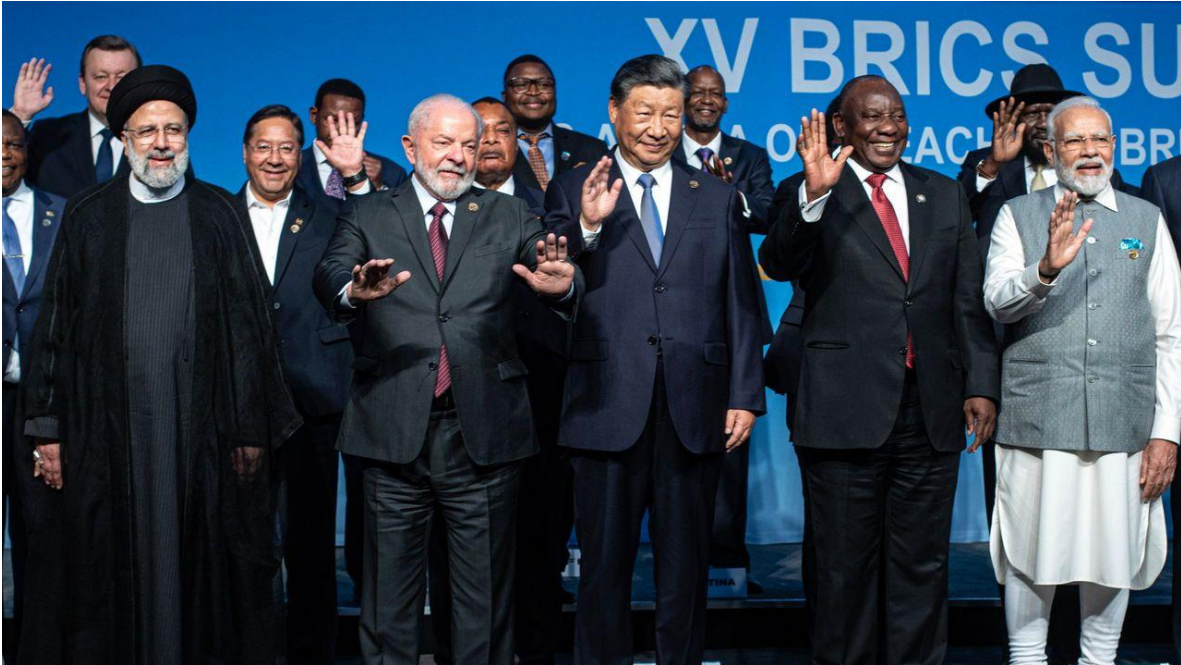


How to locate the global south

How a fuzzy, scorned term reflects geopolitical shifts



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The global south is everywhere and nowhere. It is everywhere because political leaders, including Joe Biden, Narendra Modi, Emmanuel Macron and Xi Jinping, have recently adopted the term. And yet it is nowhere. The global south is not labelled on any map nor in any atlas. Indeed, many countries considered part of it are actually in the northern hemisphere. Such cartographical contortions are silly—but then so is talk of “the West” when its coterie includes Australia and New Zealand.

The simplest working definition of the global south is that it refers to most, but not quite all, non-Western countries. Some analysts would rather ditch the term altogether, arguing it is too amorphous to be helpful. Yet it does convey useful information. The rise of the phrase reflects the rise of the countries themselves. And it denotes a wide-ranging critique of Western countries’ policies that is sometimes valid, but also sometimes veers into nihilism.

The global south’s heft in global affairs is growing as its share of output has risen: it accounts for roughly 40% of world gdp and around 85% of the world’s population. With this increased heft comes increased ambition. The most ambitious country of all is China, which aspires to

lead the emerging world. As our analysis this week outlines, its economic power and ability to influence and coerce other emerging economies is now second only to that of America.

Even so, China's clout has stark limits and could plateau as it grows more autocratic. Its engagement in a new wave of mercantilism may cause a trade shock in the emerging world. Other countries have rising aspirations to link up with and influence other states in the global south, too. Mr Modi boasts that India is Africa's fourth-largest trading partner and fifth-largest source of foreign direct investment. It is also deepening its links with the Gulf states. Brazil, an agricultural powerhouse, talks up food security. Turkey's firms build infrastructure across East Africa.

The large number of countries in the global south gives it a collective weight, but makes it so heterogenous that reaching consensus on many issues is difficult. Taking a joint stance on, say, human rights is impossible when the group includes democracies but also absolute monarchies, hereditary dictatorships and states run by soldiers. Having a coherent position on climate change is difficult for a club that includes poor energy importers and wealthy oil states. Because several countries are adversaries—think of Iran and Saudi Arabia, or India and China—co-operation on security is unlikely. And given that some economies have repressed, state-run financial systems, while others are more open, the idea of deep financial links, through, for example, a common currency, is a fantasy.

Brazil's president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, insists that there is more that unites the global south than divides it. But often what unites the global south is a critique of what its members see as Western hegemony. The global south objects to a supposedly blinkered focus on Ukraine and broken promises on climate finance. Accusations of hypocrisy over Israel's war in Gaza stir particular ire: Nicaragua has just brought a case against Germany at the International Court of Justice (icj) claiming it is complicit in genocide for selling weapons to Israel, among other things. It follows South Africa's decision to bring a genocide case against Israel itself at the icj in January.

Some of the criticisms hold water. It is true that key international bodies, not least the Security Council of the United Nations, do not give fair representation to the emerging world. Problems that affect emerging economies only, such as the debt crisis in very poor countries, are wrongly



neglected. Nonetheless the danger is that the idea of the global south evolves into a sophisticated nihilism. China wants to weaponise it by conflating the idea of being a developing country with being anti-Western, and, by implication, adopting a hostile stance to universal liberal values. The global south is a zone of co-operation and contest, and a critique of the status quo. It does not, and may never, have a broad, coherent agenda for improving the world.

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