejor las voces y experiencias de los países dentro de este marco.

Palabras clave: «Sur Global»; análisis del discurso; comunicación internacional; intercambio cultural.

Introduction

In recent years, the concept of the “Global South” has garnered extensive attention and discussion within the international community, prompting reflections on the innovation of existing international relations theories. The term has been in use for over half a century, initially employed by scholars to refer to a group of countries outside the developed nations. Despite its increasing acceptance and usage by a growing number of scholars and institutions, there remains a lack of consensus within the international community regarding the specific countries encompassed by the term “Global South.” In many academic studies, “Global South” is often synonymous with developing countries, or the two are considered to be fundamentally indistinguishable. In widely used expressions like “South-South cooperation” and “North-South dialogue,” the term “South” specifically denotes developing countries. This lack of clarity has led some scholars to question the significance and value of the “Global South” concept, suggesting it could be replaced. While such perspectives have been prevalent and have some merit over the past few decades, the evolving status and role of Global South countries in international society are endowing this concept with a unique value that differentiates it from other related terms like “developing countries.”

In the context of unprecedented global changes, the international order is undergoing profound and complex transformations. The “Global South” is increasingly viewed as a significant force in reshaping the international order. As a collective of emerging market countries and developing nations, the Global South is striving for autonomy and independence in international politics, aiming to enhance its discursive power and promote a more just and equitable global order.

However, various internal characteristics, shifts in the international landscape, and geopolitical rivalries present ongoing challenges for the Global South in asserting its voice on the global stage. To effectively navigate these challenges, countries within the Global South must strengthen their unity and collaborate closely. Their primary objective should be to advance their own development, which in turn will enable them to contribute more ideas, values, and norms to the

world, fostering a more inclusive and diverse global environment. Furthermore, nations in “Global South” should engage more actively in global governance, enhancing their institutional power to better address worldwide issues. In addressing significant international challenges, it is essential to seek common ground and highlight the collective impact of Global South countries. In view of this, we should first make a comprehensive review of the formation of the concept of “Global South”.

Methodology

An Investigation into the Concept of “Global South”

The term “Global South” serves as an umbrella designation for emerging market countries and developing nations. Its recent prominence in academic discussions reflects its intuitive alignment with contemporary international relations. On one hand, the term captures the evolving international context and acknowledges the collective developmental achievements of developing countries, along with the challenges they face. On the other hand, focusing on the Global South indicates an increased international acceptance of shared human values (Xi, 2015). Over the long term, attention to the developmental issues of the Global South is likely to transform traditional notions of international relations and drive new changes in the field. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the rise of discourse surrounding the Global South and the evolution of its concept.

The Rise of the “Global South” Discourse

The term “Global South” originates from the traditional concept of “Southern countries,” referring to nations located in the Southern Hemisphere, south of the equator. Due to the predominance of developing countries in the southern regions of the Northern Hemisphere and the Southern Hemisphere, these countries are often collectively labeled as “Southern countries.” The “Global South” concept extends this terminology, mainly encompassing emerging market countries and developing nations.

Although the term “South” has been in use for a long time, “Global South” has not been frequently mentioned in international agendas until recent years. This trend is shifting as the economic influence of the Global South continues to rise, significantly impacting the international landscape. Countries like China and India exemplify the rapid ascent of emerging markets, with their collective contributions accounting for 80% of global economic growth, leading to a diminishing gap between the North and South and enhancing the overall strength and international influence of the Global South.

In early 2023, Ravi Agrawal, editor of *Foreign Policy*, highlighted a significant trend in global politics: the South is becoming increasingly prominent and influential across various domains, emerging as an unstoppable force (Agrawal, 2023). The concept of “Global South” has frequently

entered global discussions. For instance, during a vote on suspending Russia's membership in the Human Rights Council on April 7, 2022, the "Global South" perspective was heavily debated, further raising the profile of the term. Additionally, the "Voice of the Global South" online summit in January 2023 declared the advent of a "Global South" era, while the *Financial Times* recognized "Global South" as one of its words of the year for 2023 (Guangming Net, 2024). The 2024 Munich Security Conference Report also made multiple references to the Global South, highlighting its significance during the 78th United Nations General Assembly.

The Evolution of the "Global South" Concept

The "Global South" is not a new concept; "Southern countries" have long been used to describe nations with development disparities compared to "Northern countries." Depending on the international relations characteristics of different historical periods, the Cold War's "East-West relations" and the post-Cold War "North-South relations" have also served as frameworks for describing international dynamics. "East-West relations" primarily pertained to the socialist and Western capitalist blocs, while "North-South relations" generally referred to the interaction between developing and developed countries. The "Global South" differs from the term "developing countries" by including analyses of the roots of long-standing developmental disparities among Southern countries and the pathways to eliminate these disparities.

Scholars hold diverse views on the origins of the terms "South" and "Global South." Some nations have exploited the concept to highlight international divisions. However, an important reason for the increasing focus on the Global South as a hot topic is the United Nations' emphasis on the importance of addressing developmental issues and fostering cooperation among Global South countries.

The academic community widely recognizes that "South-South Cooperation" began at the 1955 Bandung Conference, with UN initiatives tracing back to 1949 when the Economic and Social Council established its first technical assistance program. The creation of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 1965 marked a significant milestone, and in 1974, the UN General Assembly approved the establishment of a special unit within the UNDP to facilitate technical cooperation among developing countries. This unit later evolved into the UN Office for South-South Cooperation, which coordinates South-South and trilateral cooperation efforts (United Nations, 2020). In addressing developmental challenges, the UN has proposed a series of plans reflecting global consensus and sustainable development goals, such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SDGs), which encompass both global issues like climate change and critical needs such as food security and safe drinking water in specific regions. The UN's attention to the developmental challenges faced by Southern countries underscores their increasing significance in international relations.

Classification of Countries Related to the “Global South”

Internationally, there are generally three classifications of countries related to the “Global South.” The first is a classification based on economic attributes. This includes what is typically referred to as developed countries, emerging market countries, developing countries, and least developed countries, categorized according to the stages and levels of economic development in each country. The World Bank classifies countries into four categories — high-income countries, upper-middle-income countries, lower-middle-income countries, and low-income countries — based on differences in per capita income. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) uses indicators such as gross national income per capita, years of education, and life expectancy to compile the Human Development Index, categorizing countries into four groups: very high human development, high human development, medium human development, and low human development. In these classifications, economic indicators occupy either a complete or significant weight.

The second classification is based on political attributes. The most representative example is Chairman Mao Zedong’s classification of the “Three Worlds” in the 1970s. In this framework, the United States and the Soviet Union constitute the First World; Japan, Europe, Australia, and Canada are considered the Second World; while Asia, Africa, and Latin America, excluding these countries and regions, are categorized as the Third World. Countries that are exploited and oppressed in the international community fall into the Third World category. The “Three Worlds” classification clearly illustrates the political status of countries around the world.

The third classification is based on geographic attributes. According to their general geographic locations on Earth, some countries are referred to as Eastern or Western countries, and Southern or Northern countries. During the Cold War, the two major blocs of the U.S. and the Soviet Union were primarily located in the Eastern and Western Hemispheres, respectively; thus, the geographic classification of Eastern and Western countries was extended to signify ideological meanings, referring to countries in the socialist bloc and those in the capitalist bloc. At the same time, as developing countries are mainly situated in the Southern Hemisphere and the southern parts of the Northern Hemisphere, while developed countries predominantly occupy the northern parts of the Northern Hemisphere, the terms “South” and “North” are often used synonymously with developing and developed countries, respectively.

From its literal meaning, the “Global South” is a geographic concept. However, as this concept has been proposed and evolved, the strict correspondence between the “Global South” and the Southern Hemisphere has become less relevant, with people increasingly using this concept entirely divorced from its geographical significance. Consequently, the current concept of the “Global South” generally presents the following three prominent features:

First is ambiguity. The concept of “Global South,” which originated from geographic factors, did not provide clear geographic boundaries from the outset. Moreover, the “Global South” is not

a clearly defined group of member countries; it encompasses a diverse array of values, cultural traditions, and significant variations in political, economic, and social systems. Thus, some scholars argue that the “Global South” resembles more of a political slogan that cannot accurately describe this world (Joseph & Nye, 2023). However, it should also be noted that this ambiguity does not imply that the “Global South” is a concept that can be arbitrarily defined; there remains a fundamental consensus in the international community regarding which countries predominantly belong to the “Global South.”

Second is malleability. On one hand, the connotation of the “Global South” is dynamically evolving. It has shifted from a geographical “South” to a cross-regional and cross-sectoral integration, transitioning from a focus on economic development to an integration of economic and political considerations, and evolving from externally defined parameters to a fusion of external and internal shaping. The concept of the “Global South” is continually developing and enriching. On the other hand, the group classified as the “Global South” is also dynamically changing. As political, economic, and other fields evolve, the developmental identities, levels, and stages of countries are in constant flux, leading to new changes in the countries included within the “Global South.” From the perspective of future development trends, there are three potential scenarios for the evolution of the “Global South”: the first is to maintain the group’s diversity and looseness while exerting influence on international affairs through public opinion and moral authority; the second is to form an international movement that plays a role on specific functional issues; and the third is to establish a mechanized cooperative organization. Currently, the “Global South” is becoming an increasingly influential movement, with the cooperative mechanisms formed by certain country groups continuously expanding their impact within the “Global South.”

Third is competitiveness. At present, within the conceptual framework of the “Global South,” the competition for discourse power among certain countries is becoming prominent. On one hand, some developed countries are vying for the discourse power associated with the concept of the “Global South,” attempting to exclude major developing countries such as China from this group based on their own strategic goals and interests, thereby using the “Global South” as a tool to differentiate developing countries. Simultaneously, as the largest developing country, China clearly asserts itself as a member of the “Global South” (Xi, 2023). On the other hand, some major developing countries actively seek leadership within the “Global South,” which has objectively led to competition among these developing nations.

The Denotation of the “Global South” Concept: A New Paradigm in International Relations

The breadth of the “Global South” concept reflects advancements in contemporary international relations. Transitioning from “South” to “Global South” emphasizes the global nature of this term, signaling progress for our times. This shift illustrates the rapid globalization since the 21st

century, whereby the acceptance of the “Global South” concept indicates a collective awareness within the international community — whether consciously or unconsciously — of the interconnectedness of various countries and regions. Despite some nations advocating for “de-globalization” or “anti-globalization,” the tide of globalization remains irreversible. If a citizen’s nationality reflects “ethnic identity,” the concept of “Global South” embodies the characteristics of “global citizenship.” As international interactions become increasingly streamlined, recognizing global development as integral to national development is vital for promoting collective progress and enhancing global governance.

The meaning of the “Global South” is currently articulated through three dimensions: geopolitical economy, geopolitics, and international relations. From a geopolitical economy perspective, the Global South represents a group with strong developmental aspirations, with the pursuit of development serving as its unifying discourse. The rise of the Global South is rooted in its sustained economic growth, which will continue to be crucial for its more significant role on the international stage. Developmental issues remain central to both South-South cooperation and North-South dialogue. From a geopolitical standpoint, the Global South does not include developed nations in the West, embodying a political force with a traditional anti-Western stance. For example, following the Ukraine crisis, the Global South’s political positions increasingly diverged from Western alignment. When several Western nations-imposed sanctions on Russia, numerous Global South countries explicitly refused to join this coalition on international platforms like the UN. In August 2023, during an international conference on the Ukraine issue held in Saudi Arabia, many Global South nations maintained their principles despite intense lobbying from Western countries. As a geopolitical force, the Global South significantly influences the evolution of international order. In terms of international relations, the Global South constitutes a group with shared identity recognition, which helps shape collective interests and behaviors. The rising momentum of the Global South is reinforcing its members’ self-identity and international recognition, laying new foundations for inter-state interactions and power dynamics. Moreover, the deepening cooperation within the Global South is likely to catalyze profound transformations in international relations, leading to significant adjustments in the global landscape.

Findings: The International Discourse Power of “Global South” Common Interests

Cooperation among Global South countries has a long history; however, factors such as imperialism and colonialism have limited the autonomy of international collaboration. On one hand, due to the international division of labor, Global South countries often find themselves compelled to engage in unequal partnerships with developed nations at the top of the industrial chain in pursuit of development. This lack of autonomy has hindered their ability to escape challenges such as “relying on aid for development,” “growth driven by cycles dominated by developed countries,” “growth without development,” “resource curses,” and the “middle-income trap.”

On the other hand, persistent pressures from developed countries have stunted the Global South's ability to forge strong, complementary industrial advantages, directly limiting the breadth and depth of their international cooperation. Therefore, for Global South nations, achieving meaningful international partnerships and realizing developmental goals at various stages requires a conducive international and domestic environment. Currently, profound changes in the international context are presenting new opportunities for the cooperation and development of the Global South.

Diversified Narratives: Future Development of Common Interests in the Global South

The rise of the Global South is synonymous with the diversification of narratives within international relations. From the perspective of international economics, the expansion of Western capital contrasts sharply with the economic developments achieved by Southern countries through their own investments. The diversity of human civilization and the unique circumstances of different nations indicate that development cannot follow a singular model.

In recent years, the impressive achievements of certain Southern countries are likely to inspire others, leading to a ripple effect in exploring development paths that align with national conditions and fostering a shift from singular development theories to multiple developmental frameworks. From a political perspective, the post-World War II era marked a critical turning point in global governance, as nations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America asserted their right to self-determination, challenging the jungle law of international relations established over the centuries. The current rise of the Global South is pushing global governance toward a more democratic, just, and equitable direction.

Challenges to the Global South's Discourse Power

As the independence and autonomy of the Global South increase, it has become a significant strategic force influencing the trajectory of international order transformation and a vital balancing force in great power competition. However, escalating geopolitical rivalries and rising confrontations pose substantial challenges to the Global South's efforts to enhance its international discourse power.

First, the significant internal diversity and differences among Global South countries hinder the formation of a unified international force. Despite many Southern nations sharing histories of colonial oppression and facing developmental challenges, internal disparities and diversities are pronounced.

Second, the Global South lacks a high degree of political consensus, with deep-seated disagreements on leadership and coordination significantly constraining its discourse power. While China, as a natural member of the Global South, has consistently advocated for and represented the interests of Southern countries, India has pursued its own great power aspirations, sometimes

responding ambivalently to China's initiatives like the concept of a "community of shared future for mankind" and the Belt and Road Initiative, occasionally proposing alternative schemes that compete with Chinese initiatives. Consequently, the absence of a unified ideology and action within the Global South limits its ability to wield collective influence on the international stage.

Third, the Global South's endeavors to enhance its discourse power are still influenced by great power dynamics. Developed nations often hinder these efforts to maintain their traditional advantages within the international system. For instance, while China has significantly increased its contributions to various UN bodies, its influence does not proportionally match its contributions, with leadership roles in most international organizations remaining dominated by personnel from developed countries.

Furthermore, as great power competition intensifies and geopolitical tensions escalate, narratives within the Global South sometimes take on geopolitical dimensions, with certain major powers sowing discord and division within the Global South. For example, discussions around "leadership in the Global South" can exacerbate feelings of fragmentation among stronger nations within this group. In the security domain, mechanisms like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) have positioned countering China as a focal point.

Implications: Optimizing the Path for International Communication of the "Global South" Concept

In recent years, regional and global peace and security have faced severe challenges, with deficits in global peace, security, development, and governance increasing. The Ukraine crisis and renewed conflicts in the Middle East have intensified traditional security concerns, continually reshaping the global agenda. In the face of unprecedented global shifts, enhancing the international discourse power of the Global South has become imperative.

First, Southern countries must unite to collectively uphold regional and global peace, stability, and security, striving to enhance the Global South's international discourse power in security matters. For example, as a natural member of the Global South, China has released its position on the political resolution of the Ukraine crisis, proposing comprehensive solutions that have attracted significant attention. In response to global security challenges, China has articulated a vision of common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security, presenting a global security initiative that offers new approaches to tackle these challenges. China's role in mediating relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran serves as a crucial example of conflict resolution in the Middle East. The Global South should consistently advocate for the core role of the UN in international affairs, uphold the principles and purposes of the UN Charter, and promote peaceful resolutions to inter-state disputes, articulating its proposals and strategies for maintaining global peace and security. It must amplify its voice for peace in international discourse and constructively engage in political solutions to regional hot-button issues, adhering to genuine multilateralism to collectively safeguard global peace, stability, and security.

Second, strengthening development cooperation among nations will gradually elevate the Global South's international discourse power in development. Currently, global development governance faces setbacks, with many Southern nations still grappling with severe poverty and inequality, making developmental revitalization a shared demand of the Global South. Bridging the vast development gaps within the Global South and ensuring inclusive growth remains a challenge. For instance, China's remarkable achievements in development — having completed an industrialization process in decades that took developed nations centuries — underscore its influence in this domain. China aims to encourage Global South nations to explore their unique paths to modernization based on their specific conditions and realities.

Third, by advocating for the construction of an equal, inclusive, cooperative, and just international order, the Global South can enhance its ideological discourse power. Historically, concepts related to development theory, foreign aid, and modernization have been primarily framed through Western perspectives, experiences, and logic. In recent years, antiquated ideas such as power politics, unilateralism, hegemony, and Cold War mentalities have resurfaced, posing new threats and challenges to the international community, particularly to developing nations. Therefore, based on its rich cultural heritage and practical experiences, China has sought to contribute new ideas and perspectives to the world. Initiatives like the Global Development Initiative, Global Security Initiative, and Global Civilization Initiative reflect this commitment, offering fresh approaches to global challenges. Moving forward, China and the Global South must continue to shape their value systems, deepen friendly exchanges, enhance cultural interactions, and foster mutual understanding among peoples. This will strengthen the global influence of the values and ideals of Global South countries, solidify social foundations, and improve their discourse power in global dialogues (Qiushi, 2024).

Fourth, advancing the global governance system toward greater fairness and reasonableness is crucial for enhancing the institutional discourse power of the Global South. International institutions serve as critical foundations for global governance, yet the Global South is often disadvantaged in terms of its institutional voice, with weak representation in international organizations and mechanisms. As UN Secretary-General António Guterres stated at the 2023 BRICS Summit in Johannesburg, global governance must reflect today's power and economic relations rather than those of 1945. Thus, reforms to the global governance system are urgently needed. Numerous issues related to poverty, climate change, and energy are directly relevant to Global South nations, necessitating their enhanced discourse power in these domains to push the global governance system toward greater fairness and reasonableness. In terms of enhancing institutional discourse power, China has already undertaken several initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative and advocating for the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Moving forward, China must collaborate with Global South nations to effectively utilize existing governance platforms such as the UN, IMF, and G20, advocating for reforms to address injustices and inequities while increasing the representation and voice of Southern countries to ensure effective governance outcomes (El, 2023).

Conclusion

Currently, the international system is undergoing profound changes and transformations. The Global South, as a key force in the evolution of the international order, is actively pursuing independence and self-reliance while striving for justice and equity. This pursuit is enhancing its collective influence in international politics and continually demonstrating its strategic value and advancing its discourse power. In the future, the Global South will maintain its vibrancy in opposing Western centrism, rejecting hegemonism, and advocating for international fairness and justice. It will also work to promote a multipolar world characterized by equality and order, as well as inclusive economic globalization, influencing and shaping the processes, trajectories, and forms of international order.

As a crucial member of the Global South, China will lead efforts to unite Southern countries, focusing on enhancing global governance discourse power while fostering collective development and prosperity, ultimately contributing the strength of the Global South to the creation of a better future for humanity.

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Statement

Conflict of Interest

We have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Funding

No financial support from outside parties for this article.

Acknowledgment

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to East China Normal University and the University of Dar es Salaam for the workshop “Dialogues on Sino-Tanzanian Civilizations”, which provided me with the invaluable opportunity to explore the topic of the “Global South” from the perspective of translation studies. I am especially grateful for the chance to conduct field research in Tanzania, experiencing firsthand the spirit of cooperation within the “Global South” on the East African continent.

Note

The article is original and has not been previously published.