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# China's Strategic Engagement with the Global South: Reshaping Development and Governance

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**Abstract**
China's expanding engagement with the Global South has altered both the practice of development cooperation and the institutional politics of global governance. This article reviews the ways in which infrastructure financing foreign trade investment South-South cooperation and new multilateral initiatives have created wider scopes for development while posing new challenges in terms of governance. It uses a qualitative integrative review involving 19 different academic papers published between 2010 and 2025 and a number of institutional reports. The data show that China has not merely substituted the Western-led order with one of its own but has instead created a more intricate and competitive governance situation by combining engagement in conventional institutions with the establishment of new institutions. These include the Belt and Road Initiative, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, cooperation with BRICS countries and the Global Development Initiative. Although this approach can increase the room for maneuvering, solve the issues related to infrastructure, and give Southern countries more bargaining power, its results heavily depend on the level of the domestic capability, transparency, and ability to manage debt, environmental concerns and involve local communities into addressing the governance issues.

**Keywords:** China; Global South; South-South cooperation; Belt and Road Initiative; development finance; global governance

## Introduction

The renewed political salience of the "Global South" reflects more than a mere change in diplomatic jargon. It signifies a redistribution of influence, voice, initiative, and power from countries that have long been marginalized in the decision-making processes with regards to trade, finance, development, and security. At the same time, this term does not imply, even loosely, the existence of clearly defined geographical regions. It covers all countries characterized as low- and middle-income, emerging economies, resource-rich countries, small islands, and various conflict-torn societies with different capabilities and interests. The core of the term is based on shared, but not mutual, experience of hierarchy in international politics as well as a strong aspiration to acquire more autonomy and representation (Bull & Banik, 2025).

In this regard, China is a rather unique case. It still perceives itself as a developing country, evoking such notions as Bandung Spirit, non-interference, and South-South cooperation. At the same time, China has become an important trading country, creditor, investor, technology provider, and agenda setter, with resources that allow it to achieve much more than many countries of the Global South. This dual identity−simultaneously a member, partner, and leading power of the Global South−gives Beijing unusual legitimacy and leverage. Duggan (2020) describes this role identity as that of a "champion of the developing world," while Liu (2022) traces its historical capital to the 1955 Bandung Conference and the subsequent institutionalization of cooperation across Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

The scale and breadth of this engagement have made China central to contemporary debates on development and governance. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) connect infrastructure projects to trade, investments in industry, digital technology, energy issues, and policy formulation. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), New Development Bank (NDB), BRICS partnership, Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), along with many other regional meetings enable negotiations concerning development and projects. Recently, the establishment of the Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), and Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) has expanded the idea of development and sovereignty.

Different opinions exist on the interpretations of these developments. Some hold that China provides badly-needed capital and ideas previously ignored by more traditional donors. The provision of capital by China can give governments wider room for industrial development and for making agreements with other countries (Alshareef, 2024; Lin & Wang, 2025). When taken together, these mechanisms blur the boundaries between terms like aid and commerce, statecraft and development, as well as between bilateral and multilateral governance.

Interpretations of the changes are divided. One position posits that it is possible to regard China as an entity that provides infrastructure, capital, and policymaking solutions that have not been supplied by traditional donors. In this case, Chinese funding could enable governments to emerge from under the industrial policies they have been pursuing and to negotiate with Western institutions more successfully (Alshareef, 2024; Lin & Wang, 2025). Another position implies that there are issues with contracting, relations with elite stakeholders, risks of debt, environmental consequences, and limited local ties, as well as the emergence of new forms of dependence due to infrastructure and digital systems' functioning (Mohan & Tan-Mullins, 2019; Power & Mohan, 2010). Both perspectives identify real tendencies, but neither is adequate when treated as a universal explanation.

This article asks: "How and through what mechanisms is China's strategic engagement reshaping development practices and governance in the Global South, and under what conditions does that engagement expand rather than constrain Southern agency?"**.** It argues that China's most consequential effect is not the construction of a separate, fully formed

"Chinese order." It is the pluralization of development and governance through three connected processes: the provision of material capabilities, the layering of institutions, and the diffusion of norms about sovereignty and development. These processes widen policy choices and redistribute agenda-setting power, but their benefits are conditional. Domestic institutions, bargaining capacity, project selection, transparency, and social participation determine whether new options generate structural transformation or reproduce enclave development and elite dependence.

The discussion proceeds from methodology to six findings. It first situates China's engagement in the historical transition from Bandung solidarity to institutionalized economic statecraft. It then examines infrastructure and productive transformation, the expansion of policy space, institutional and normative change, recipient agency, and the contradictions that have driven China's recent strategic recalibration. The conclusion draws out the implications for development governance and a more multipolar international order.

**Methodology and Analytical Approach**

The research incorporates qualitative integration of literature and involves an analysis of different works published within the time frame of 2010 to 2025. The sources include numerous peer-reviewed journal articles, review articles, regional studies, etc. that focus on topics such as South-South cooperation, China's development finance, infrastructure, foreign aid, industrialization, economic governance, China-Africa relations, and various global initiatives of China. One duplicate copy of an article was not included in the analysis, however further primary resources and institutional data were added, such as State Council Information Office of China, All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), UNCTAD, and World Bank, where the official policy statements of importance were checked and quotations were calculated. Texts were selected for relevance to three analytical domains. The first was development practice, including aid, loans, trade, investment, industrial relocation, infrastructure, technology, and knowledge exchange.

The second was governance architecture, covering participation in established institutions, creation of new institutions, agenda setting, rules, standards, and normative claims. The third was Southern agency and distributional outcomes, including state bargaining, domestic ownership, debt sustainability, social and environmental effects, and local perceptions. The review compared supportive, critical, and mixed interpretations rather than organizing evidence around a predetermined "threat" or "win-win" conclusion.

The process of coding involved two phases where first, descriptive coding was done to identify the mode of activities that China adopted. This step indicated any developments by China's Belt and Road Initiative and other initiatives concerning the Chinese credit, such as the FOCAC and the BRICS among others .During the second stage of coding, the analysis grouped the findings according to five mechanisms concerning the provision of capabilities, institutional layering, opening up of the policy space, being a norm entrepreneur, and the mediation of the recipient. Any contradictory findings were included. For instance, the studies that linked Chinese financial operations to the expansion of infrastructure and to gaining independence from policies were placed next to case studies stating about elite control over investments and accountability issues.

The analysis adopts a relational understanding of power. China's influence is not inferred merely from the volume of finance or the number of institutions it supports. Influence exists when resources alter the choices available to other actors, when institutions shift agendas or procedures, or when norms change what governments regard as legitimate development policy. Conversely, Southern states are not treated as passive recipients. They select, negotiate, renegotiate, delay, combine, or reject projects, although their capacity to do so varies. This approach makes it possible to distinguish opportunity from outcome and Chinese intent from locally mediated effects.

The method has limitations. The Global South is internally heterogeneous, and the literature remains weighted toward Africa and large infrastructure projects. Project-level data are often incomplete, while the boundaries between official aid, export credit, commercial lending, and investment are contested. A literature review also cannot establish uniform causal effects across countries. Its value lies instead in analytical synthesis: identifying recurring mechanisms, conditions, and contradictions across a diverse body of scholarship.

## Findings and Observations

### From Bandung Solidarity to Institutionalized Strategic Engagement

It is often said that China's relations with the Global South began with its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, such narratives overlook the fact that Chinese political ideas were rooted in history. In particular, at the Bandung Conference in 1955, Chinese diplomats combined ideas of anti-colonial solidarity with ideas of sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference, equality, and peaceful coexistence. This historical fact made it possible for later governments to utilize this gain. Liu (2022) claims that the Bandung Conference allowed China to legitimize its belief in the existence of an alternative pathway to modernization and set up the platform for global interstate policy learning.

Historically speaking, China makes pauses in the diplomatic dimension, claiming that the ability to learn from each other is one of the most critical aspects of its interaction with Global South countries. Nonetheless, the current development differs greatly from earlier practices in this dimension. As it develops relations with Global South countries, China combines political narratives with propositions based on its own economic power.

This evolution also reflects domestic transformation inside China. Lin and Wang (2025) connect China's external economic relations to its movement from labor-intensive production toward more capital- and technology-intensive industries. As wages and industrial capabilities rose, Chinese firms acquired incentives to relocate some manufacturing, seek new markets, secure inputs, and build the infrastructure necessary for wider commercial networks. Development cooperation and economic internationalization thus became intertwined. The language of South-South partnership is normatively important, but it coexists with commercial interests, strategic risk management, and the internationalization of Chinese firms and standards.

China's role is consequently defined by a productive tension. Its continuing identification with the developing world distinguishes it from traditional donors and supports demands for greater Southern representation. Yet material asymmetry complicates the language of equality. Banik and Mawdsley (2023) caution that the rhetoric of mutual benefit can obscure paternalism, hierarchy, and geoeconomic competition. This does not make South-South cooperation meaningless. It means that its egalitarian claims must be assessed through decision-making processes, ownership, and the distribution of gains rather than through diplomatic language alone.

**Infrastructure, Connectivity, and the Politics of Productive Transformation**

Chinese involvement is mainly evident through bringing back infrastructure into the forefront of development cooperation. For many countries, the lack of energy, transportation, logistics, and digital connectivity is not a trivial issue - it is a major barrier to industrialization, social services, and integration into regional value chains. Chinese policy banks and public companies developed the capacity for financing and implementation of large projects, which could not be compared with traditional forms of aid focused on social issues and institutional rehabilitation. BRI integrated these efforts into a more coherent strategy of connectivity.

The importance of infrastructure lies in its ability to capacity-creating rather than also serving as a simple addition to physical assets. Ramifications of transport corridors will be reduced through time and costs of transactions, energy systems can remove constraints related to supply, and telecommunication systems can help create new markets and services. According to The World Bank (2019), if transportation corridors are complete, it will lower the time for traveling through corridors by 12% and increase international trade by 2.8-9.7% while increasing foreign direct investment in low-income economies of the corridor.

Therefore, it is important to note the differences in infrastructure provision and structural shift. Lin and Wang (2025) argue that there are prospects for relocating labor-intensive production processes to underdeveloped economies as a result of China's industrial upgrade. Chinese investments boost the functioning of manufacturing plants in different countries provided infrastructure, skills level, macroeconomic stability, and industrial policy are in place. This perspective shows that the aim of government's activity could be to counteract coordination failures because, while the markets could reveal comparative advantages of firms, the states provide infrastructure, institutions, and necessary subsequent investments.

Critical case studies confirm that it cannot be assumed that the stated results will be achieved. Mohan and Tan-Mullins (2019) argue that Chinese companies financing energy projects in Ghana and Cambodia demonstrate that financing and construction of projects are negotiated in elite circles, instead of passing through already existing accountability mechanisms. As a result, enclave projects with weak ties with local economies are very possible. Power and Mohan (2010) point out that proclamations about the existence of a coherent Chinese geopolitical strategy can hide many fragmented agencies, managers, firms, local intermediaries, and recipient-state interests that produce the actual results.

These findings are compatible rather than mutually exclusive. Infrastructure changes development possibilities, but its distributional effects depend on governance. A railway can lower national transport costs while displacing communities; a power project can increase generation while deepening fiscal vulnerability; a port can become a trade hub or a stranded asset. The critical question is not whether infrastructure is "good" or "bad," but whether projects are embedded in credible national and regional strategies, subjected to transparent appraisal, connected to local suppliers and labor markets, and governed throughout their life cycle.

**Finance, Conditionality, and the Expansion of Policy Space**

Chinese development finance has affected governance since it has provided Southern governments with different external options. Historically, the traditional development lending model attaches macroeconomic, governance, procurement, or policy conditions to financial assistance. On the other hand, Chinese lenders tend to rely on project-based negotiations and uphold the principle of sovereignty and non-interference, although they may have commercial and security clauses in their contracts. If the governments are in need of constructing infrastructure or developing industry, the fact that other financing is available will enhance their negotiating ability with the Chinese even if the Chinese offer is not cheaper.

Alshareef (2024) argues that Chinese finance can enlarge development policy space in two ways. First, it directs resources toward transport, energy, and industrial clusters that strengthen productive capacity. Second, Chinese trade and investment arrangements tend to impose fewer "behind-the-border" restrictions on industrial policy than many comprehensive agreements associated with advanced economies. This can preserve greater room for subsidies, local-content measures, state-owned enterprises, technology policy, and capital management. Dunford and Liu (2024) similarly interpret China's international economic engagement as potentially supporting a more balanced multipolar order, although the consequences vary with domestic development strategies.

Policy space, however, is a capacity rather than a guaranteed developmental outcome. Governments may use it to coordinate industrial upgrading, or they may use it to avoid scrutiny and sustain patronage. Where public institutions are weak, negotiation is secretive, and project selection is politically driven, "non-conditionality" can protect incumbent elites more effectively than national autonomy. Where debt-management systems are fragmented, governments may accumulate liabilities without adequate assessment of foreign-exchange risks, expected returns, or contingent guarantees. The absence of one form of conditionality can therefore coexist with powerful constraints created by debt service, dependence on a single contractor, or control over critical technology.

The term "debt-trap diplomacy" is not always appropriate, as it assumes strategic aims behind unfavorable outcomes of credits and ignores the agency of debtors and the variety of Chinese lenders. Carmody et al. (2022) and Alshareef (2024) show that China's finance is adaptive and that it can expand autonomy. Nevertheless, rejecting the idea of debt-trap completely must not underestimate the existing risks of debts. The questions must be academic: Is the project economically and socially valid? Was there transparency in terms? Who were the actors initiating the loan? How were risks divided? Could the borrower renegotiate the terms of the loan? What options were provided to the borrower? The analysis must differentiate deliberate coercion from bad assessment and domestic political motives, commodity shocks, currency depreciation, and global problems in sovereign debts.

Recipient governments bear responsibility, but this does not absolve lenders. Responsible financing implies conducting proper feasibility studies, making the result of these studies public, organizing a competition where possible, and conducting fiscal risk assessments.

**Institutional Layering and the Reconfiguration of Global Governance**

China has changed its governance approach, doing both by improving existing structures and creating new ones. It is still actively involved in the United Nations, WTO, IMF, and World Bank to obtain more influence there and position itself as a proponent of multilateralism. At the same time, it has been promoting BRICS collaboration, NDB, AIIB, BRI, and regional organizations that exist beside other institutions.

According to Cai (2023), China employs a "bypassing strategy": when reform within Western-dominated institutions is slow, China builds mechanisms outside them that can create indirect pressure for wider change. However, bypassing does not always mean leaving or substituting. The case of the AIIB is a good illustration of institutional layering. China initiated it and remains the biggest shareholder of the bank, anyway, the bank has developed a multilateral structure, which includes a professional bureaucracy and co-investment relations with other banks. In the first annual report of the bank published in 2024, the numbers presented show 110 full and approved members and the geography of participation which goes far beyond a small geopolitical bloc (AIIB, 2025). Such institutions enhance China's agenda-setting role while also socializing Chinese initiatives into international operational standards. Influence moves in both directions.

Consequently, Heldt and Park (2025) characterize China's role in the global economic governance as diverse across different areas: China can be supportive, complementary, reformist, and challenging of the current arrangements. A continuum of effects provides a better description than the strict binary of the status quo versus revisionist approach. In the sphere of infrastructure finance, China has created significant alternatives; in trade, it is benefitting from several laws and regulations and defending them; in development discourse, it is promoting state sovereignty and state-led transformations; and in multilateral organizations, it is trying to get representation in proportion to its economic power. The direction of change is therefore neither one-way diffusion nor simple institutional rivalry. It is a process of bargaining and hybridization in which Chinese actors learn from established organizations even as their financing capacity shifts priorities toward infrastructure and state-led development. For Southern partners, the governance of standards is as consequential as the governance of formal voting rights because technical choices can lock in suppliers, maintenance relationships, and regulatory pathways for decades.

China’s recent global undertakings shift the focus from institutions to norms. The GDI emphasizes the need to work to develop and implement the Sustainable Development Goals. The GSI deals with shared and indivisible security, dialogue, non-interference, and opposition to block confrontations. The GCI promotes the idea of civilization diversity while arguing against the notion of a single cultural or political model that applies universally. Collectively, these initiatives relate development, security, and legitimacy to the concept of a "community of shared future for mankind" (Yao & Li, 2024).

These concepts are relevant for a certain part of the Global South because they deal with pressing issues such as unequal representation, selective intervention, economic pressure, and the prioritization of security aim over development. However, the practical meaning of these ideas is still under discussion. While sovereignty may protect weaker states from being interfered with, the principle of non-interference may affect accountability for breach of rights. Although the concept of civilization pluralism may promote cultural equality, it may also protect the authoritarian practices from criticism. Finally, while development-first governance may facilitate the problem of disregard for production transformation, it may subjugate participation and justice to the idea of rapid implementation. Norm entrepreneurship must therefore be evaluated through implementation, not only official formulations.

**Southern Agency and the Co-production of Outcomes**

The most important corrective to both celebratory and alarmist accounts is the recognition that China does not act on an empty field. Southern countries, regional organizations, companies, communities, and social movements shape the terms and outcomes of engagements. They propose the projects, select sectors, negotiate prices and guarantees, award contracts, demand restructuring, and sometimes even abandon or transform them. Their choices are constrained by asymmetries, but they are not irrelevant.

The case of African relations with China illustrates this co-production. Mulugeta (2025) argued that African states and institutions increasingly link cooperation with China with its own priorities (stated in Agenda 2063 and the African Continental Free Trade Agreement). Infrastructural, trade, health, educational, and industrial projects are seen as a means to meet Africa’s objectives only in the case when they are aligned with regional cooperation. The

Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC)[1] also provides African governments with a permanent opportunity to present their needs and priorities collectively, though the outcomes depend on their preparedness and negotiating power.

Southeast Asia provides a parallel example of selective engagement whereby countries embrace BRI and GDI's economic components but approach them cautiously from a security and political standpoint. Basing their findings on the research done by Yao and Li (2024), the responses from the countries in this region center on economic and strategic motives in a certain manner. In addition, nations adopt only those BRI and GDI[2] components that align with their priorities and interests. Therefore, engagement should not be understood as outright support of BRI and GDI projects. For instance, countries can use Chinese infrastructure but at the same time finance the projects through a multilateral bank, oppose certain aspects of GSI[3], and cooperate with countries like the US, Japan, India, or the EU.

A similar agency can be noticed below the state level. As local communities, trade unions, journalists, courts, and civil organizations can expose negative environmental consequences, seek compensation for their losses, fight against land grabbing, and call on governments to renegotiate their agreements. Their level of power varies depending on the openness of political systems and rate of institutional access. Stronger local participation is therefore not an external value imposed on South-South cooperation; it is a mechanism for ensuring that projects answer to the societies whose development they claim to serve.

Agency is most effective when supported by technical capacity. Governments need the ability to evaluate demand forecasts, debt and currency risks, environmental effects, procurement choices, technology standards, data governance, and long-term maintenance costs. Coordination within a region can reduce destructive competition among neighboring countries that try to attract the same ports, railways, or industrial areas and improve the bargaining position vis-a-vis major financers. The availability of external options only becomes useful autonomy when a state is capable of comparing and governing those options.

Collective agency matters especially because bilateral negotiations increase asymmetries. Regional organizations can develop shared standards for project, debentures, employment, ecological assessments, critical mineral processing, and infrastructure. They can also coordinate corridor design and ensure that investments facilitate trade and do not only create useful projects just for the sake of prestige. Coalitions from BRICS, African Union, ASEAN, and other Southern platforms do not have to find a common position so as to cooperate in governance reform initiatives.

[1] The Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) is a governmental platform formed in 2000 and hosting regular meetings every 3 years to enable policy negotiations, commerce, and financial assistance. In total, fifty-three countries are members of this institution, all except Eswatini.

[2] Global Development Initiative

[3] Global Security Initiative

**Contradictions, Learning, and Strategic Recalibration**

China's engagement has never been static. Its initial expansion emphasized large, state-backed loans and turnkey infrastructure. Debt distress, slowing domestic growth, project underperformance, political backlash, environmental criticism, and the COVID-19 shock increased the costs of that model. Carmody et al. (2022) identify a reorganization toward tighter risk control, smaller projects, public-private arrangements, aid, health cooperation, and people-to-people initiatives. Liu and Li (2025) similarly describe Chinese aid as a learning process shaped by domestic priorities, recipient responses, multilateral interaction, and the global development agenda.

This recalibration is visible in the language of high-quality, green, digital, and "small and beautiful" cooperation. It should not be interpreted as the end of the BRI. It represents a change in portfolio and political presentation: less reliance on highly leveraged megaprojects, more attention to financial viability, and greater emphasis on technology, renewable energy, health, agriculture, skills, and visible community benefits. The GDI embeds many of these activities in the 2030 Agenda and a wider development narrative (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2021).

There are several opportunities and new risks arising from this change. Solar energy and digital communication are vital for countries moving away from obsolete systems and building new approaches in their industries, but they may create other issues for people through new industry developments that raise concerns about labor conditions and compliance with various security norms. Projects aimed at promoting green technologies do not necessarily bring about social justice, and small projects do not guarantee accountability. Governments need to keep changing in accordance with the changes in the economy as new industries appear.

Learning becomes the competitive process as China's focus on infrastructure development makes other organizations reflect on the way they neglected connectivity and productive sectors for all this time. At the same time, negative publicity concerning Chinese ventures puts pressure on the country, making it adopt stricter environmental, social, debt, and transparency policies. This mutual adaptation is one of China's most significant systemic effects. Global development governance is becoming more plural and competitive, but also partially convergent around sustainability, co-financing, measurable outcomes, and risk management.

**Reshaping Rather Than Replacing the International Order**

The combined findings point to transformation through accumulation rather than rupture. China is integrating finance, institutions, forums, standards, and narratives into an existing system. Some of the mechanisms bypass Western supremacy; others operate through the existing frameworks, still others generate hybrid practices. China benefits from the openness and stability of the economic system but is at the same time challenging the power structure in the system.

The main structural benefit for the Global South is increased optionality. Governments can diversify their loans, investments, markets, technology providers, and diplomatic connections. UNCTAD (2024) reports shows that the South-South trading continues to expand, reinforcing the material foundations of this change. More options allow countries to improve their bargaining power and become less dependent on one institution.

Optionality, however, is not emancipation. Dependence can be diversified rather than overcome. Commodity exporters may remain locked into unequal trade structures; borrowers may exchange one set of external constraints for another; and political elites may use geopolitical competition to avoid domestic reform. The Global South itself contains rising powers and vulnerable states whose interests do not automatically coincide. Bull and Banik (2025) therefore emphasize both the political force and internal diversity of the category.

China’s engagement is best described as negotiated pluralization. “Pluralization” captures the multiplication of development pathways, institutional venues, and legitimate policy ideas. “Negotiated” recognizes that these changes are mediated by asymmetry, domestic politics, local resistance, and strategic competition. The concept avoids assuming that a more multipolar order is inherently more equitable. Equity depends on how voice, risk, ownership, and benefits are distributed within and among Southern societies.

**Conclusion**

China's strategic interaction with Global South changes development and governing frameworks by integrating material resources, territorial capabilities, and institutional transformation. Various practices, including infrastructure financing, trading, investing capital, providing aid, and exchanging knowledge, have brought new dynamism and relevance to the discussions of development practices. BRICS cooperation, NDB, AIIB, Implementation of BRI initiative, launching of the FOCAC, and recent international programs have promoted the contestation of development priorities and governing principles, leading to increased diversity of institutions where these processes unfold. In summary, these initiatives increase opportunities for the Global South and add pressure on the conventional institutions to respond to requests for representation, infrastructure, sovereignty, and political autonomy.

The evidence does not support a singular judgment. China can narrow an infrastructure gap, conduct investments in various industry sectors, and expand policy scope. At the same time, this process may have negative outcomes in the forms of unsustainable liabilities, opaque bargains, enclave development, environmental harm, and technological dependence.

Three implications follow. First, partner states should embed external finance in transparent national and regional development strategies, with credible project appraisal, debt management, local-linkage plans, environmental safeguards, and public oversight. Second, China’s long-term legitimacy will depend less on the scale of commitments than on quality, disclosure, social value, and responsiveness to local priorities. Third, established powers and institutions should treat China's rise not merely as a geopolitical threat but as evidence of unresolved failures in development finance and global representation.

China is neither simply overturning the international order nor being absorbed unchanged into it. It is helping create a layered system in which rules, resources, and models are more contested. Whether this emerging pluralism becomes more equitable will depend on the capacity of Global South states and societies to convert geopolitical competition into productive transformation, collective bargaining, and democratic developmental governance. The decisive issue is thus not whether China will "lead" the Global South, but whether expanded choices can be governed in ways that advance locally defined, socially inclusive, and environmentally sustainable development.

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