From Solidarity to Connectivity: The Global South's New Geopolitics

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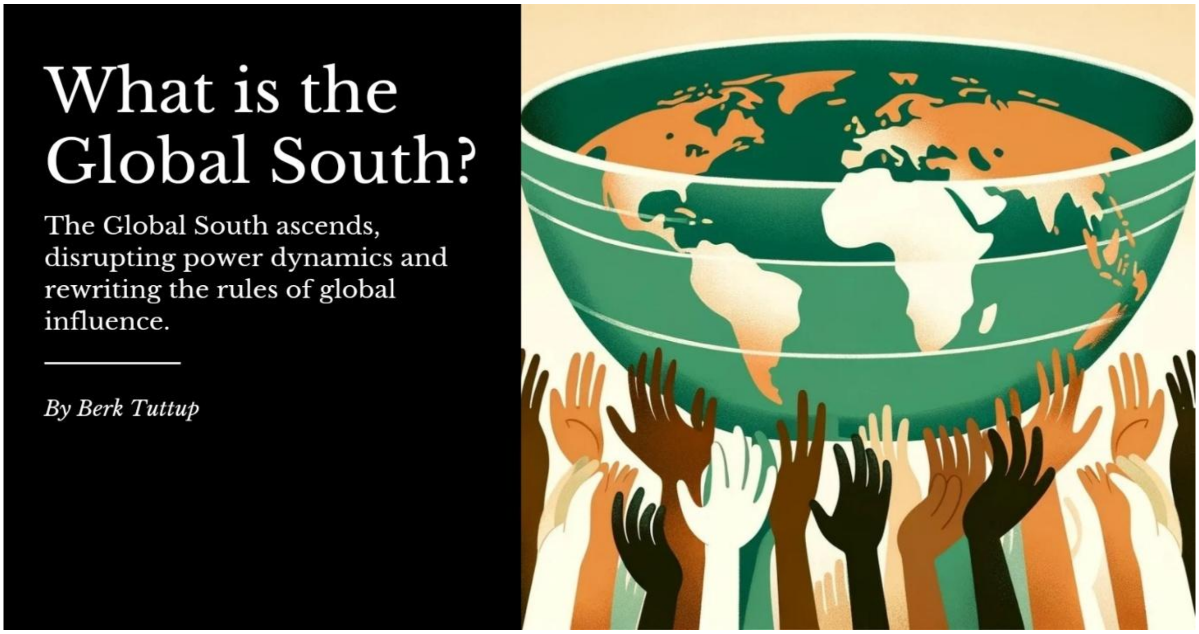
Introduction



Source: Foreign Analysis

For much of the post-colonial period, the Global South was brought together by a shared experience. Countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East built solidarity around decolonization, sovereignty and demands for a fairer international order. The Non-aligned Movement and the Group of 77 reflected this identity. Today, however, the forces reshaping the Global South are increasingly economic, technological and strategic.

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The most important change is the rise of connectivity. Trade routes, ports, energy networks, digital infrastructure, supply chains and financial systems are creating new links among developing countries. South-South trade has expanded sharply. UN Trade and Development estimates that South-South merchandise exports rose from about 500 billion dollars in 1995 to 6.8 trillion dollars in 2025, while 57 percent of developing country exports now go to other developing economies. This suggests that the Global South is no longer a political category. It is becoming a connected economic space.

The expansion of BRICS reflects this shift. Its members are seeking cooperation in trade, finance, technology, transport and digital infrastructure, while discussions around alternative payment systems and development financing point towards a more diversified international system. Yet this connectivity does not mean that the Global South speaks with one voice. Its countries also have different interests, strategic partnerships and security concerns.

The new geopolitics of the Global South therefore needs to be understood beyond the old language of solidarity. How economic and technological connectivity is changing power, influence and strategic choices across the developing world is becoming a central question for international politics.

From Political Solidarity to Economic Interdependence

he idea of the Global South was originally shaped by a common political experience. Many countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East had experienced colonial rule and later worked together to protect their sovereignty and increase their influence in international affairs. The Non-Aligned Movement and the Group of 77 reflected this approach. At that time, cooperation among developing countries was largely based on political solidarity and a shared demand for a more equal international system.

That basis of cooperation still exists, but economic interests are becoming increasingly important. Trade, investment, manufacturing and supply chains are creating stronger connections among developing countries. Countries do not necessarily need to have the same foreign policy positions to become important economic partners. They can cooperate because they need each other's markets, resources, products, investment and production capacity.

The growth of South-South trade shows this change. According to UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD), South-South merchandise trade increased from about $500 billion in 1995 to $6.8 trillion in 2025. The share of developing country exports going to other developing economies also increased from 38 percent in 1995 to 57 percent in 2025.[2] This means that developing countries are becoming important markets for one another rather than depending only on trade with advanced economies. Recent efforts to reduce trade barriers also show this shift. The São Paulo Round Protocol of the Global System of Trade Preferences is now one ratification away from entering into force. The participating economies represent a market of around $18 trillion and more than 4 billion people.[3]

The Global South is therefore not becoming a single political bloc. Instead, it is becoming more economically connected. Shared history remains important, but shared markets are increasingly shaping relationships among developing countries.

Connectivity is Creating New Geopolitical Geography

The geography of the Global South is being reshaped not only by political alliances but also by infrastructure. The central question is increasingly not simply who has influence in developing countries, but who connects them to one another and to global markets. Ports, railways, highways, economic corridors, energy networks and digital infrastructure are creating new economic relationships across Asia, Africa and the Middle East. The Asian Development Bank's Asian Economic Integration Report 2026 notes that regional integration in Asia and the Pacific has continued to deepen, with trade remaining its primary driver.[4]

Maritime connectivity is particularly important because more than 80 percent of the volume of international merchandise trade moves by sea. This makes ports and shipping networks important points of economic and strategic connectivity. The World Bank estimates that South Asia's ongoing port development, from planning to construction, represents around $73 billion, while

[2] United Nations Trade and Development (UNCTAD), "After Nearly Two Decades, South-South Trade Agreement Nears Entry into Force," July 2026, https://unctad.org/news/after-nearly-two-decades-south-south-trade-agreement-nears-entry-force

[3] United Nations Trade and Development (UNCTAD), "Global System of Trade Preferences among Developing Countries," accessed September 20, 2026, https://unctad.org/topic/trade-agreements/global-system-of-trade-preferences

[4] Asian Development Bank, Asian Economic Integration Report 2026: Leveraging Regional Cooperation and Integration to Navigate Global Uncertainties, February 2026. ADB report

approximately 75 percent of the region's international trade by value is transported by sea. Yet intra-regional trade remains only about 5 percent of South Asia's total trade, indicating significant unrealized potential from better connectivity.[5]

This is where infrastructure becomes a form of geopolitical influence. A port can determine which markets a country can efficiently reach; a railway can redirect trade flows; an economic corridor can connect previously separate production centres; and digital infrastructure can integrate economies without physical borders. The World Bank, for example, estimates that more efficient transport links between Bangladesh and India could raise national income by up to 17 percent in Bangladesh and 8 percent in India.[6]

Bangladesh therefore occupies an important position in this emerging geography. Chattogram remains the maritime gateway for more than 90 percent of Bangladesh's international trade volume and 98 percent of its container traffic, while the planned Bay Terminal is intended to accommodate larger vessels and improve the country's maritime connectivity.[7] At the same time, Bangladesh is increasingly linked to wider BBIN, BIMSTEC and Bay of Bengal connectivity initiatives. The strategic significance of such projects goes beyond infrastructure itself: countries that control, finance or host important connectivity nodes can influence the direction of trade, investment and regional economic integration.

BRICS and the Search for a More Connected Financial System

The expansion of BRICS reflects a broader transformation in how countries of the Global South are seeking to organize their economic relationships. BRICS now consists of 11 members, following the admission of Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Indonesia, while a separate partner-country mechanism has brought countries including Malaysia, Nigeria, Thailand, Kazakhstan and Vietnam into a wider network.[8] The significance of this expansion is not simply the growth of the group. It creates a larger platform through which

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[5] World Bank, "Maritime Ports, Regional Trade and Shared Prosperity in South Asia," January 15, 2025. World Bank source

[6] World Bank, "Seamless Transport Connectivity Can Create Significant Economic Gains for Bangladesh and India," March 9, 2021. World Bank source

[7] World Bank, "World Bank Helps Bangladesh Develop Bay Terminal," June 28, 2024. World Bank source

[8] RICS Brasil, "About the BRICS," Government of Brazil, 2025, https://brics.br/en/about-the-brics; BRICS Brasil, "Vietnam Joins BRICS as a Partner Country," June 13, 2025, https://brics.br/en/news/vietnam-joins-brics-as-a-partner-country

developing and emerging economies can discuss trade, finance and development outside traditional institutional channels.

Financial connectivity is becoming an important part of this process. BRICS discussions have increasingly focused on local-currency transactions, cross-border payments and greater interoperability between national payment systems. The objective is not necessarily to establish a single alternative currency, but to create more options for conducting trade and financing without depending entirely on established financial channels. This distinction is important because BRICS members have different economic structures, monetary policies and strategic interests.

The New Development Bank (NDB) provides a practical example of this approach. At its 2026 Annual Meeting, NDB President Dilma Rousseff identified local-currency financing as a strategic priority and highlighted trade finance, guarantees, risk-sharing mechanisms and co-financing as tools for expanding development finance.[9] The Bank has also been developing country-specific local-currency instruments; in 2026, it discussed an Indian rupee bond program designed to finance infrastructure while reducing foreign-exchange risks.

This does not mean that the existing international financial system is being replaced. Rather, the emerging trend is toward greater diversification of financial connections. For many developing economies, access to financing in domestic currencies can reduce exposure to exchange-rate volatility, while stronger South–South financial institutions can provide additional sources of development capital. At the same time, differences among BRICS members, limited currency convertibility and the continuing importance of established global financial markets constrain the depth of this integration. The more significant development, therefore, may be the gradual construction of additional financial channels alongside the existing system, rather than a sudden shift away from it.

From Physical Roads to Digital Networks

The geography of connectivity is no longer defined only by ports, highways and railways. Increasingly, it is shaped by submarine cables, data centres, cloud infrastructure, satellites, mobile networks, digital payments and artificial intelligence. Digital connectivity is becoming an essential part of economic integration, allowing countries to participate in global trade and services without relying entirely on physical proximity. In 2025, around 6 billion people, 74 percent of the world's population were using the internet, yet 2.2 billion remained offline, most of them in low- and middle-income countries.[10]

The digital divide is also becoming more complex. The issue is no longer simply whether a country has internet access, but whether that access is fast, affordable, reliable and secure. ITU data shows that 5G covered 55 percent of the global population in 2025, but coverage reached 84 percent in high-income countries compared with only 4 percent in low-income countries.[11] This gap matters because advanced connectivity increasingly supports artificial intelligence, cloud computing,

[9] New Development Bank, "Opening Remarks by H.E. Mrs. Dilma Rousseff, President of the New Development Bank at NDB 2026 Annual Meeting," May 2026, NDB 2026 Annual Meeting remark

[10] International Telecommunication Union (ITU), Measuring Digital Development: Facts and Figures 2025, 2025, ITU Statistics: Internet Use in 2025

[11] International Telecommunication Union (ITU), Measuring Digital Development: Facts and Figures 2025

digital services and data-intensive industries. Countries with stronger digital infrastructure can therefore attract investment and participate in higher-value parts of the global digital economy.

This creates a new dimension of geopolitical competition. Submarine cables carry the overwhelming majority of international data traffic, while data centres, cloud platforms and digital payment systems increasingly determine how information and economic transactions move across borders. Control over these systems can affect not only commercial activity but also data governance, cybersecurity, technological standards and access to emerging technologies. The ITU itself identifies submarine cables and satellites as important elements of resilient global connectivity.

For the Global South, this creates both an opportunity and a risk. Digital infrastructure can reduce geographical disadvantages and connect developing economies to global markets. At the same time, dependence on foreign technology, infrastructure providers and digital platforms can create new forms of technological dependence. The central question is therefore whether digital connectivity will help the Global South close existing technological gaps or reproduce them in a new form.

From Resource Suppliers to Strategic Production Networks

The growing importance of the Global South is increasingly tied to its role in the global supply of critical minerals, energy, agricultural commodities and industrial inputs. The energy transition is particularly changing the strategic value of resources such as lithium, nickel, cobalt, graphite, copper and rare earth elements. Demand for these minerals is expected to rise substantially as electric vehicles, renewable energy systems, electricity networks and advanced technologies expand. The International Energy Agency projects that, under its stated-policies scenario, lithium demand could grow fivefold by 2040, while graphite and nickel demand could double.[12]

Yet possessing resources does not necessarily translate into control over the economic value they generate. The major vulnerability lies in processing and refining. In 2025, the leading refiner accounted for about 70 percent of global refined supply across key energy minerals, with China

[12] International Energy Agency, Global Critical Minerals Outlook 2025 (Paris: IEA, 2025), "Overview of Outlook for Key Minerals."

dominating the processing of most minerals and Indonesia playing a major role in nickel.[13] The concentration has also become an economic-security concern as export restrictions and supply disruptions increasingly affect strategic industries.

This creates an important opportunity for resource-rich countries in the Global South. Rather than remaining exporters of raw materials, they can seek greater participation in processing, refining, component manufacturing and downstream industries. Indonesia's development of a domestic nickel-processing industry illustrates how resource policy can be linked with industrial development. Similar possibilities exist across Africa and Latin America, where resource endowments can potentially support new production networks if combined with infrastructure, investment, technology and skills.

The challenge, however, is that diversification remains uneven. The IEA's 2026 assessment finds that investment outside dominant suppliers is still concentrated more heavily in mining than in refining and manufacturing capacity.[14] This points to the central issue for the emerging Global South: who captures the value created by its resources? If countries can connect natural resources with processing capacity, manufacturing and technology, they could become strategic production partners rather than simply suppliers. The future significance of the Global South may therefore depend not only on what it possesses, but on how effectively it connects resources to higher-value stages of production.

Conclusion: Connectivity Without Unity?

The transformation of the Global South should not be understood simply as the emergence of a unified political bloc challenging the Global North. A more significant change is taking place beneath the level of formal alliances. Countries across Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East are becoming more closely connected through trade, infrastructure, finance, technology, energy and production networks. These connections are creating new forms of interdependence even where political interests remain different.

This does not mean that the Global South is becoming politically unified. China and India continue to have competing strategic interests, while Gulf states pursue their own economic and security

[13] International Energy Agency, Global Critical Minerals Outlook 2026 (Paris: IEA, 2026), "Market Overview.
[14] International Energy Agency, Global Critical Minerals Outlook 2026 (Paris: IEA, 2026), "Executive Summary."

priorities. African, Asian and Latin American countries also maintain relationships with the United States, Europe, China, Russia and one another according to their individual interests. Economic cooperation therefore does not necessarily produce common political positions.

Yet this diversity should not obscure the importance of the emerging networks. A country does not need to belong to a single political bloc to gain strategic significance. A state that hosts an important port, controls a critical mineral, provides a major manufacturing link, develops digital infrastructure or becomes an important financial hub can acquire influence through its position within wider networks. Connectivity itself is becoming a source of power.

This also explains why the future of the Global South may be defined less by solidarity than by strategic interdependence. Countries are likely to cooperate where their interests overlap while maintaining different partnerships elsewhere. The result may be neither a unified Global South nor a return to the old hierarchy, but a more complex system in which influence is distributed through multiple economic and technological connections.

The central transformation, therefore, is geographical as much as political. Power is increasingly being created through the connections between markets, ports, financial systems, technologies, resources and production networks. The Global South's growing significance will ultimately depend not only on what its countries possess, but on how effectively they connect those assets to one another and to the wider global economy.