

The Global South and Human Security*

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Abstract: The term Global South is an oxymoron, which combines contradictory notions. This article examines the background to the emergence of this specific term by comparing it with group labels such as the Third World, emerging economies, BRICS, and the G20. The idea of the Third World captured people’s liberatory imagination worldwide, though this appellation was initially given from Europe. The acronym BRICS was coined by an American investor but eventually appropriated by the five nations. An influential interpretation of the Global South was proposed in the 2013 Human Development Report. Since some countries of the South managed to catch up with the West thanks to the post-Cold War globalization, it was argued that there was no reason to break the ties between North and South. However, when the war in Ukraine broke out, many developing countries did not align themselves with either Russia or the West. It is at this point that the West has rediscovered the utility of the term Global South. Finally, this article argues that the concept of human security and dignity may have the potential to repair our deeply divided world.

Keywords: Global South, Third World, BRICS, G20, Bandung, human security

Introduction: The Global South as an Oxymoron

An oxymoron is a rhetorical device in which the author combines expressions that logically contradict one another to achieve an effect that prompts the reader to think deeply. “Hot ice” is a physical impossibility, but phrases such as “be cruel to be kind,” “an open secret,” and “the living dead” deftly express the composite, complex nature of existence. A similar pattern can be seen in the kanji (Chinese characters) used to write the word for “crisis” in Japanese: 危機 (*kiki*), which is the word combining the negativity of “danger” (危険; *kiken*) with the positivity of “opportunity” (機会; *kikai*).

The expression “Global South” follows this same contradictory pattern, combining the whole (Global) and a part (South). Nobody appears to have clearly defined this term when it started to be used. If the intention is to note the upsurge of nations downtrodden in the periphery of the global system as a result of colonialism

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and racism, we could refer simply to the rise of the “countries in the South.” Why, then, is the adjective “global” appended?

It was in the 1960s that scholars began to write broadly of the “North-South problem,”¹ reflecting the global system whereby richer, developed countries (the former imperial powers) are concentrated in the Northern Hemisphere and the poorer developing countries (the former colonies) around the Equator through the Southern Hemisphere. More than half a century later, with a number of emerging economies that belong to the South achieving remarkable growth, some began to argue that the North-South framework had been losing its validity. Ironically, it was precisely at this point that the discussion about the power of the Global South emerged.

This article examines the background to the emergence of this term and tries to present an argumentative inquiry into the existence or otherwise of a normative value that could potentially tie the Global South and the whole world together.

1. The Third World and the Global South

There is a saying, “Make haste slowly.” In order to comprehend the context in which the Global South framework became mainstream, let us first consider the related concept, the Third World. The meanings and connotations this term signifies are similar to, but subtly different from, those of the Global South.

It is possible to identify who first used the term “Third World” in print. The author was the French demographer Alfred Sauvy. In a short essay penned in 1952, Sauvy likened international society in the era of national liberation and the Cold War to French society on the eve of the Revolution, describing the group of countries struggling with famine and population growth as a Third World after the Third Estate under the *Ancien Régime* of France. The other two “estates” in pre-revolutionary France were the nobility and the clergy, and their equivalents in the contemporary world were the capitalist bloc and the socialist bloc (Sauvy 1952). This concept of the Third World was later adopted in radical left rhetoric, and Frantz Fanon’s discussion in *Les damnés de la terre [The Wretched of the Earth]* is considered a classic work (Fanon 1961).

Some great powers also responded positively to the conception of the Third World. One of these indeed was France. After the end of the Algerian War in 1962, President Charles de Gaulle pursued partnerships with the Third World as the keystone of French diplomacy. By positioning France as a self-appointed “window to the West” for the Third World, de Gaulle sought to prevent the Third World from drifting toward the Eastern Bloc and to strategically boost France’s standing in world affairs. Regardless of France’s intentions, this offered the countries of the South an alternative to siding with the United States and the Soviet Union.

Another of these great powers was China under Deng Xiaoping. Continuing on the diplomatic trajectory set by Mao Zedong, Deng advocated the “Three Worlds Theory” on the stage of the United Nations in the 1970s. This Chinese interpretation

¹ The term “North-South” problem in contrast to the “East-West” confrontation is said to have been coined by Oliver Franks of Lloyds Bank in 1959.

of the world differed from the pre-existing Third World theory in that it placed the superpowers of the United States and the Soviet Union as the First World, positioned China as a leader of the Third World that was challenging the global order, and situated Western Europe and Japan in the Second World between these two worlds, equivalent to the “petty bourgeoisie” in the vocabulary of class struggle². While based on the two-dimensional schema of opposition between the North (including the Soviet Union) and the South, this view acknowledged the existence of ambiguous “intermediate zones” and sought to expand the scope for Chinese diplomacy in the complex adversarial relationships constituted by all these different forces.

How did the Third World see itself? It appears that the governments and peoples of regions belonging to the Third World did not necessarily use the term frequently. Typically, people who took to the streets in the French Revolution did not identify with the so-called Third Estate but asserted themselves as citizens of the Republic. The terms Third World and Global South are similar in that they are appellations used by others seeking solidarity, rather than self-designations.

The framework that the countries of the Third World formed on their own initiative was the Non-Aligned Movement, the first official meeting of which was held in 1961. This movement, which eschewed military ties with either the United States or the Soviet Union and instead sought gradually to form an alternative third bloc of independent nations, continued right throughout the Cold War, even though it did not make a significant impact on international politics. One of the leading proponents of the Non-Aligned Movement was Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito, who broke away from the Soviet Union and advocated socialist self-management.

2. The Post-Cold War Era and the Global South

With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, terms such as Third World and Non-Aligned fell out of general use. The Cold War came to an end, resulting that the conflict between East and West – the First and Second Worlds – evaporated (or at least appeared to have disappeared). It is unfeasible to talk of a “third” world when the world can no longer be divided into three parts.

The intellectuals of the Meiji period in Japan struggled to choose numerous sets of kanji (Chinese character) words to formulate equivalents of foreign terms they encountered in Western academic literature. China later re-imported many of these terms from the Japanese, while modern Japan has come to rely more heavily on rendering new Western terms in katakana phonetic script. Contemporary China, however, translates the latest concepts directly into Chinese by using Chinese own characters. For example, the term globalization (*mondialisation* in French) is rendered 全球化 in Chinese: an expression that ignites the imagination of readers who use Chinese characters much more than the Japanese katakana word: グローバリゼーション (*gurobarizeshon*). 全球化 visually expresses the connection of

² See Mao (2007) with a provocative introduction by Slavoj Žižek.

all points on the surface of our planet into a single complete whole.

In English, discussions of the “South” adding the adjective “Global” arose precisely in the context of the end of the Cold War and the subsequent acceleration of globalization (the formation of a single global economy). While it was the Brandt Report that established the term “North-South” formally in the vocabulary of development policy (Brandt 1980), the first document that officially took up and explicated the concept of the “Global South” was the 2013 Human Development Report of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Entitled *The Rise of the South*, this report explicitly used the term Global South, deploying diverse data to demonstrate that the locus of the global political economy was shifting from the North to the South (UNDP 2013).

Practically, the report described how countries such as Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, South Africa, and Turkey, while focusing on the role of states in development, were achieving positive outcomes in education, health, and other fields rather than just economic growth. It also emphasized that these countries had benefited from the open world economy. While it is essential to address the negative aspects of globalization such as widening income disparities, it is also undeniable that these newly emerging economies have attained rapid economic growth by making maximal use of global connectivity. The South will continue to need the North, and the North, too, will increasingly need the South. The ripples of growth will surely spread within the South as well.

The Global South has also been used in the language of struggle, just as the Third World used to be, to signify a globally connected agency of resistance to globalization. The expression “our internal Third World” was once in vogue, and now, many developed societies have internal “South” and countries of the South internal “North.”

In this way, the term Global South had begun to circulate by the 2010s, but it was still by no means in widespread use.

3. Emerging Economies and the Global South

Around the start of the 21st century, the term “emerging economies” (we have several synonyms such as emerging market, emerging states, emerging nations, and emerging countries) was more commonly used than the Global South.³ At the core of emerging nations was the group of countries known by the acronym BRICS: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. In 2022, the group of developed nations known as the G7 (which includes Japan) accounted for 30% of the world GDP (on a purchasing power parity basis), while BRICS stood at 32%, with China alone at 18% (IMF, *World Economic Outlook*). In terms of economic size, BRICS has already overtaken the G7.⁴

³ See the Springer book series: Emerging-state economy and international policy studies. <https://www.springer.com/series/16114>

⁴ The size of GDP of the G7 is still larger on a US dollar basis, but this conventional method of measurement may not last long: BRICS is pursuing de-dollarization and considering

The term BRICS was coined in 2001 by Goldman Sachs economist Jim O'Neill to denote a group of countries with high promise for investors. Over time, the usage of this acronym has been adopted by the countries in question themselves. BRICS and other emerging economies have strengthened their global presence as an autonomous group of developing nations, even as they face the ever-present threat of so-called "middle-income trap."

In this context, the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022 generated massive shockwaves. BRICS has been holding annual summits since 2009. China, India, Brazil, and South Africa are wary of imposing sanctions on their fellow, Russia, and have not closed the door of dialogue with the Eurasian former superpower. As many nations in the Global South fought hard to win their independence, very few of them actively support Russia's disregard for national sovereignty in invading Ukraine. Nonetheless, the reluctance to join in the harsh condemnation of Russia is shared among the countries of the Global South as well as the members of BRICS. Colonial rule by the Western powers denied the nations in the South their sovereignty for a century or more. Judging from voting patterns at the United Nations, the undeniable reality is that these countries are instinctively disinclined to align themselves vocally with the Western view of justice, which appears just and yet hypocritical, even if they do not give support to the Russian invasion either.

What this signifies is the emergence of a third global presence that engages with the West and Russia only on the basis of their respective merits. This presence needs to be named, but reinvoking the old vocabulary of Third World, Non-Aligned, and the like may be problematic. What is needed is a term that has the potential to accommodate the feelings of this group of majority nations and bring them back to an open world order. In my opinion, this is the context for the emergence of the term Global South and its popularization in the sphere of diplomacy. Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy used the G7 Hiroshima Summit as an opportunity to renew his dialogue with the Global South.

As the war in Ukraine drags on, it becomes increasingly difficult for Western countries to engage with BRICS, of which Russia is an original member. In May 2023, the United States noted the possibility that South Africa had supplied munitions to Russia, but the South African government publicly refuted this possibility. In the apartheid era, international society including both the United States and the Soviet Union imposed an arms embargo and other sanctions on the white government of South Africa, which was blatantly implementing apartheid policies. The post-apartheid government led by the African majority today would be disturbed by the suggestion that they would disregard sanctions.

China has been included in the category of emerging economies, but it is not certain if China will continue to be regarded as a part of the Global South. The 2013 UNDP report classified China as a country of the South, but when the Japanese government today commits to collaboration with the Global South, it is unlikely that China is considered a subject of such collaboration. China is an economic superpower closing in on the United States and is also a permanent member of the

adopting its own common currency.

United Nations Security Council. As US-China tensions intensify, the United States tries to exclude China from the category of developing country. Regardless of the intentions of the United States, in practical terms, China may already be too big to represent the South from within.

4. Africa and the Global South

Now that the legitimacy of BRICS as a collective, including Russia and China, wavers, the question is who will take the lead in the Global South. India, Brazil, and South Africa have a substantial presence in South Asia, Latin America, and sub-Saharan Africa, respectively, but they are not necessarily natural representatives of their respective regions. Given that the Global South is a holistic entity, we should pay more attention to its small and medium-sized parts.⁵

The G20 is an extension of the G7 group of nations, including not only BRICS but also influential nations and regions such as South Korea, Indonesia, Australia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Mexico, Argentina, and the European Union (EU). The foundation of G20's representativeness, however, is somewhat shaky. How do Bangladesh and Pakistan react when the spotlight is cast on India? What about Malaysia, when Indonesia is treated as the sole regional power in Southeast Asia?

Consider the case of Africa. Future projections by demographers at the United Nations show that by the beginning of the 22nd century, 40% of the world's entire population will live on the African continent, and 40% will be in Asia. This means that the vast majority, no less than 80%, of the world's people will be Africans and Asians.⁶ Although Africa's demographic presence will be enormous in the future, South Africa is the only African member of BRICS and the G20 at present. In light of economic size, however, countries such as Nigeria and Egypt have larger GDP than South Africa. In population terms, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, and Tanzania are all larger than South Africa. The African nations have worked adeptly at building consensus through the African Union (AU), which encompasses a number of large countries alongside many small and medium ones. If Western countries want to collaborate effectively with the Global South, they should try to understand the individual characteristics of the 50-plus sovereign states in Africa.

Kenya is a country that, while not so large in size, has a vibrant IT industry with a host of start-ups and is a popular destination for Western tourists. In September 2022, Kenya's newly inaugurated President William Ruto performed his first diplomatic duty by attending the funeral of Queen Elizabeth II of Britain, his country's former colonial master. He said that in contrast to the courteous treatment afforded to the leaders of Western countries, African leaders and their spouses were

⁵ As we zoom in and zoom out, we will see nested structures of wholes that are also parts of larger wholes. See Koestler (1967).

⁶ See the concept of Afrasia in Mine (2022). Afrasia is a mega-region consisting of Africa and Asia based on the premise that no country should behave in the region like the imperial powers did in the past.

loaded onto buses for transportation. According to reports in the Kenyan media, when addressing an international conference in April 2023, President Ruto likened this treatment to children being herded onto a school bus.⁷ Even Kenyans who do not like Ruto can imagine the humiliation they felt.

If powerful nations are to engage seriously with the Global South, they need to begin by acknowledging the individuality of the 55 different members of the AU and treat them with the same respect that they show to the 27 members of the EU. In 1993, at a time when Europe and North America were growing tired of providing aid to Africa, the Japanese government hosted the first Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD).⁸ Following this, countries and regions such as China, South Korea, India, the EU, the United States, and Russia began hosting their own summits with African leaders.

The notion that the great powers of the North bestow benefits one-sidedly on the Global South can no longer be sustained. The countries of the South are carefully watching the behavior of their Northern counterparts to identify where their true friends are. The countries of the South will surely distance themselves if they believe they are being looked down upon. What is at stake is not the amount of aid offered but collective dignity.

5. The Bandung Spirit and the Global South

The Global South is vast. The countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America cover 73% of the world's land area and are home to around 86% of the world's population. As already mentioned, the G7 accounts for just three-tenths of the global economy, and this share will soon fall into the 20% range. By any measure, the Global South is set to overwhelm other regions of the world.

Is there really a need to ascertain the power of a region that has already been growing so large and powerful? Is there any point in treating such a big region as a single entity? Would it not be preferable to proactively acknowledge the internal diversity of the Global South and turn our attention to the distinctive experiences of each of the smaller countries within it?

It is fair to ask such questions, but this way of thinking is only half correct. This is because, despite the Global South's immense diversity, the line that distinguishes between the Global South and the Global North is unmistakable. Blurring this demarcation on the basis of internal diversity is also a statement of a political position, if not deliberately so. Then, what exactly is the common consciousness that binds the Global South together? The answer lies in how its members view the shadow of colonial rule. The origins of the Global South can be traced back to the Asian-African Conference (Bandung Conference) of 1955.

In that year, representatives from 29 newly independent countries in Asia and Africa gathered in Bandung, Indonesia, to discuss a new vision for a post-imperial

⁷ Ruto's remarks at a Mo Ibrahim Foundation's conference in April 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2xglAL4ZICU>

⁸ See the articles in the *International Journal of Afrasian Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2022.

world. Japan also humbly joined, following its defeat in World War II. The countries assembled in Bandung all shared an anti-colonialist spirit, but they did not overtly advocate the notion of Third World solidarity in written expression. What the representatives agreed on were universal principles such as respect for basic human rights and the United Nations Charter, sovereign equality and non-interference in domestic affairs, and peaceful resolution of conflict. Returning to these basic principles is essential to ending the current violent conflict in Europe.

The countries of Latin America also aligned themselves with these moves, even though they did not face the same challenges of national independence in the recent past. Brazil sent its delegation to the Bandung Conference to serve as an observer. The fact is that the United States and Canada, too, share the characteristic of being multi-racial societies bearing the historical marks of colonial times. In the long run, the continent of the Americas may reconcile with its past as part of the hybrid, “darker” nations,⁹ and even its northern half may gradually moderate its unilateral exercise of hegemonic power over other regions of the world.

6. Japan-China Relations and the Global South

The word “hegemony” is written 霸權 (*haken*) in kanji. In Greek mythology, Hegemone was a beautiful goddess and queen, so a “hegemon” (hegemonic state) may not necessarily be an evil power. In international relations, the hegemonic stability theory proposes that when an exceptionally powerful country, such as the United States after World War II, enforces rules that bring benefits to all players, the international order gains long-term stability. The kanji term 霸權, on the other hand, has a more heavy-handed tone. You may not violate borders and occupy the territory of another country. Still, if you utilize political and economic might and conspire to deny a country the ability to make free decisions, extract its resources, and exploit its labor, you are taking a 霸權的 (hegemonic) approach.

The 1978 Treaty of Peace and Friendship between Japan and the People’s Republic of China contains what is known as an anti-hegemony clause, based on the Japan–China Joint Communiqué of 1972. The clause reads: “The Contracting Parties declare that neither of them should seek hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region or in any other region and that each is opposed to efforts by any other country or group of countries to establish such hegemony” (Article 2).¹⁰ China and Japan are thus obligated not to act in a hegemonic manner in either the Asia-Pacific or in any other region (including Africa) and expected to oppose hegemonic behavior of any other country in these regions. There is no provision to compel these two countries to take specific actions, but the Treaty carries significant weight as international law.

In the 1978 Treaty, the country that was regarded as seeking hegemony was the Soviet Union. China’s attempt to use anti-hegemonic rhetoric to weaken the Soviet

⁹ In an echo of W.E.B. DuBois, Vijay Prashad uses the “darker nations” as a synonym for the Third World (Prashad 2007).

¹⁰ <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/china/treaty78.html>

influence was connected to the family feud between the Communist Parties of the two countries. In consideration of its relationship with the Soviet Union such as in the fisheries industry, Japan proposed adding the words “The present Treaty shall not affect the position of either Contracting Party regarding its relations with third countries,” as Article 4 of the Treaty, and China eventually agreed to this addition.

Regardless of the situation at the time the Treaty was signed, half a century later, the Soviet Union has ceased to exist, and only the wording of the Treaty itself remains. The Soviet Union’s successor, Russia, does not have the power to wield exclusive hegemony in Asia and Africa on its own. In the period known as the “long 20th century” from the 1870s through the 1990s (Kibata 2014), the peoples of Asia and Africa gradually liberated themselves from the rule of the imperial powers in the Northern Hemisphere that had deprived them of their sovereignty. In this context, it is specifically meaningful that two powerful countries in East Asia entered into a pledge not to seek hegemony and repeat the mistakes of the Western powers in the Asia-Pacific and other regions. It must be of great significance if China and Japan remain in agreement on the principle of not seeking hegemony and opposing efforts by any other country to exercise hegemony in the Global South.

The Japanese government’s diplomatic pursuit of partnerships with the Global South is reminiscent of France’s Third World diplomacy. Needless to say, China, too, is seeking to partner with the Global South. Given their shared anti-hegemonic spirit, Japan and China would do well to strive for peaceful competition in formulating effective approaches to partnership.

Conclusion: The Global South and Human Security

Suppose we have a set of values that binds diverse nations in the Global South together. Could such norms coalesce into broader, truly global norms beyond the realm of the Global South? The norms of rejecting colonial rule, racism, and the pursuit of hegemony by great powers have certainly taken root. However, these are negative norms intended to oppose something else, rather than positive ones seeking to create something new.

At this point, let us discuss the meaning of the term used in the title of this article: human security. The leading proponent of this term was development economist Mahbub ul Haq, who was former Finance Minister of Pakistan and the driving force behind the intellectual circle of UNDP. Haq characterized human security as follows.

Human security is not a concern with weapons. It is a concern with human dignity. In the last analysis, it is a child who did not die, a disease that did not spread, an ethnic tension that did not explode, a dissident who was not silenced, a human spirit that was not crushed (Haq 1995, 116).

Haq continued: “A powerful, revolutionary idea, the emerging concept of human security forces a new morality on all of us through a perception of common threats to our very survival” (ibid.). Importantly, what Haq believed was that each and every human should be able to feel secure and live their dignified lives, believing in a

brighter future. We are surrounded by wars, infectious diseases, natural disasters, and economic crises. Under globalization, these problems spill over national borders. Nevertheless, it is possible to strive for a world that does not disintegrate under the weight of serious and pervasive crises in the Anthropocene: we can continue to dream. This is the key message of human security.

In 2003, a commission co-chaired by former United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Sadako Ogata and Indian economist Amartya Sen released a report on human security (Commission on Human Security 2003). Ogata and Sen are an East Asian humanitarian activist and a South Asian intellect, respectively. Sen was a close friend of Haq, who passed away shortly after presenting his idea of human security. It is still rare for intellectuals from the non-Western world to take the lead in jointly advocating universal values to the world and prompting a global discussion on such values. UNDP's publication of a new report on human security last year reignited the discussion about the concept, and this report contained a new keyword: solidarity (UNDP 2022).

We all know how the war in Europe has triggered new moves across the world to defend national sovereignty and prioritize national security. The Global South is full of countries that gained their sovereignty through national liberation movements. When it comes to human security, in the Global South, there are both skepticism of any discussion of security as distinct from national security and a recurring awareness that the ultimate purpose of national liberation was to ensure human dignity, well-being, and peace of mind for every person.

Are the countries of the Global South ready to accept human security as a universal ideal for the pursuit of the well-being of each and every human beyond national borders? Can the Global South become a leading advocate for the dignity and rights inherent in every person in an era of recurring violent wars between nations? The real test begins now.

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