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# Cooperate or Compete?

## What Chinese Analysts Think of India's 'Global South' Leadership

Anushka Saxena

Takshashila Issue Brief  
Version 1.0, September 2024

This Issue Brief assesses the narratives presented by Chinese analysts on India's bid to position itself as the 'Voice of the Global South'. The Brief discusses the competitive lens such analysts deploy when opining on India-China relations vis-à-vis the Global South, and further sheds light on the perils of India's Global South policy approach, as evaluated by Chinese commentators.

*Recommended Citation:*

Anushka Saxena, "Cooperate or Compete?: What Chinese Analysts Think of India's 'Global South' Leadership," Takshashila Issue Brief, September 2024, The Takshashila Institution.

# Executive Summary

The concept of leadership of the ‘Global South’ is increasingly gaining traction in India and China. As rising powers and competitors, both countries see merit in positioning themselves as the ‘voice of the Global South’. In doing so, both aim to seek legitimacy for their ambitions to be seen as the leading representative of developing countries. It is not unusual, in this regard, that Chinese analysts and commentators have thoroughly critiqued India’s case, all the while expounding China’s significance to the Global South.

This essay assesses the viewpoints of a few such analysts, and concludes that there exist two broad and common themes in each of their commentaries on the two countries’ claim for leadership of the Global South. First, is that any interpretation excluding China from the list of countries constituting the Global South is a “fallacy,” and second, is that even though India is an emerging economic power, its constraints, opportunism, and “pro-Westernism” hinder its vision for leading the Global South.

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# I. Introduction

At present, India–China relations are at their lowest since the 1962 war. Naturally, this is reflected in the two sides’ engagement with the Global South. So far, India has hosted three ‘Voice of the Global South’ Summits (VOGSS) – in January and November 2023, and most recently, on August 17, 2024. At each VOGSS, India refrained from inviting China. Even though New Delhi communicated the decision to Beijing, consequent non-invitations added to Beijing’s ire, and made the issue competitive in the Chinese perspective. To hence respond to India’s decision, in the aftermath of each of these summits, Chinese analysts took to the papers to express why a Global South without China is a fallacious or a ‘pseudo-proposition’ – a term popularised by a September 2023 *Global Times* article on the VOGSS.<sup>1</sup>

# II. A “Fallacious” Global South

Three major patterns of note emerge from Chinese analysts’ contentions on the subject:

**Firstly**, Chinese analysts have repeatedly emphasised the vagueness of the concept of the ‘Global South’, in a bid to legitimise their position that China is as much a part of the Global South as India, or the other 120+ attendee countries of the VOGSS. As the above-referenced *Global Times* article states:<sup>2</sup>

There are many parameters to conceptualise the idea of the ‘Global South’, and which countries are a part of it. Broadly, there are four such notable parameters:

1. The 130-odd ‘Group of 77’ developing countries are included. While the G77 recognises China as a member, China refers to itself as an important political contributor but not a member of the G77, and meetings between the two sides are referred to as ‘G77+China’.
2. These are largely non-Western or even non-former Soviet countries, but with shared historical experiences of colonialism.
3. Most of these countries may be middle- or lower-income economies geographically situated below the Brandt line dividing the ‘Global North’ from the ‘Global South’.
4. These countries have a shared experience of marginalization from the Western-dominated global legal and economic architectures. They are rule-takers more than rule-makers.

*“Because the definitions of ‘Global South’ are diverse, many people often use or interpret this term as they please, parroting or presenting their own understanding and definitions of ‘Global South’. It can be imagined that such arbitrary speculation or self-talk can only lead to confusion in academic theories and concepts, and even result in different opinions... However, the international status of a country is not determined by a few countries, but by the majority of countries in the world.”*

Xu Xiujun, a Senior Research Fellow at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (a high-profile institution under the Chinese State Council), has furthered this line of argument at a Roundtable organised by *Xinhua News* in August 2023, stating:<sup>3</sup>

*“Some Western politicians are keen on political manipulation and hype, attempting to portray the ‘Global South’ as a group that excludes China, using it as a political weapon to divide developing countries.”*

This “difference of opinions”, and the “manipulation” of definitions, hence forms the shield with which Chinese analysts defend their position for China’s inclusion. Many even cite a 2004 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report which explicitly includes China in the club of Global South countries.<sup>4</sup> Such reports also become a tool to critique the West, and other countries such as India, which Chinese analysts argue are echoing the West’s sentiments by excluding China from endeavours such as the VOGSS.

To further make the case that China is very much a part of the Global South, analysts often rely on evidence to suggest that China, despite being the second largest economy in the world, is still a developing country. For example, in a detailed research paper published by Zhang Jie, Dean and Professor at the School of International Relations, Xi'an International Studies University, in March 2024, he argues:<sup>5</sup>

*“The motive behind the G7, led by the United States, and some Western media hyping the ‘Global South’, is to exclude China from the family of developing countries. As early as during Trump’s administration, the U.S. was already pushing the narrative that ‘China is not a developing country.’ For instance, in a memorandum issued on July 26, 2019, titled ‘Reforming Developing Country Status in the World Trade Organization,’ the U.S. declared that ‘the United States never accepted China’s claim to developing country status.’”*

Here, Zhang reiterates the view presented in the above-referenced *Global Times* article, that a country’s international status is not determined by a few nations but by a majority of countries in a particular grouping. Further, he concludes that China will long be in the primary stage of socialism, which means that despite its rapid economic growth, it will continue to be a developing country.

**Secondly**, Chinese analysts contend that China’s role as a contributor to the growth and development of developing countries makes its participation in Global South-related endeavours, such as the VOGSS, critical. Zhang ironically also argues that China’s “close ties and cooperation” with several developing countries makes China not just a developing country itself, but also a contributor to South-South cooperation. Similarly, a commentary responding to the most recent VOGSS, published by an anonymous author calling themselves ‘Huā Jiǎ Xīn Qīng Nián’ (花甲新青年) on the Chinese media platform *Sohu*, takes the argument further, and states:<sup>6</sup>

*“As an important member of the Global South, China holds a significant position in areas such as the economy, technology, and markets... [hence] China’s absence could also impact the effectiveness of the summit.”*

This sentiment was also reiterated at the Global Times Annual Summit in December 2023 by Zhang Jiadong, a popular voice on India-related issues at Fudan University (a public university in Shanghai). In his remarks, he said:<sup>7</sup>

*“It’s not impossible that some are attempting to seize this opportunity to create the role of a so-called ‘leader of the Global South’. In reality, for the ‘Global South’ countries, China’s identity and status are irreplaceable.”*

This is a domain where Chinese analysts also contest India's ability to lead the Global South, arguing that Indian economic and technological capabilities are not lucrative enough to contribute to the growth of Global South countries, especially when compared to China. This aspect is detailed in the subsequent section.

**Thirdly**, most commentaries on the inclusion of China in the Global South grouping highlight the morality of Beijing's arguments – that it stands for cooperation, inclusiveness, and mutual respect. For example, in a commentary published in June 2024 by two scholars at the University of International Business and Economics in Beijing, Lan Qingxin and Yang Penghui, they cite three reasons as to why China is a crucial member of the Global South.<sup>8</sup> Of these, two of the reasons are that China's approach to developing countries revolves around a “win-win” method of partnership with “mutual benefits,” and that China emphasises “harmonious coexistence” above competition.

All the while, India's bid for the leadership of the Global South is presented as opportunistic. This sentiment is expressed in a popular article published by Senior Colonel Zhou Bo, a retired officer of the People's Liberation Army, in the South China Morning Post, where he states:<sup>9</sup>

*“India repeatedly objected to Sri Lanka allowing Chinese military vessels to dock to replenish supplies, forcing the government to introduce a ban on Chinese ships. China, in contrast, has welcomed India's membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and BRICS (which also*

*includes Brazil, Russia and South Africa), two organisations in which China has a crucial role.”*

It is also often argued that it is India that has aggravated the power competition between itself and China vis-à-vis the Global South, because it is a rising power. China, on the other hand, toes the line of cooperation, by allowing India to co-exist and participate in what are otherwise China-centric institutions. The title and conclusion of Zhou Bo’s article, in fact, suggest that India and China should both be anchors rather than competitors in a “volatile world.”<sup>10</sup>

The representation of China as a magnanimous actor is hence set against the representation of India as an immoral and demonised one. This line of argumentation is emerging as a common feature in the Chinese analytical community’s assessment of China’s Global South leadership. It attempts to bolster China’s bid for its membership and position as a representative of developing countries of the Global South, even as it claims to not seek leadership over the group.



### III. The Constraints and Opportunism in India's Approach

The twin goals of Chinese analytical narrative on the leadership of the Global South, are to garner legitimacy for China's cause, and to simultaneously put India down. While the former is discussed above, the latter is achieved in two ways – by pointing to India's economic or technological constraints, and by attempting to prove that India's bid to become voice of the Global South is opportunistic and power-hungry.

There are, again, three ways in which this exercise is undertaken to influence the reader's perception of India's Global South pitch:

#### 1. Highlighting Limited Comprehensive National Power

As highlighted above, Chinese analysts contend that one of the reasons why China is critical to the Global South, is because of its economic and financial contribution to the developing world. They point to India's shortcomings in this regard, and question the numbers. For example, in the final section of his CIIS paper, titled 'Constraints Faced by India in Strengthening Relations with the Global South', Zhang Jie cites an Indian scholar who made the case in a prominent news publication that India

cannot compete with China in funding the development of Global South countries because of capacity deficit.<sup>11</sup> Further, he states:

*“Although India is now the world’s fifth-largest economy, its manufacturing sector remains underdeveloped, and its technological innovation capacity and labour force quality are not high. India is positioned at the lower end of global supply chains and lacks the capacity to meet its own development and industrial upgrading needs. Its ability to provide international public goods is limited, making it difficult to fill the gaps in funding and technology that many ‘Global South’ countries urgently need.”*

These urgent needs are further highlighted through a report published by the Asian Development Bank in 2017, which argues that till 2020, South Asian countries needed an annual investment of US\$ 294 billion for their current infrastructural requirements, while the actual annual investment remained at around US\$ 134 billion.<sup>12</sup> For India, the estimated annual need was around US\$ 230 billion, while its current investment stood at around US\$ 118 billion. The numbers may now be obsolete, but Chinese analysts such as Zhang Jie continue to use them to show that given the huge developmental requirements of South Asian countries, and India’s own difficulties in fulfilling its domestic infrastructural requirements, India cannot be the developmental leader Global South countries need.

In another commentary Zhang wrote for the Fujian Province Library's platform '*Decision Information*', he similarly expressed discontent with India's attempts to deploy Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) in Global South countries, arguing that the initiative may have led to some enhancement of India's image, but multiple challenges exist.<sup>13</sup> Further, he stated that India doesn't have the capability to "*collide head-on*" with economic powers like China and the US.

Similarly, Chinese analysts often attempt to use Indian narratives abroad against it, and also question if India's leadership of the Global South actually carries with it any merit or benefit. For example, in Zhou Bo's *SCMP* commentary, he states:<sup>14</sup>

*"India's latest self-branding is 'Vishwaguru', or world teacher. The question is what India can teach the world... China, which spent four decades lifting 800 million of its people out of poverty, is more qualified to share its lessons learned with other developing countries. In diplomacy, India has yet to set a better example than Beijing's successful mediation between Saudi Arabia and Iran."*

For Zhou to articulate such a competitive sentiment is remarkable, considering he attempts to dissuade India from looking at China through the lens of competition. But it may also be so because there is a consensus among Chinese analysts that India is not in the same competitive league as perhaps China is, especially when it comes to bolstering the growth and development of Global South countries. Hence, Chinese analysts play on India's domestic economic challenges to make the case that India cannot

serve the developmental requirements of developing countries, all the while ignoring the hurdles faced by the slowing Chinese economy as well as the failures of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

## 2. Pitting Chinese Inclusiveness against Indian ‘Opportunism’

As highlighted above, in how Chinese analysts assess India’s engagements with the Global South, they make India out to be an unscrupulous actor. This most prominently plays out in analysts’ descriptions of India’s engagements as ‘opportunistic’. In Zhou Bo’s own words, “[Indian Prime Minister] *Modi’s government is at best pragmatic and at worst opportunistic.*”<sup>15</sup>

A few common examples are often cited to demonstrate this:

- Zhang’s paper makes the case that the Indian government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi operates on an ‘India-first’ policy approach, and does not truly take up responsibilities akin to a leader. In that sense, PM Modi’s decision to skip two ‘Non-Alignment Movement’ Summits in 2016 and 2019 reflected, in the Chinese perspective, a sense of pragmatism that was not desirable to Global South countries.<sup>16</sup> Even though India has expressed that the realities of the current global order have changed drastically from when NAM was first convened, Zhang has attempted to portray that the decision was motivated by India’s increasing alignment with the West.

- A detailed research report published in November 2023 in the *Pacific Journal* of the Eurasian System Science Research Association, a Chinese think tank, claimed that the reason for India’s “re-kindled” diplomacy towards the Global South is that it needs the support of the grouping for power projection.<sup>17</sup> The report states:

*“The recognition of a permanent seat on the UN Security Council is seen by the Modi government as a symbol of status that matches India’s growing economic strength. In recent years, the Modi government has intensified its lobbying and outreach to the Global South, with UN Security Council reform frequently appearing on India’s Global South agenda.”*

Citing an Indian political commentator, the report once again uses the arguments made by Indian scholars to state, “*advocating for the reform of international multilateral institutions to become the spokesperson and defender of the interests of the ‘Global South’ is one of the top priorities of India’s foreign policy.*” Hence, the report intertwines India’s endeavours to associate with and lead the Global South with its goal of reforming the UN-centered international order to suit national interests.<sup>18</sup>

- The argument surrounding India’s attempts to use the Global South as a stepping stone towards fulfilling its global power ambitions, is also reflected in the above-referenced article from *Sohu*.<sup>19</sup> In it, the writer makes the case:

The Eurasian System Science Research Association (ESSRA) states itself to be an “independent legal entity,” but under the supervision of the Ministry of Science & Technology of China. Its Honorary Chairman, Jiang Zhenghua, was former Vice-Chairman of the National People’s Congress, and its Chairman, Zhong Ershun, is a researcher with the Chinese Academy of Sciences in Beijing (a State Council-supervised research institution).

*“India might aim to highlight its central role among Global South countries by not inviting China, thereby reducing China's influence in the region. On the other hand, India might also be trying to send a message to the international community: that India is an indispensable force in the affairs of the Global South. For India, sending this signal could undoubtedly help further elevate its international standing and influence.”*

With this context in mind, China's bid to lead and represent the Global South may seem much more palatable, given that China projects itself as magnanimous, investing in the growth of developing countries without any vested interest.

### 3. The 'Pro-West' Angle

A common concern reflected in Chinese analytical views on almost any issue pertaining to India, is the closeness between India and Western countries, particularly the US. Coming back to the case of PM Modi skipping two NAM Summits, the *Pacific Journal* report expresses:<sup>20</sup>

*“After Narendra Modi took office as Prime Minister in 2014, he made two key adjustments to India's non-aligned diplomacy:*

- *Distancing from the Global South identity: Modi skipped the Non-Aligned Movement meetings, focusing instead on the 'Neighbourhood First' policy and a tough stance toward Pakistan, portraying a strongman image both domestically and*

*internationally. His China policy became more adventurous and assertive... the vision of jointly reforming the global governance system with China [sic] is on the verge of collapse.”*

- ***Prioritising ‘Pro-Western’ diplomacy:** The Modi government shifted from collaborating with China to balance the West, to strengthening security ties with the US and Western powers to counterbalance China, leading to the erosion of India’s Global South identity.”*

The report, in essence, represents how most Chinese analysts on the subject simplistically equate India’s closer partnership with the West, as a subversion of its alignment with the Global South. This “pro-Western diplomacy” is also framed as the means through which India ruined any possibilities of joint collaboration with China to shape the ‘Asian century’, and eroded its chances of representing the ‘Global South’.

India has often pitched itself as a ‘voice’ and not a leader of the Global South, and the goal of being this voice is to act as a ‘bridge’ between the Global South and the Global North (conventionally understood as a grouping of developed countries). Here, too, analysts find India’s proposal to be a bridge problematic, stating that its ‘pro-Westernism’ is a rebuttal to the Global South countries’ joint experiences with colonialism and financial repression. As explained by Hu Shisheng, Director of the Institute for South Asian Studies at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), in an interview for *Jiefang Daily* in August 2024, “*India’s major diplomatic strategy involves simultaneously engaging with the Global South and the West.*”<sup>21</sup>

Such writings hence pit the visions and principles of the Global South and North, as seen through the Chinese lens, as diametrically opposed.

Further, Zhou states in his *SCMP* article that India's articulation of its Global South approach as that of a 'bridge' with the Global North, is a mere display of modesty. Further, he questions:<sup>22</sup>

*“But, in a globalised world, why would any Global South country need to reach the Global North through an Indian bridge? The only thing that looks somewhat like a bridge is the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor in which India has a key role. But this is a US-led project. And it will probably never come to fruition due to the Gaza conflict, which threatens to spread across the region.”*

Zhang Jie similarly criticises Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's statement<sup>23</sup> regarding India being a “South-Western power,” by arguing that it is a meagre effort to “*maintain close ties with the "Global North" to better safeguard its national interests and create a favourable external environment for its development... while emphasising its Global South identity.*” This is even though Jaishankar's statement was more nuanced, in that he said, “*India would continue to be a more South-Western power than the West may desire.*” Here, India's ‘Global South identity’ is again pitted against its proximity with the West, in an attempt to undermine India's position on and vision for the group.



Finally, in commentaries describing India's pro-West inclinations, Chinese writers often instruct India on the perils of its 'alignment'. For example, Liu Zongyi, a Research Director at the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, and a regular writer on India-related affairs in China, stated in his April 2024 article for *Huanqiu* (the Chinese-language version of *Global Times*):<sup>24</sup>

*“Although the West hopes to use India to divide developing countries and marginalize China’s influence among them, it is unwilling to provide substantial material support to help India become a true leader of the ‘Global South.’”*

Liu has often made the case that India is slowly turning into a “pawn” of the West.<sup>25</sup> His commentary on India's bid for Global South leadership can hence be seen as an attempt to communicate the fear in China that this transformation may soon be complete. This instructional language is especially stylistic of Liu, given that he is one of the most read Chinese scholars on India-related issues, both in India and abroad.

## IV. Conclusion

In all, Chinese analytical views on India as the “voice of the Global South,” are deeply rooted in a sense of competition even though they project China’s willingness to cooperate more than compete. However, China and the Global South are presented as helpless, because of India’s “opportunism” and “pro-Westernism.” China’s indispensable role as a representative of the Global South, especially in terms of its contribution to developing countries’ growth and development, is again a feature of the competitive lens Chinese writings on the subject deploy, in that its economic might is contended against India’s lack of comprehensive national power. India’s ambitions to become a global power are shown as built on the back of support from the Global South, and its vision to act as a North-South bridge are hence portrayed as futile.

India and China are continuing to inevitably compete in not just representation of the Global South, but also in economic, technological and military domains, in general. In this regard, such narratives emerging from China are highly important to take into account to develop counter-narratives to support the Indian approach to contemporary partnerships.

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