

China and India in the race for leadership of the Global South: Current status and international relations challenges

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Abstract:

This research examines the escalating competition between China and India for leadership in the Global South, highlighting their differing approaches to expanding influence across the region. The research focuses on their economic, political, and diplomatic strategies, particularly concerning the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by China, while India emphasises soft power, democratic values, and cultural diplomacy. The research method is primarily qualitative, using comparative analysis of China's and India's foreign policies to assess the broader geopolitical implications. The research explores the impact of this rivalry on regional and global governance, examining how it shapes the political and economic trends of the Global South. As both nations strive for dominance, the research considers the challenges and opportunities that such competition presents for smaller and emerging countries, as well as the potential risks of deepening divides within multilateral institutions.

Keywords: China, Global South, India, international relations, leadership competition.

Classification numbers: 5.1, 5.2, 5.3

1. Introduction

Since the early days of the Asian-African Conference in Bandung in 1955, where China and India engaged in debates and cooperation against colonialism and racial discrimination, the two nations have continued to compete for leadership in the Global South. China, with its superior economic power and initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has increasingly positioned itself as a leading country in providing infrastructure investment for developing nations. Meanwhile, India, despite not possessing the same economic resources as China, stands out with its flexible diplomacy, adeptness at maintaining relations with major powers, and especially its ability to promote South-South cooperation. As the largest democracy in South Asia, India has the advantage of leveraging democratic and human rights values in its foreign policy strategies, setting itself apart in the race for leadership.

However, the competition between China and India for leadership in the Global South not only affects the countries in the region but also has

far-reaching implications for international relations. The Global South, with its vast population and strategic positioning, is increasingly asserting its significance in global affairs. The relationship between major powers like China and India, combined with the active participation of Global South nations, will bring about major transformations in the structure and operation of the international order. The rivalry between China and India is not merely a matter of confrontation; both nations recognise that a combination of cooperation and competition can yield benefits for themselves as well as for the Global South. Meanwhile, countries in the region will have to make crucial strategic decisions, weighing their options between collaborating with China, India, or other global powers amid the uncertainties of global political and economic shifts.

The objective of this research is to examine the race for leadership in the Global South between China and India, analysing each country's strategic moves across various domains, and predicting the implications for both the Global South and the broader international order. The findings will not only clarify the competitive

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dynamics between China and India but also provide valuable insights into the opportunities and challenges of shaping a new international order where the Global South plays an increasingly significant role.

2. Theoretical overview

2.1. The concept of the Global South

The term “Global South” originally denoted a geographical distinction, referring to nations located below the equator. Over time, it has evolved into a broader political and economic concept encompassing developing and underdeveloped countries in contrast to the developed nations of the Global North. Coined by C. Oglesby (1969) [1], the term highlighted structural power imbalances between North and South. During the Cold War, it was associated with the “Third World”, referring to countries unaffiliated with the Western or Soviet blocs, before gradually being replaced by this term due to its negative connotations.

Politically and economically, the “Global South” transcends geography and signifies enduring global power divisions rooted in shared experiences of colonialism and economic marginalisation. These disparities continue to shape contemporary perceptions of hierarchy within the international political economy.

From a theoretical perspective, the Global South has been analysed through several major frameworks. Early theories of imperialism (Hobson, Lenin, Gramsci, Du Bois) describe how colonial extraction and capitalist expansion created long-standing inequalities between the North and South. These ideas later informed dependency theory (Prebisch, Singer, Frank), which argues that countries on the “periphery” remain economically subordinate to industrialised “core” nations due to unequal trade structures and historical dependencies. Postcolonial theorists such as Fanon and Du Bois further highlight how colonial legacies produced racialised global hierarchies that persist in international politics. More recent scholarship emphasises the growing agency of Global South states, portraying them not as passive recipients of global structures but as emerging actors capable of reshaping governance norms [2]. These theoretical lenses provide the foundation for analysing leadership competition within the Global South today.

The Global South comprises a diverse group of nations united by shared historical constraints and aspirations for greater global influence. Countries such as Brazil, South Africa, Indonesia, India, and China play pivotal roles through platforms like BRICS and the G77 [3]. Despite economic heterogeneity, with emerging economies contributing over 40% of global GDP, the group maintains political solidarity in advocating a more equitable international order [4]. This diversity underscores the complexity of leadership competition within the Global South.

Despite its geographic origins, the term “Global South” is not spatially precise, as major nations like China and India, both located in the Northern Hemisphere, are included due to their political, economic, and developmental trajectories [5]. In the 21st century, rising Southern powers have increasingly challenged Western dominance, prompting a re-evaluation of global power distribution.

2.2. The concept of leadership in international relations

Leadership in international relations refers to the position of an entity that has the decisive ability to influence other actors, particularly states and relevant organisations [6]. This ability is reflected not only in the relationship between the leader and the subjects being led but also in the interactions among actors within the international system. Leadership becomes decisive when the leading entity can take actions that directly impact the status and interests of other actors within this system. A leadership position is often derived from various factors such as military, economic, and cultural power, but changes in the international system can also alter a nation’s leadership role. Historically, countries such as the United Kingdom, France, and the United States have successively held global leadership roles, from the “great powers” of the 19th century to the “superpowers” of the 20th century. Today, the rise of nations such as China and India indicates a shift in global leadership [7].

Leadership in international relations is demonstrated not only through a nation’s ability to achieve its political goals but also through its capacity to organise and control the actions of competing actors [8]. One of the key factors in leadership is the ability to maintain influence and coordinate the actions of other states, even in the face of resistance. The evolution of the

international system has transformed the nature of leadership from the dominance of “great powers” in the 19th century to “superpowers” in the 20th century and, in the present, a competition among nations aspiring for global hegemony. Leadership competition is evident in the rivalry for dominance among nations, especially when a major power refuses to accept the dominance of another. The lack of acceptance of leadership can lead to reactions such as regional competition or direct confrontation between major powers. Secondary states may employ strategies such as “soft balancing” or cooperation to navigate leadership challenges. External factors, such as regional policies and the internal political dynamics of states, also play a crucial role in shaping responses to regional leadership [9].

2.3. Power dynamics in the Global South

2.3.1. Power transition theory and its implications

Power transition theory (PTT) is a dynamic and structural model for analysing fundamental shifts in global power [10]. Structurally, PTT envisions world politics as a hierarchical system of states with varying degrees of cooperation and competition. The theory identifies the relative roles of states within this hierarchy, the system of governing rules, and how powerful states attempt to manage global politics [11]. Dynamically, PTT focuses on the differential growth rates among nations, arguing that these relative shifts in power create new relationships between states. Key elements of the theory include hierarchy, power, and satisfaction. The satisfaction or dissatisfaction of nations with the existing status quo, including the broad acceptance of international rules and norms, plays a crucial role in determining the likelihood of major conflict [12]. The most powerful nations hold the top positions in the global or regional hierarchy, with the leading nation referred to as the “dominant” state. However, unlike competing theories, the dominant nation is not a hegemon but seeks to manage the system with a coalition of stable and satisfied supporters [13].

A significant implication of PTT is its ability to predict conflict when a challenging nation and the dominant nation reach a stage of power parity. At this point of parity, the likelihood of winning a war becomes more uncertain, increasing the risk of conflict. However, PTT is not solely a theory of war but also explains longer periods of peace in world history.

In the context of the rise of China and India, PTT had foreseen the importance of this power shift early on. A.F.K. Organski (1958) [11] posed the question not of whether China would become the most powerful nation on earth, but rather how long it would take her to achieve this status. Currently, the parity in GDP (purchasing power parity) between China and the United States has become evident. The rise of these two Asian powers promises to create a global and regional power transition. However, it is important to note that the satisfaction of China and India with the current international order will play a decisive role in whether this transition is peaceful or conflictual.

Relating to the potential leadership role of China and India in the Global South, PTT suggests that as these nations continue to grow and gain the ability to challenge or even surpass current great powers, they could become key actors in reshaping international rules and norms. If China and India feel dissatisfied with the existing order, largely established by Western powers, they might seek to promote the interests of the Global South and establish an international system that better reflects the perspectives and needs of developing nations. However, if they are satisfied with the benefits derived from the current order or seek to integrate and change the system from within, their leadership might focus on promoting cooperation and shared development within the Global South within the existing framework.

2.3.2. Balance of power theory in the context of China-India rivalry

The balance of power theory is a fundamental theory in international relations, asserting that states act to prevent any single state or coalition from dominating the system [13]. In an international order lacking a central governing authority, states prioritise survival and security by countering excessive concentrations of power. This balancing can take two primary forms: internal balancing, where states enhance their own military, economic, and technological capabilities, and external balancing, where states form alliances or partnerships to counter potential threats [14].

For decades, India exhibited underbalancing in its approach to China. Instead of engaging in direct military competition or forming robust alliances, India pursued a hedging strategy, combining soft balancing, selective hard balancing, and diplomatic engagement.

This cautious approach was shaped by the perception that China did not pose an existential threat, unlike Pakistan. An existential threat is one that endangers a state's survival and core national identity, and for Indian policymakers, Pakistan remained the more immediate concern [15].

This perception was reinforced by India's early leadership. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru initially saw China as a natural partner, emphasising post-colonial solidarity rather than military rivalry. Even after the 1962 Sino-Indian War, which exposed India's military vulnerabilities, New Delhi refrained from entering formal military alliances with the West. Several factors contributed to this underbalancing, including domestic political priorities, economic interests in maintaining cooperation, the natural geographical barrier of the Himalayas, and nuclear deterrence, which reduced the risk of outright war [16].

However, since 2017, India's balancing strategy has shifted in response to China's growing assertiveness under Xi Jinping, particularly regarding border tensions [17]. This shift marks a move towards limited hard balancing, characterised by increased military infrastructure development, enhanced troop deployments, and procurement of advanced weaponry. While India's military capabilities remain asymmetrical compared to China's, its strategic recalibration signals a more active role in countering China's influence.

In terms of external balancing, India has strengthened its strategic partnerships with the United States, Japan, and Australia within the Quad framework. However, India remains wary of being entrapped in military conflicts and maintains its strategic autonomy [1]. Alongside hard balancing, India continues to employ soft balancing, leveraging diplomatic influence and multilateral institutions to counterbalance China's rise without direct military confrontation.

China's approach to India has historically oscillated between benign neglect and strategic countermeasures. While Beijing has often dismissed India as a secondary concern, it has actively supported Pakistan as a balancing measure against Indian power, particularly in nuclear capabilities. For instance, China aided Pakistan's nuclear programme following India's 1974 nuclear test and has since opposed India's membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) [18].

China has also engaged in selective border intrusions while simultaneously pursuing economic cooperation with India, a strategy aimed at preventing New Delhi from fully aligning with Washington. Moreover, Beijing's economic investments in South Asian nations serve to expand its regional influence, though these smaller states have generally avoided forming direct military alliances against India [19].

2.4. Overview of the current situation in the Global South

In the current context, the Global South is gradually strengthening its position and seeking sustainable development pathways. Economically, a key trend in the Global South is the rise of emerging economies, which are making increasingly significant contributions to global economic growth. Today, this region accounts for more than 40% of the world's GDP and has contributed approximately 80% of global economic growth over the past two decades. Experts note that cooperation among peer economies is increasing, and the Global South is finding a "greater voice" [20], with countries such as China, India, Brazil, and South Africa playing crucial roles in reshaping the international economic order [4].

Additionally, the Global South is gradually enhancing its political influence. China's mediation between Iran and Saudi Arabia, along with Brazil's efforts to promote a peace plan for Ukraine, demonstrate the growing capacity of these nations to intervene in and resolve regional conflicts. At the same time, the development of cooperative mechanisms such as BRICS and the "Voice of Global South Summit" highlights increasing solidarity within the region. Furthermore, multilateral cooperation between China and Latin American countries is creating a new foundation for global governance. Faced with challenges such as protectionism, great power politics, and geopolitical instability, the Global South is actively seeking effective cooperation models to safeguard common interests and promote a more equitable world order.

Despite its development potential, the Global South still faces significant challenges. First, economic and social inequalities between the Global North and South remain a pressing issue. International financial and trade institutions, largely controlled by the West, continue to create barriers for developing countries in accessing capital and technology. Nations in the

Global South remain highly vulnerable to geopolitical and economic fluctuations. Tensions between major powers, particularly the United States and China, could impact the region's stability and economic growth. Moreover, dependence on raw material exports makes many countries susceptible to market volatility. Additionally, internal issues such as corruption, weak governance, and political instability continue to hinder sustainable development. Strengthening governance capacity and enhancing transparency are key factors for the Global South to fully realise its development potential.

3. China and India's moves in the race to lead the Global South

3.1. China's actions

3.1.1. Economic and investment strategies

China has emerged as a global superpower in the 21st century and one of the most prominent financial and investment contributors in the race to lead the Global South [25]. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) exemplifies China's strategy to position itself as both a donor and provider of infrastructure projects while fostering close cooperation with Global South nations. Through the lens of power transition theory (PTT), the BRI reflects China's ambition to challenge the Western-dominated global order, reshaping international norms to favour developing nations [21]. By offering loans and infrastructure investments, China seeks to enhance its status as a leading power, fostering economic dependence among partner nations.

As a superpower, China views itself as both a donor and a recipient of aid. It believes it understands the needs of developing nations, having transitioned from poverty to the world's second-largest economy. China is eager to share its "Chinese wisdom and solutions" to address global development challenges. It argues that "Chinese-style modernisation" (modernisation without political liberalisation or democracy) is not only the path to the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" but also a model for other developing nations [22].

The BRI represents China's shift from a reactive approach to proactive great power diplomacy [23]. Initially aimed at enhancing cooperation with neighbouring countries, the BRI rapidly expanded to a global scope, encompassing finance, infrastructure,

innovation, trade, transportation, sustainability, and people-to-people connectivity. China presents itself as a development partner offering "mutually beneficial cooperation", in contrast to Western-style aid. China's development cooperation goals are to help developing nations achieve independence, particularly from the West [24].

To analyse China's strategies further, power transition theory and balance of power theory can be applied. PTT explains how China, through initiatives like the BRI, seeks to challenge the dominance of the United States and other Western powers in the international system. Similarly, balance of power theory elucidates China's broader strategy to assert itself as a global leader, aiming to balance or surpass existing powers through economic and diplomatic efforts.

Responses from Global South nations and experts to the BRI are varied and complex. Proponents view the BRI as an example of South-South cooperation, emphasising mutual benefits and solidarity among developing nations [26]. Many Global South countries welcome the BRI for addressing infrastructure challenges, stimulating economic growth, and enhancing regional connectivity. Unlike Western aid, Chinese projects often come without political conditions, making them attractive to some governments.

However, some experts and nations express concerns that large-scale loans from China may lead to "debt-trap diplomacy", making debt repayment challenging and increasing dependence on China [27]. Additionally, the lack of transparency in BRI loan contracts and terms has raised concerns about fairness and the true benefits accruing to participating nations. Some BRI projects have negatively impacted local communities, including land appropriation, environmental pollution, and disruption of livelihoods. Critics also argue that the benefits of the BRI are unevenly distributed, often favouring state-owned enterprises and the middle and upper classes. Moreover, the presence of large numbers of Chinese workers in BRI projects, while locals are limited to low-level positions, has sparked concerns and resentment.

Furthermore, the legal framework governing international financial regulations, particularly those set by organisations such as the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), plays a significant role in shaping China's ability to implement large-scale initiatives.

I. Chakrabarty (2023) [28] discusses how global financial regulations impact China's investments, presenting both opportunities and challenges in meeting international expectations and policies. These legal constraints can affect the development and success of BRI projects, complicating compliance and transparency.

"Chinese-style modernisation" represents a unique development model, emphasising economic growth and technological innovation while avoiding political democratisation. This model is presented as a blueprint for other developing nations in the Global South, offering an alternative to Western-led democratic and development models. China's emphasis on economic modernisation, without the political reforms often associated with development, is a critical aspect of its soft power in the region.

3.1.2. Political and diplomatic strategies

The rise of the Global South signals a shift in global power, challenging Western-led institutions. China, positioning itself as the leader of this transformation, has adjusted its foreign policy to align with the interests of developing nations. In a speech, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi emphasised China's role, reinforcing its commitment to uniting and revitalising the Global South, enhancing South-South cooperation, and increasing its influence in global governance [29].

China's engagement with the Global South is driven by four primary goals. First, China seeks to amplify the voice of developing nations in multilateral forums such as BRICS, the G77, and the United Nations, countering Western dominance in global decision-making. Second, China aims to restructure the global political and economic order, promoting alternatives to Western-led financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. The establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) exemplifies this effort, positioning China as a leader in reshaping global finance.

Third, China's economic and political stability is closely tied to the stability of the developing world. By fostering economic and diplomatic ties, China ensures access to key markets, resources, and strategic alliances necessary for long-term growth. Finally, China frames itself as a natural partner to the Global

South, leveraging historical ties against colonialism and promoting economic cooperation. This narrative is reinforced through initiatives such as the BRI, emphasising China as a development partner rather than a hegemonic power [30].

To achieve these goals, China has initiated several frameworks, including the Community of Shared Future, Global Security Initiative (GSI), Global Development Initiative (GDI), and Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI). These frameworks help solidify China's leadership role and counter Western criticisms. By promoting these frameworks in global forums such as BRICS, the G20, and the World Trade Organisation (WTO), China strengthens its position and influences global governance structures to reflect the interests of developing nations.

Economic diplomacy plays a pivotal role in China's Global South strategy. Through the BRI, China provides financial resources, infrastructure development, and technology to partner nations, fostering economic interdependence. However, the BRI has faced criticisms, with some nations questioning the sustainability of Chinese investments due to rising debt burdens and concerns over sovereignty. Nevertheless, China's growing role as a global mediator, such as in resolving conflicts between Saudi Arabia and Iran, underscores its increasing influence in international diplomacy [31].

Under Xi Jinping, China's political centralisation has also significantly impacted its global strategy. Centralised power has enabled more assertive economic planning, including stricter regulatory oversight of BRI projects. This has helped mitigate financial risks and ensure national oversight, though it has also caused delays and increased scrutiny from recipient nations regarding loan terms. Critics argue that this centralisation reduces flexibility and imposes constraints on local governance in partner countries.

Moreover, China's governance adjustments have influenced its approach to state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and private sector engagement in international markets. While SOEs are encouraged to lead overseas investments, tighter regulations on the private sector, particularly in technology, reflect China's strategy to leverage state power while maintaining control over domestic economic stability.

In recent years, China has also prioritised sustainability, seeking to balance rapid industrialisation with environmental responsibility. This is evident in China's commitment to achieving carbon neutrality by 2060. The BRI increasingly promotes green development through investments in renewable energy, such as solar and wind power in Africa and Southeast Asia, to foster sustainable infrastructure. However, inconsistencies between China's green goals and continued investments in fossil fuels have drawn criticism, highlighting the challenges China faces in reconciling economic ambitions with environmental commitments.

China's legal strategies in trade disputes also shape its role in the global economy. At the WTO, China advocates for a fairer global trade order benefiting developing nations while selectively complying with rulings to protect its interests. The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and other trade agreements reflect China's efforts to reshape trade governance in the Asia-Pacific. However, tensions with the US and EU persist, particularly regarding technology trade restrictions and intellectual property disputes.

In summary, China's rise as a Global South leader is bolstered by a strategic blend of economic diplomacy, political centralisation, sustainability efforts, and legal strategies. By actively shaping global governance and positioning itself as a development partner, China aims to challenge Western dominance while securing its own economic and political future. However, balancing leadership ambitions with regional sensitivities and criticisms of economic hegemony remains an ongoing challenge.

3.1.3. Soft power strategies

China employs soft power as a critical tool to expand its influence and strengthen its international standing, particularly in Global South nations. Through a range of cultural initiatives, Beijing aims to build a "harmonious world", promoting a peaceful environment to support both economic and political development. Additionally, China seeks to enhance its national image, assert its cultural identity, and alleviate concerns from neighbouring countries about its rise. Most importantly, China promotes the "Chinese Solution" - a development model independent of Western values, emphasising diversity, mutual respect, and the non-imposition of ideology on other nations [32].

To achieve these objectives, China has launched several cultural initiatives to expand its influence and build trust in developing nations. A key component of this strategy is public diplomacy, encompassing cultural exchanges, education, and media outreach. China has signed numerous bilateral cultural agreements and provided thousands of scholarships to students from Global South nations, particularly in Africa. Additionally, the network of Confucius Institutes has expanded to promote Chinese language and culture, fostering closer ties between Chinese citizens and local communities.

China has also invested heavily in media cooperation, with China Radio International broadcasting in multiple languages across Africa to shape public opinion in Beijing's favour. By emphasising principles of non-interference, mutual benefit, and respect for sovereignty, Beijing seeks to build robust relationships with developing nations. Moreover, China employs "smile diplomacy" to assuage regional concerns about its growing influence and has launched public relations campaigns to tell the "China story" and shape global discourse in its favour [33].

These efforts have significantly expanded China's influence, particularly in Southeast Asia and Africa, where many nations view China's rise more positively than the West. Through infrastructure investments, China has also established itself as a leading trade partner in regions such as ASEAN and South Korea. Furthermore, China's soft power has fostered scepticism about the universality of Western values, particularly regarding democracy and human rights. Beijing has successfully secured diplomatic alignment with many nations, maintaining neutrality in global conflicts, such as the Russia-Ukraine war.

China's soft power strategy has achieved considerable success, particularly in building economic and infrastructure relationships without imposing political conditions. Its focus on development cooperation has facilitated access and built trust with developing nations. Moreover, China's emphasis on Asian values, such as cooperation and sovereignty, has helped it garner support from nations with similar development perspectives.

However, China's soft power also faces significant challenges. A notable limitation is the difficulty in engaging with Western nations, where Beijing's state-led

economic model and human rights record do not garner widespread appeal. Additionally, China's domestic nationalism sometimes undermines efforts to build trust with neighbouring countries. Furthermore, Beijing's partnerships with authoritarian regimes have raised concerns about China's global image, leading to accusations of "neo-colonialism" through its economic activities, particularly in Africa.

A critical critique of China's soft power strategy is the accusation of "debt-trap diplomacy". Critics argue that China's loans to developing nations, particularly those involved in the BRI, are strategically designed to create financial dependence. This dependence can be leveraged by China to gain political influence. Many nations in Africa and South Asia, for instance, have struggled to repay these loans, raising concerns about long-term economic and political consequences [27].

China's significant economic capacity, however, provides a clear advantage over nations such as India in its soft power strategy. With vast financial resources, China can fund large-scale infrastructure projects, making it a dominant force in global investment. In contrast, India's smaller economic scale limits its ability to provide comparable financial support. While India offers rich cultural programmes and sustainable development initiatives, it lacks the economic leverage to match China's ambitious global investments. Nevertheless, India's soft power, rooted in cultural diplomacy and non-imposition, holds potential in regions where nations prioritise cooperation and shared development goals over purely financial terms.

3.2. India's actions

3.2.1. Economic and investment strategies

With robust economic growth, India has emerged as a key strategic partner for Global South nations, particularly in economic cooperation and development assistance. As the world's fifth-largest economy, India prioritises domestic development while expanding its influence through trade agreements, financial cooperation, and development aid programmes [34]. These actions align with India's broader geopolitical objectives, enabling it to enhance economic connectivity, strengthen regional partnerships, and maintain strategic balance in global power dynamics.

Within the framework of South-South cooperation, India has actively provided Official Development

Assistance (ODA) to countries such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and several African nations [35]. These projects primarily focus on infrastructure development, education, healthcare, and agriculture. By investing in roads, energy networks, and transportation systems, India promotes economic growth in partner countries while strengthening trade routes. Educational programmes, including scholarships and institutional partnerships, further enhance human capital development. In healthcare, India supports vaccination programmes and hospital infrastructure, contributing to improved public health. Additionally, agricultural initiatives provide technology transfers and capacity-building programmes to ensure food security and sustainable farming practices. India's ODA initiatives serve a dual purpose: They contribute to the sustainable development of recipient nations while enhancing India's trade relations and geopolitical presence in these regions. By integrating aid with trade partnerships, India strengthens its economic footprint and fosters long-term diplomatic alliances.

A cornerstone of India's economic strategy is the expansion of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with Global South nations. For instance, the FTA with Sri Lanka has significantly facilitated India's exports, improving market penetration and bilateral trade (International Trade Administration, 2024) [36]. D. Chakraborty, et al. (2022) [37] emphasises that FTAs play a pivotal role in fostering competition and driving innovation in India. Increased market access compels Indian industries to enhance production efficiency, invest in technological advancements, and compete globally. In this context, India's FTAs not only boost economic growth but also strengthen regional integration, encouraging cross-border investments and supply chain linkages. Moreover, India-China trade competition drives innovation through strategic market access, as analysed by D. Chakraborty, et al. (2022) [37] and J. Chaisse, et al. (2021) [38] using a game-theoretic approach, while India's evolving FTA policies have bolstered domestic industries.

Beyond trade agreements, India has focused on financial cooperation mechanisms to strengthen economic partnerships in the Global South. The India-Brazil-South Africa (IBSA) Dialogue Forum promotes trilateral cooperation in areas such as poverty reduction and infrastructure development, while the IBSA Fund

provides financial support for development projects, enhancing regional connectivity and economic resilience. Additionally, I. Chakrabarty (2023) [28] explores how global financial regulations, particularly the FATF, influence India's economic environment. As India navigates these international legal frameworks, it strategically aligns its policies to balance regulatory compliance with investment promotion, ensuring continued economic expansion.

India's development cooperation model further solidifies its economic influence by offering concessional loans and technical assistance through programmes such as the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) and the Indian Development and Economic Assistance Scheme (IDEAS). Through ITEC, India provides capacity-building programmes and financial support to developing nations, helping them strengthen their institutional and economic capacities. Meanwhile, IDEAS facilitates concessional financing for infrastructure and industrial projects, ensuring recipient nations can access financial support under favourable terms [39]. These initiatives go beyond mere financial aid; they position India as a key economic partner and development leader in the Global South. By integrating economic diplomacy with strategic investments, India effectively builds lasting economic relationships while reinforcing its role as a major player in regional development.

India's economic strategies, centred on trade agreements, financial cooperation, and development assistance, align with its broader geopolitical ambitions. Through theoretical lenses such as balance of power and competition-driven innovation, India's approach can be seen as a deliberate effort to expand its leadership role while maintaining regional stability and fostering economic growth. By leveraging FTAs, ODA, and financial cooperation mechanisms, India continues to strengthen its position as a rising power, promoting greater economic integration and shared prosperity across the Global South.

3.2.2. Political and diplomatic strategies

India has built its leadership role in the Global South through its anti-colonial legacy and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Under Jawaharlal Nehru's leadership, India championed sovereignty, non-interference, and international equality. The 1955 Bandung Conference and subsequent NAM summits

shaped India's stance on global issues. In the 21st century, India has reinforced its leadership through initiatives such as the Voice of the Global South Summit launched in 2023. This forum enables developing nations to discuss food security, energy, climate change, and sustainable development. This policy aims to strengthen India's role in representing Global South nations while reflecting its diplomatic strategy of enhancing regional cooperation and promoting the collective interests of developing countries.

India's G20 presidency in 2023 marked a significant milestone. India actively advocated for the African Union's inclusion in the G20 [40], amplifying the voice of developing nations. The *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* ("the world is one family") concept, emphasised in the New Delhi Declaration, further amplified the Global South's voice [41]. This reflects India's commitment to global cooperation, sustainable growth, and climate justice. Additionally, India has supported reforms in multilateral development banks, aiding developing nations in balancing economic growth with environmental protection.

In addition to its multilateral engagements, India has expanded its regional influence through its Act East Policy (AEP). An upgrade of the Look East Policy in 2014, the AEP deepens India's strategic, economic, and cultural ties with Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region. By enhancing cooperation in maritime security, digital connectivity, supply chain resilience, and development assistance, India positions itself as a trusted partner to ASEAN countries, many of which are anchored in the Global South [42]. This policy helps India balance China's regional presence while also strengthening its image as a promoter of inclusive growth and South-South cooperation.

In technology, India has deployed the Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) initiative, including innovations such as the Aadhaar biometric identification system and the Unified Payments Interface (UPI). These technologies not only enhance domestic public service efficiency but have also been shared with over 50 countries, particularly in the Global South. The G20 recognised DPI as a potential tool to bridge the global digital divide, solidifying India's leadership in technological innovation. Furthermore, India has demonstrated a strong commitment to renewable energy through the International Solar Alliance and

the National Green Hydrogen Mission. As the world's fourth-largest renewable energy producer, India leads global efforts to reduce carbon emissions and shape a green economy [43].

India's democratic governance has enabled political reforms that drive economic outcomes, particularly through initiatives such as DPI and the International Solar Alliance (ISA). These reforms, grounded in sustainability science, position India as a leader in green innovation, fostering economic ties with the Global South. However, India's navigation of international legal disputes, such as those involving Investor-State Dispute Settlement (ISDS) and public health measures during COVID-19, has shaped its innovation environment by influencing investor confidence and policy reforms [44]. These dynamics underscore India's strategic balancing of domestic priorities and global commitments.

India's multifaceted diplomatic strategy allows it to maintain a balance between major powers. Its role in BRICS promotes South-South cooperation, while participation in the Quad strengthens ties with developed nations. This approach not only expands India's influence but also fosters dialogue and cooperation between the Global North and South. However, this strategy is not without challenges. India faces intense competition from China, a nation with significant financial, technological, and the Global political influence in the region. Additionally, strained relations with some neighbouring countries and differing interests among Global South nations pose challenges in assessing the effectiveness of India's policies.

3.2.3. Soft power strategies

India has leveraged soft power to enhance relations and promote cooperation with Global South nations, particularly through cultural and sustainable development initiatives. A key strategy is promoting India's cultural heritage, blending tradition with modernity. India has not only invited initiatives such as the ISA and the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI) to engage with the G20 [45], but has also promoted philosophies of living in harmony with nature, as seen in Hinduism and Buddhism, establishing itself as a responsible steward of environmental management. This has helped India

not only build an image as a nation with a sustainable development philosophy but also assert its leadership in global environmental discussions.

India's approach to cultural diplomacy and soft power resonates more effectively than China's in some respects, particularly due to its focus on shared values such as sustainability, spirituality, and environmental responsibility. While both nations use cultural narratives to expand influence, India's strategy stands out for emphasising collaboration with Global South nations on issues critical to them such as climate change, sustainable development, and humanitarian assistance. This creates greater resonance because it aligns with the increasing global emphasis on environmental sustainability and social responsibility. India's soft power is perceived as more altruistic and focused on the welfare of partner nations, rather than solely driven by economic or geopolitical interests, which are often associated with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

For instance, initiatives such as the ISA and the Lifestyle for Environment (LiFE) campaign are seen as collective global efforts, inviting nations to join India in addressing environmental challenges. This collaborative, rather than impositional, model makes India's soft power strategy more appealing, particularly to nations wary of China's growing economic and political influence, which is often perceived as self-serving and domineering.

Moreover, India's promotion of cultural diplomacy through mediums such as Ayurveda, Yoga, and educational exchange programmes appeals to many nations, offering practical benefits that align with the cultural and spiritual values of numerous Global South countries. In contrast, China's cultural outreach tends to emphasise its own history and heritage, which, while powerful, does not always resonate deeply with the values of other nations, particularly when accompanied by a robust economic and political agenda.

India's soft power is rooted in partnerships and mutual interests, making it well positioned to foster long-term relationships. In contrast, while China's economic initiatives often deliver infrastructure and development, they can also lead to debt dependency and perceptions of neo-colonialism, which may make its approach less appealing to some Global South nations.

In sustainable development, India has focused on promoting renewable energy through initiatives such as solar energy projects, demonstrating a genuine commitment to green growth and sustainability. These initiatives resonate with developing nations prioritising environmental protection but lacking the resources to implement large-scale solutions independently. India's focus on climate change and clean energy innovation is seen as a positive force, in contrast to China's emphasis on infrastructure development, which, while impactful, often comes with greater economic and geopolitical consequences that may raise concerns about dependency.

India has also launched financial and digital initiatives, particularly through the promotion of the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) and Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) [46]. These initiatives not only provide financial opportunities for Global South nations but also strengthen digital connectivity and build sustainable financial systems, making India's soft power more attractive to nations seeking modernisation without falling into debt traps.

Through financial assistance programmes and multilateral cooperation initiatives such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) and the Social Impact Fund, India has created broad cooperative opportunities, helping Global South nations enhance development and cultural exchange [47]. As a result, India has not only cemented its position in the region but has also become a global cultural hub, with significant influence in clean energy innovation, higher education, healthcare technology, and digital services.

3.3. Comparative analysis of soft power strategies

China and India employ distinct soft power strategies to influence the Global South, with varying degrees of resonance. China leverages its network of Confucius Institutes and media campaigns, such as China Radio International's broadcasts in Africa, to promote "Chinese-style modernisation" as a development model (Section 3.1). These efforts have strengthened economic and infrastructure ties, particularly in regions such as ASEAN and Africa, where China is a leading trade partner. However, China's soft power faces criticisms of "debt-trap diplomacy", with BRI loans creating financial dependence and perceptions of neo-

colonialism, especially in Africa and South Asia [27]. Additionally, China's partnerships with authoritarian regimes and domestic nationalism undermine trust in some regions.

In contrast, India's soft power, rooted in cultural diplomacy through Yoga, Ayurveda, and sustainable initiatives such as the International Solar Alliance (ISA), resonates by emphasising shared values and altruistic approaches (Section 3.2). For example, India's educational exchange programmes in Southeast Asia foster deep cultural ties, while China's media campaigns dominate African airwaves but lack similar cultural resonance. India's collaborative approach, such as inviting nations to join the ISA, appeals to countries wary of China's economic influence. However, India's smaller economic capacity limits its ability to fund large-scale projects compared to China's BRI investments [48].

These differences highlight trade-offs between economic leverage and cultural resonance. India's soft power excels in regions prioritising collaboration and sustainability, such as Southeast Asia and Africa, where initiatives like the ISA align with local priorities. Conversely, China's infrastructure investments deliver immediate economic benefits but often raise sovereignty concerns. Both nations face challenges in balancing leadership ambitions with regional sensitivities, but India's partnership-focused approach offers greater potential for long-term relationships in the Global South.

4. Impacts on international relations

4.1. Impacts on the structure of the Global South region

In the context of the competition for regional leadership in the Global South between China and India, alongside the opportunities for cooperation, there are also negative impacts that could potentially change the structure and development trajectory of the region. First, one prominent issue is the risk of the "debt trap" and economic dependency. Global South countries, when participating in large-scale infrastructure projects promoted by China through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), may face rising public debt burdens. This can lead to economic imbalances and vulnerability to political exploitation, as foreign partners may impose policies that serve their own interests.

Second, China uses massive investments as a hard power tool, aiming to exert direct influence on developing countries. However, this model often comes with economic and political constraints, leaving Global South countries susceptible to manipulation and at risk of losing autonomy in decision-making. This competition can create a “divided” environment, where countries are forced to choose between large-scale investment models and the cultural and educational cooperation offered by India. Such forced choices not only reduce the ability to diversify international relations but also create internal tensions and polarisation in the foreign policies of partner countries.

Third, competition for influence also brings negative social and cultural effects. When Global South countries are coerced into the power struggle between the two giants, cultural exchanges may be dominated by economic interests, leading to the erosion of traditional cultural values. The spread of “soft power” cultural values and products from China and India may not always align with the local context, causing social side effects such as cultural imbalance, value conflicts, and even the loss of cultural independence in the development of countries in the Global South.

Fourth, this fierce competition also poses risks to the environment and security. Large-scale infrastructure investment projects, while bringing rapid economic development, can cause severe environmental consequences if not properly managed, ranging from over-exploitation of resources to pollution and environmental degradation. Meanwhile, the focus on power competition between the two great powers can escalate geopolitical tensions, turning Global South countries into battlegrounds for conflicts, thus negatively affecting regional stability.

Finally, the policies and initiatives of China and India, despite their goals to increase influence, could create a “common vulnerability” for the region. When Global South countries are caught between difficult choices, they may lose the opportunity to build independent, flexible, and multilateral relationships. These negative impacts extend beyond economics or politics, influencing social, environmental, and cultural aspects, which in turn affects the sustainable development process of the entire region.

4.2. Impacts on the global order

The intensifying competition between India and China not only creates a geopolitical contest but also has profound implications for the global order, particularly in the post-Cold War multilateral context. The polarisation within international forums and the strategic choices of these powers are reshaping the global order towards a multipolar system, with clearer divisions among alliance blocs.

First, the India-China competition turns multilateral forums into arenas for power struggles rather than platforms for building a common front on global issues. Nations no longer have the opportunity to collectively focus on establishing shared rules but are instead compelled to choose between aligning with alliances led by one of the two powers. This leads to a dispersion of voices and influence, with forums such as the G20 increasingly dominated by bilateral relations rather than genuine multilateral cooperation. This shift threatens to undermine the effectiveness of the rules-based global system established post-Cold War.

In the World Trade Organisation (WTO), China’s advocacy for a fairer trade order benefiting developing nations clashes with India’s selective compliance with rulings, weakening global trade governance (Section 3.2). Similarly, India’s withdrawal from Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) negotiations, driven by concerns over domestic industries, reflects a prioritisation of national interests over regional integration, shaping Asia-Pacific investment regionalism [49, 50]. RCEP’s investment provisions, as analysed by J. Chaisse, et al. (2022) [51], have influenced regional economic law, impacting the Global South’s integration into global markets. Meanwhile, India’s advocacy for the African Union’s G20 membership [52] and China’s mediation between Iran and Saudi Arabia (Section 3.2) illustrate competing influences on African governance, highlighting the Global South’s pivotal role in reshaping global forums.

Second, the intense competition between India and China may accelerate the decline of multilateralism as we know it. Post-COVID-19 and amid global economic downturns, China has increasingly disengaged from key international forums such as the G20, while India faces pressure from alliances such as the Quad - comprising the United States, Japan, India, and

Australia - to bolster its position. China's absence from these forums not only reduces the representativeness of global discussions but also paves the way for new regional alliances, further fragmenting the multilateral system into distinct opposing blocs. Western powers, particularly the United States, are attempting to restructure their alliances to include the voices of emerging nations, but this polarisation only heightens the complexity of global governance.

Third, the India-China rivalry poses a significant question about the strategic choices of nations in the international arena. Should nations safeguard their interests by adhering to existing multilateral rules, or shift towards alternative systems led by authoritarian powers? As India navigates between participating in alliances such as the Quad - thereby enhancing its ability to leverage both hard and soft power - and maintaining its traditional policy of neutrality, other nations worldwide will also need to consider whether to embrace a new world order where the values and priorities of the Global South are fully reflected. This choice will directly impact international cooperation and affect security, economic development, and the stability of the global order.

Finally, this competition raises concerns about the diminishing role of international institutions, as global alliances and forums become fragmented along distinct factions. Western powers, facing the rise of "China-led" forums or new alliances initiated by India, will need to adjust their diplomatic strategies to maintain influence. This fragmentation may result in smaller and medium-sized nations losing their voice and influence in a global system once expected to be equitable and transparent.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

This research has analysed the competition between China and India in increasing their influence in the Global South. The research highlights the economic, political, diplomatic, and soft power strategies both countries use to expand their influence, with differing approaches. While China primarily focuses on infrastructure investments through the BRI, India emphasises soft power strategies, cultural diplomacy, and the promotion of democratic values. Both countries seek to assert leadership in the Global South, and this competition is shaping the regional international relations landscape.

In the future, the competition between China and India will continue to influence the political and economic trends of the Global South. As both countries attempt to expand their influence with key regional partners, countries in the region will need to reassess their national interests in this new context. The power struggle between China and India may present opportunities for countries in the Global South to assert their interests more strongly, but it could also deepen divisions and create new challenges for regional cooperation.

Future research should focus on the specific impacts of this competition on countries in the Global South, particularly regions such as Africa and Southeast Asia, to analyse how local governments balance their relationships with both China and India. Furthermore, studying the role of multilateral organisations such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in either moderating or exacerbating tensions between the two countries will provide valuable insights into changes in the global order.

In conclusion, although the competition between China and India in the Global South offers opportunities for development and expanding influence, it also presents challenges that need to be addressed strategically. The dynamics in this competition will continue to have a significant impact on international relations and remain an important area for further study.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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