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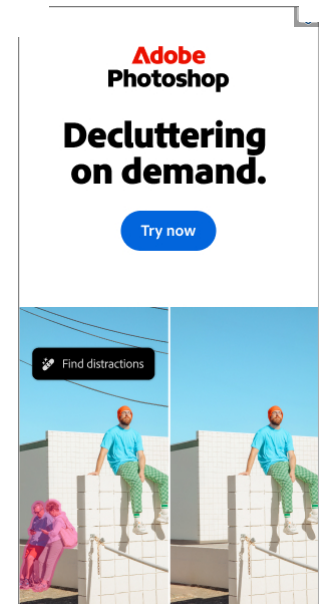
THE DEBATE | OPINION

A Roadmap for South-South Cooperation

Greater Global South solidarity is the only viable solution in the face of the seismic political shifts in the West.

By **Fifa A. Rahman, Benjamin Djoudalbaye, J. Carolyn Gomes, Nagham Kharlil, J. Carlos Lara, and Munira Mustaffa**

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The Nucleo Storico: Abstractions exhibition at the 60th Venice Biennale, which featured 37 artists from the Global South, in Venice, Italy, May 7, 2024.

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Of late, whether in the days following the Trump administration's shutdown of USAID, or in the ongoing conflict in Palestine, there has been much said about where the United States stands and how it will continue to interact with the rest of the world.

Writing in The Guardian, former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown [wrote that](#) “the era when American leaders valued their soft power is coming to an end.” Bruno Maçães, the former Portuguese secretary of state for European affairs, critiquing Washington’s approach in Gaza, [stated](#) in TIME magazine, “No one could accuse the U.S. of double standards. What it is vulnerable to is the accusation that it no longer has any standards at all.”

Professor Ntobeko Ntusi, chair of medicine at the University of Cape Town, [commenting](#) on the USAID shutdown said that “governments in the Global South must come to the realization that the prosperity of their people lies not in the hands of the U.S. White House, but in their own agency, development and self-reliance.” The Turkish head of intelligence, Hakan Fidan, [stated](#) that the U.S. president’s actions are “a wake-up call for us to unite and design our own center of gravity.”

Challenging the Status Quo

More has been said on the decline of Western reliance and influence more broadly, with former British diplomat Samir Puri describing in his [recent book](#) the notion of “Westlessness,” i.e., the “declining slice of the global pie held by Western nations and

peoples.” He argued that “in demographic, economic, military, and cultural terms, we are hurtling towards a far more diverse global future.”

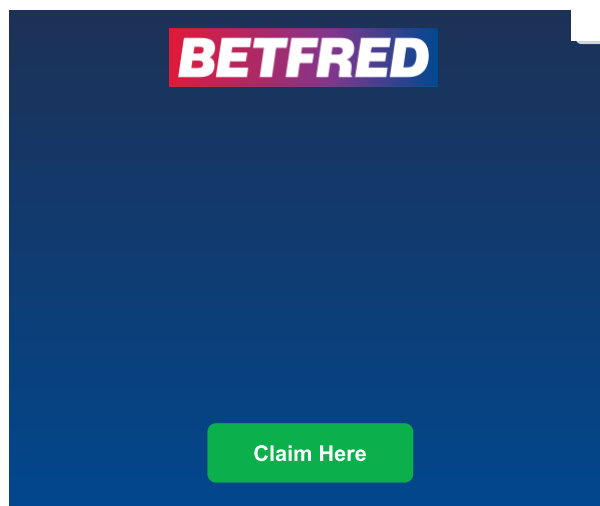
Preparations for this more diverse global future should have happened yesterday. We do see pockets of Global South/global majority cooperation, such as meetings between Global South heads of state at the recent World Governments Summit in Dubai, and groupings such as the Hague Group, which consist of the governments of Belize, Bolivia, Colombia, Cuba, Honduras, Malaysia, Namibia, Senegal, and South Africa.

The recent developments in the Middle East also signal a shift in the center of global political gravity. Amid the ongoing Israel-Gaza war, Arab and Muslim-majority nations, including Turkiye, Qatar, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, have emerged as pivotal actors, leading both public negotiations and behind-the-scenes diplomacy, despite their internal differences. This underscores the growing diplomatic influence of the MENA region on the global stage. Furthermore, following the fall of the Syrian regime in December 2024, the Arab and Muslim world swiftly united in support of the new interim government and the Syrian people, highlighting a

deepening commitment to south-south collaboration and solidarity.

And while we see these vignettes of solidarity among Global South nations, we see no cohesive roadmap for the next 20 or 30 years that focuses on the south-south economic, security, cultural, climate, and public health agenda.

Emerging Initiatives and the Need for Cohesion



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Such a roadmap should enshrine within it a number of key principles and efforts. The aforementioned Professor Ntusi called for leaders in the Global South to “create the conditions that enable scientists in their countries to take ownership of their fields” – an idea that we wholly and fully support and must include robust research budgets, cooperation and consolidation of research with scientists elsewhere in the Global South, and increased autonomy for scientists to flourish. There also needs to be a concerted economic agenda for south-south cooperation, including via more direct trade/flight routes and substitution of commercial products and commodities that can be produced in the Global South at a higher quality.

However, the future of multilateralism as it stands remains uncertain and continues to reflect colonial power structures. As such, any effective roadmap must pursue a dual strategy: revitalizing multilateralism that overcomes historical divisions and the legacy of colonial structures that still shape international

relations, while simultaneously investing in a robust plurilateral approaches among Global South nations that can advance their collective interests without waiting for Global North consensus. This strategic plurilateralism will be crucial for building negotiating power and creating alternative mechanisms for cooperation.

Any effective roadmap must incorporate several key principles.

1. **Scientific autonomy:** Creating conditions for Global South scientists to take ownership of their fields, with robust research budgets and south-south research collaboration.
2. **Technological self-determination:** Advancing investment in digital infrastructure and regional innovation to reduce reliance on foreign technology monopolies. Investing in local solutions and securing data governance to foster economic resilience and digital autonomy.
3. **Public health self-reliance:** Self-reliance in public health financing, and increased south-south cooperation on research and human resource training
4. **Economic cooperation:** A south-south economic agenda that reduces reliance on western products and capital, and

increases trade routes and intercontinental supply-chain strengthening

5. **Pharmaceutical innovation:** A new approach to pharmaceutical innovation and access – including regional manufacturing, increased R&D budgets for Global South scientists to boost innovation, and a concerted effort to use existing flexibilities to access more affordable medications
6. **Religious freedoms:** Reinforcing existing interfaith initiatives and legal and social frameworks that protect religious practices across faiths while also safeguarding the rights of individuals with no religious affiliation. These efforts should be culturally grounded, ensuring that protections are meaningful within local contexts while upholding inclusive and pluralistic values.
7. **Pragmatic security cooperation:** Developing incremental security partnerships that prioritize achievable goals. This should focus on practical cooperation in non-sensitive areas first: coordinated responses to transnational crime, disaster relief operations, and peacekeeping missions where mutual interests clearly align.

8. Integrated security frameworks: Establishing clear protocols for intelligence sharing with robust safeguards, addressing jurisdictional conflicts, and creating mechanisms to resolve overlapping territorial claims are essential prerequisites before deeper integration can occur. Critically, these security frameworks should be intentionally linked to regional economic development plans, recognizing that economic stability and opportunity are fundamental to sustainable security outcomes.

Challenges and Bottlenecks

Operationalizing these goals will require identification and mitigation of potential and existing challenges and bottlenecks. Historical mistrust between Global South nations continue to impede consensus and progress on common goals, as evidenced by the ongoing tensions between India and Pakistan. This pattern of regional friction is not limited to longstanding rivalries; even typically stable relationships are showing signs of deterioration, as illustrated by mounting friction between [India and Bangladesh](#).


Such emerging conflicts highlight how quickly South-South cooperation can be derailed by bilateral tensions and continued

geopolitical maneuvering by global powers disrupts regional integration efforts. For instance, China's Belt and Road Initiative, while providing infrastructure investment, has created [debt dependency concerns](#). Grassroots engagement is essential to realize these goals and create accountability – but as illustrated by [CIVICUS rankings](#), several Global South countries, including Afghanistan, Cuba, and Eritrea, continue to have closed or heavily restricted civic spaces.

There also continues to be significant capacity gaps – in terms of defense, sustainability and climate, and public health, to name a few. For example, the World Health Organization [has projected](#) that there will be a shortage of 6.1 million health workers in Africa by 2030 with status quo investments, which in turn will have deleterious impacts on the continent's well-being and productivity.

According to [SIPRI 2023](#), military capabilities show stark disparities: Global South regions like Africa (2.1 percent), South America (2.1 percent), and Southeast Asia (2.0 percent) each contribute only a small fraction of global military expenditure, despite containing numerous countries and substantial populations. Meanwhile, the five biggest spenders (the U.S., China,

Russia, India, and Saudi Arabia) account for 61 percent of world military spending. This concentration of military resources among a handful of nations reflects broader geopolitical power imbalances.

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Similarly in the security domain, the digital security divide remains stark, with the [Global Cybersecurity Index 2024](#) showing many Global South nations ranking in the bottom tier for cybersecurity capabilities. This [weakness](#) stems from insufficient technical resources, underdeveloped legal frameworks governing digital spaces, and widespread gaps in cybersecurity awareness and training programs.

Implementation Pathways

Several mechanisms can facilitate this roadmap. The first is regional blocs and groupings like ASEAN, MERCOSUR, The Arab League, SADC, ECOWAS, and BRICS. These should more actively integrate intercontinental South-South integration and cooperation meetings and decisions and can serve as building blocks for wider cooperation. The second is head of state meetings, such as the African Union Assembly and World Governments Summit, which can drive high-level political commitment at the highest levels. The third is international conferences and events like that Climate COPs and World Health Assembly, which can serve as platforms for global engagement and provide opportunities to formalize collaborative initiatives.

In addition, we call for an urgent Global South heads of state summit that both plots and operationalizes this roadmap. The rewards would be substantial: more resilient economies less vulnerable to external shocks, healthcare systems responsive to local needs, indigenous solutions to climate challenges, and security conditions that are not predicated on the elections of a few Global North states.

The time for fragmented responses has passed. What is needed now is a comprehensive strategy that harnesses collective strengths while addressing shared vulnerabilities. The foundations exist; what remains is the political will and practical vision to build upon them.

The path to a more equitable global order begins with the Global South recognizing its collective potential and acting with strategic unity. Only through intentional cooperation can the promise of a “far more diverse global future” be realized as an opportunity rather than a challenge.

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AUTHORS

GUEST AUTHOR

Fifa A. Rahman

Fifa A. Rahman, Ph.D. (Malaysia), is global health expert and principal consultant at Matahari Global Solutions.

GUEST AUTHOR

Benjamin Djoudalbaye

Benjamin Djoudalbaye, M.D. (Chad), is an expert in African global health diplomacy.

GUEST AUTHOR

J. Carolyn Gomes

J. Carolyn Gomes, MBBS (Jamaica), is a physician and recipient of the U.N. Human Rights Prize and Order of Jamaica.

GUEST AUTHOR

Nagham Kharlil

Nagham Kharlili, Ph.D. (Syria), is an independent researcher and expert on religious extremism and tech.

GUEST AUTHOR



J. Carlos Lara

J. Carlos Lara, LL.M. (Chile), is a human rights advocate and executive director at Derechos Digitales.

GUEST AUTHOR

Munira Mustaffa

Munira Mustaffa, MSc (Malaysia), is a conflict and security expert at Chasseur Group.

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