

even during the later decades of the Cold War.

Rather than hankering after the imagined common values of a bygone age, then, U.S. allies and partners would do well to regard the foreign policy of Trump's second administration as a return to the natural position

of the United States. Emulating their Asian counterparts, Western countries should learn to deal with Washington not as a superpower with almost unlimited willingness to defend them but as an offshore balancer that will use its forces discriminatingly to advance American interests first. 🌐

## Rise of the Nonaligned

### Who Wins in a Multipolar World?

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**T**he global South has been a net winner from the shifts in global power over the last two decades. The growing influence of emerging economies, the rise of China as a great power, tensions between the United States and its European allies, and increasing great-power competition have given these countries new leverage in global affairs. They have taken advantage of these shifts by building new coalitions, such as BRICS (whose first members were Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa); strengthening regional alliances, such as the African Union; and pursuing a more assertive agenda at the UN General Assembly. From championing the Paris agreement on climate change to taking Israel to the International Court of Justice, the global South—the broad

grouping of largely postcolonial countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East—has shown a greater willingness to challenge Western dominance and redefine the rules of the global order.

An “America first” foreign policy would seem to put those gains at risk. During his presidential campaign, Donald Trump promised to hit developing countries where it hurts most: raising tariffs that will throttle exporters in developing countries; normalizing the mass deportation of migrants, whose remittances are essential for the economies of many countries in the global South; and withdrawing from global environmental agreements that provide crucial support to those people disproportionately affected by the climate crisis. His proposed economic

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policies will probably lead to inflation at home, with devastating knock-on effects for developing countries as interest rates rise globally and credit becomes more expensive for economies already burdened by debt. His commitment to targeting China may make it harder for Beijing to continue serving as an alternative market and source of investment for much of the world.

But even if Trump follows through on his promises (and he may not), the bigger story for the global South should be one of opportunity. Trump has exhibited little interest in, and often contempt for, the non-Western world, but his return could paradoxically help countries in the global South advance their own interests. His hostility to certain international norms will push these countries to work together more effectively, while his transactional approach will give them the chance to play the great powers off one another.

And if Trump winds up accommodating Russia to pry it away from China, that would indicate that the United States must now navigate a multipolar world—exactly the understanding of geopolitics that the global South has come to embrace. Indeed, many governments in the global South welcome his departure from the U.S. foreign policy tradition of liberal internationalism that purports to make the world “safe for democracy” but has, since its inception under President Woodrow Wilson, applied one standard to Europeans and another to everyone else. By contrast, Trump borrows from another tradition, that of the likes of President William Taft, whose “dollar diplomacy” used economic influence to extend American power

abroad without moral pretense. Both approaches are forms of hegemonic reassertion—attempts to cement U.S. primacy on the world stage—but one cloaks itself in moral superiority, and the other does not. Some developing countries will feel Trump’s amoral pragmatism as a breath of fresh air, as well as an opening to promote their own interests, whatever the declared aims of Washington.

#### THE PENDULUM SWINGS

The global South is a capacious category, encompassing a wide variety of countries that have differing levels of wealth, influence, and aspiration. The interests and needs of a country with the economic heft of Brazil are very different from those of a poorer one such as Niger. Not all countries in the global South pull in the same direction: Indonesia, for instance, increasingly resists taking sides in the competition between China and the United States, while Argentina, under its Trump-admiring president, Javier Milei, has reoriented its foreign policy to hew more closely to American positions. Meanwhile, India is balancing its traditional solidarity with postcolonial countries against its desire to become a major military player loosely in the U.S. camp—a shift that has elevated its global standing as a counterweight to China.

Yet despite its diversity, the global South has over the decades managed to form effective coalitions to reshape those international rules long crafted to serve the interests of the powerful. Its countries have united on occasion to make international norms more equitable. In the mid-twentieth century, under the banner of the Non-Aligned

Movement, the global South coalition aimed to dismantle Western imperial legacies—fighting for sovereignty, racial equality, economic justice, and what it saw as cultural liberation from Western influence. By the 1970s, the global South had organized under various groupings, including the G-77 at the UN, to achieve significant victories: decolonization became enshrined in international law and the principle of nonintervention in the internal affairs of sovereign states emerged as a global norm. Organizations such as the oil-trading cartel OPEC used economic leverage to assert greater non-Western control over natural resources. Crucially, the advocacy of countries in the global South began influencing rules on nuclear proliferation, trade, energy, and the environment, codifying in international law the need for forms of redistributive justice to compensate countries that had emerged from the ravages of colonialism.

Consider the global nonproliferation regime: in the 1960s, the United States and the Soviet Union colluded to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and technological know-how, aiming to curb proliferation. That rankled many countries in the global South that sought greater access to peaceful nuclear technology and feared that an agreement between the superpowers would effectively entrench nuclear weapons, making it virtually impossible to eliminate them in the future. These countries banded together and, through years of hard-nosed negotiations, secured a compromise with the superpowers. The Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, signed in 1968, still favored states that already possessed

nuclear weapons, but it included provisions that encouraged disarmament in powerful countries and incentives for weaker countries to develop peaceful nuclear energy.

There were reverses, too. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the United States dismissed the global South as obsolete, insisting that all countries embrace domestic reforms to align with a liberal order under American primacy. Structural adjustment programs from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank enforced financial deregulation and austerity, while the United States used the extraterritorial application of domestic law—notably through the stipulations of Section 301 of the 1974 Trade Act—to pressure countries to dismantle protective tariffs and subsidies. Yet globalization unfolded in unexpected ways. It generated new wealth for many postcolonial countries, propelled China into a position of rising power, and fueled potent transnational movements such as political Islam. Although globalization also encouraged a wave of democratization across the developing world, that outcome did not always benefit the United States and its Western allies.

U.S. President Bill Clinton reopened opportunities for the global South. Rhetoric about the so-called liberal international order appealed to the notion of an interconnected world where prosperity could be more evenly distributed, including to developing countries. Clinton was not immune to violating these norms, such as when he bypassed the UN Security Council to launch NATO's intervention in Kosovo in 1999. The Helms-Burton Act in



1996 penalized foreign companies engaged in business with Cuba, even when such activities were legal in their own countries and lawful in the eyes of the World Trade Organization.

But Clinton's emphasis on a "rules-based order" allowed countries in the global South to use international institutions to their own advantage. The World Trade Organization provided a platform for developing countries to negotiate favorable deals, including the ability to legally challenge stronger economies, helping level the playing field in international trade. The 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing spotlighted gender issues, unleashing an era of progressive change across the developing world by galvanizing international support for gender equality initiatives and pressuring governments to better secure women's rights. The Kyoto Protocol to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change provided a mechanism through which

developing countries could receive financial and technological support for environmental policies while taking industrialized countries to task for failing to curb carbon emissions. The World Bank reformed to prioritize programs that reduced poverty and promoted sustainable development across the global South. A world of institutionalized global norms, despite its imperfections, allowed developing countries to hold great powers accountable and extract meaningful concessions through multilateral mechanisms.

The pendulum swung after the 9/11 attacks, in whose aftermath U.S. President George W. Bush insisted, "There are no rules." This proclamation heralded an era of unrestrained use of force in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere, resulting in the direct and indirect deaths of millions of people across the global South. The United States tortured detainees from developing countries in clandestine facilities.

In many Western countries, Muslims and their religion in general became the subjects of racialized scrutiny. The humanitarian doctrine of “responsibility to protect”—that sanctioned intervention to prevent crimes such as genocide—facilitated invasions and violations of national sovereignty, such as the NATO-led attack on Libya in 2011, that seemed motivated more by strategic interests than concerns about the welfare of people. U.S. President Barack Obama challenged international law by turning Yemen into a proving ground for drone warfare, causing a fragile state to spiral into chaos. This interventionism bred instability and triggered mass migration from Africa and the Middle East to Europe, especially during the Syrian civil war in the 2010s.

The financial crisis of 2008 would force the pendulum back in the other direction. It delivered a devastating blow to the West, exposing the rot within the pillars of the liberal international order. For the first time in decades, the West found itself needing the global South. The G-20, which brought emerging economies such as Brazil, China, India, and South Africa to the table alongside traditional Western powers, replaced the G-7 as the primary forum for global economic governance. Non-Western countries won a greater say in crafting global recovery plans, such as coordinated stimulus measures and reforms to financial governance. For example, the G-20 oversaw the expansion of representation in the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to include more voices from emerging economies. Concurrently, a range of

non-Western institutions—including the African Union, BRICS, OPEC+ (the expanded version of the cartel), and the Chinese-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank—became vibrant arenas of collective action for the global South.

Trump’s arrival in the White House in 2017 slowed the global South’s progress. His sidelining of the World Health Organization during the COVID-19 pandemic, withdrawal from the Paris agreement, and disregard for trade rules by unilaterally imposing tariffs outside the World Trade Organization framework had devastating effects. International institutions had offered the global South some modest protections—without them, weaker states were left vulnerable to the law of the jungle. In 2020, he announced his administration’s intention to withdraw from the World Health Organization, for instance, temporarily freezing U.S. funding for key programs in Africa, undermining efforts to combat polio and malaria. Trump’s disregard for international institutions also weakened the extent to which global South countries could influence global governance. Trump’s demonization of nonwhite migrants from global South countries further deepened the divide, promoting xenophobia and racist hostility that has reverberated far beyond U.S. borders.

Not much changed under U.S. President Joe Biden. His stance on trade largely mirrored Trump’s. Although Biden initially rolled back some of Trump’s hard-line positions on immigration, he would tack back toward them in the second half of his presidency. He returned the United

States to the Paris agreement, but his legislation devised to combat climate change—including the Inflation Reduction Act—risks becoming a tool for protectionism, making it harder, not easier, for global South countries to transition to green economies.

It is unsurprising that many developing countries have turned to China in recent years. China's transformation from a relatively poor country to a much more powerful and prosperous one in just a half century helps it speak to governments and publics in the global South. It has been a major financier for these countries, trading loans and investment for commodities, raw materials, energy, and port access to fuel its rapid growth. Beijing capitalized on Washington's self-inflicted wounds—such as its calamitous invasion of Iraq in 2003 and Trump's disdain for international agreements and institutions—to become a major player in multilateral organizations, in which it often claims to represent the interests of the developing world.

But there are growing signs of trouble. As China becomes more powerful, it increasingly treats other countries not as a partner might, but as a great power would. Many see its actions as neocolonial, including its imposition of draconian conditions on trade and investment deals and its heavy-handed diplomacy across Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia. In Southeast Asia, China has shifted from partner to aspiring hegemon, pressuring countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. Even within BRICS—which is now expanding beyond its founding members—some worry that China sees the grouping

as a vehicle to project influence rather than a shared platform for collective action benefiting developing countries. Trump's return to the White House will not make it any easier for the global South to balance China with the United States; his trade protectionism will hurt developing countries across the board.

#### DELUSIONS OF HEGEMONY

Trump's campaign pledges on trade, climate, migration, and taxation are often understood as a retreat from the world. From the perspective of the global South, however, these commitments suggest the opposite: they augur an attempt to reassert U.S. hegemony. When Trump threatens to withdraw from international agreements, he is actually insisting that the United States can go it alone—and that others should just fall in line if they know what's good for them. By sowing uncertainty about the credibility of American commitments, Trump incentivizes countries to align more closely with the United States or risk losing out. His proposed tax cuts and tariffs will fuel inflation, leading to higher U.S. interest rates. This, in turn, will raise borrowing costs globally, especially for countries with significant debt, and will drive investors away from emerging markets toward safer returns in the United States. The resulting currency depreciation will make imports more expensive, increasing inflation while reducing productivity in many developing countries. Rather than signaling isolation, Trump's campaign pledges are interpreted in the global South as a calculated strategy of revisionism—a

bid to restore U.S. primacy by making other countries pay heed, align with Washington, or be left vulnerable in an increasingly uncertain order.

Leaders across the global South will have little option but to find ways to shield their countries from the consequences of Trump's policies. Domestic publics in many developing countries are far more politically mobilized and technologically empowered than they were in previous eras, making their demands louder and harder to ignore. The poor and middle classes in much of the global South benefited significantly from the economic opportunities that came with globalization and that Trump threatens. They will expect their leaders to hold the line.

Many governments will, for instance, continue to explore alternatives to the U.S. currency, experimenting with nondollar payment systems, digital currencies, and trade mechanisms in local denominations to blunt the White House's capacity to coerce rivals through sanctions and other restrictions. They may seek new, creative strategies to maintain international trade flows and sidestep the restrictions imposed by the incoming U.S. administration. Anticipating such moves, Trump posted to social media in November threatening to impose 100 percent tariffs on BRICS countries should they pursue an alternative currency "to replace the mighty U.S. dollar."

If Trump does indeed conduct mass deportations, they will hurt his country's standing in much of the global South because they vindicate the belief that Trump holds profound disdain for the non-Western world. This will

deepen the divide between the global North and South on issues of race and cultural difference, straining the West's diplomatic relations with countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America while provoking broader resentment toward Western countries seen as perpetuating racial hierarchies. Such actions could exacerbate tensions within the United States, widening the gap between communities over issues of race and immigration and further undermining the country's moral authority on the global stage.

One subject that has won broad solidarity among the countries of the global South is the Palestinian cause. South Africa, for example, has taken steps to challenge Israel's actions in Gaza at the International Court of Justice, accusing it of committing acts of genocide. Many governments across the global South view this as emblematic of broader Western hypocrisy, pointing to how the West largely tolerates the killing of Palestinian and Lebanese civilians by Israel, even as it vociferously condemns Russian aggression and the killing of Ukrainian civilians. This double standard has deepened skepticism in the global South about the impartiality of the liberal international order. The plight of the Palestinians will serve as a flash point, a symbol of inequities in the prevailing international order and, in the eyes of many across the developing world, the unfinished work of decolonization. The issue will continue to underscore the persistent tensions between Western and non-Western countries. Even as Trump gives freer rein to Israeli ambitions, developing countries will

keep using the UN General Assembly and international law to challenge not only Israel but also the United States.

On climate action, Trump's approach promises to embolden interest groups within the global South that are dedicated to high-carbon industries and the extraction of fossil fuels. That will shift the domestic balance of power away from proponents of the green transition. High-carbon interest groups are bound to resist necessary reforms and make it costlier and slower to effect the green transition globally. Trump's relative indifference to climate action could embolden loggers, ranchers, and miners around the world, leading to further deforestation and unsustainable agricultural expansions that will exacerbate climate change, threatening global food security by disrupting ecosystems and reducing crop yields in both the global South and the global North.

At the same time, Trump's foreign policy could have some curious consequences. Instead of reasserting American primacy, Washington could come to see that the world has shifted under its feet. If Trump follows through on his campaign pledge to lower tensions with Russia while still seeking to pressure China, he may unintentionally accelerate the drift toward a multipolar world. By easing hostilities with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Trump would tacitly acknowledge that Russia cannot be subdued and that Moscow's quest for regional hegemony is legitimate—that Russia is entitled to strive to maintain a sphere of influence. This would vindicate many countries in the global South that have argued

for years that the international system is no longer defined by unchallenged American hegemony but by a more balanced order, in which the United States must increasingly eschew the impulsive foreign policy of unipolarity for calculated restraint. Developing countries will continue treating both China and Russia as pivotal centers of power, seizing opportunities to extract economic, security, and technological concessions through platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a China-led multilateral group. In a fragmented global order marked by competition and pragmatic transactionalism, Trump's policies could increase the global South's leverage, enabling it to play great powers off one another.

To be sure, the global South lacks the unity and resources to fully blunt the sharper edges of Trump's foreign policy. The United States under Trump will still wield unmatched influence, setting agendas and shaping international rules. Washington retains the capacity to employ economic coercion, diplomatic isolation, and even military force to quash serious efforts by developing countries to challenge U.S. preferences. But the rising agency of the global South and the expanding geopolitical consciousness among its peoples have fundamentally altered the dynamics of global power. The U.S. government, whether under Trump or his successors, will find it increasingly difficult to ignore the growing political relevance of those countries once consigned to the margins. Trump's bid to reassert American hegemony will run into a world that is far less pliant than he imagines it to be. 🌐