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# The belt & road initiative and U.S.-China competition over the global South

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## ABSTRACT

The Belt and Road initiative aims to facilitate cooperation in the areas of infrastructure, trade and finance between China and relevant countries. It also seeks to boost soft connectivity in terms of rules, standards and people-to-people exchange. The majority of the BRI participating countries are developing ones in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America, also known as the global South. China's efforts to advance the BRI have raised suspicion of the United States. By strengthening its ties with the global South, the United States seeks to divide and conquer between China and other developing countries, and to promote the alienation of the global South from China to realize the goal of outcompeting China. The BRI is a double-edged sword that could complicate its relations with the developing countries. China needs to recognize many difficulties faced by the global South and its pragmatic orientation of non-Western but not anti-Western, and strive to improve effectiveness and efficiency of the BRI.

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## 1. Introduction

The Chinese leadership launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, and since then much progress has been made in this connectivity-oriented project. With rising economic clouts, China has the aspiration to play a leading role in the world affairs by promoting the BRI (Ho 2020; Goodman and Parker 2016), which is also critical for addressing China's domestic challenges such as sustaining growth momentum, ensuring energy supply and creating jobs. The BRI aims to facilitate cooperation in the areas of infrastructure, trade and finance between China and relevant countries. It also seeks to boost soft connectivity in terms of rules, standards and people-to-people exchange. As of March 2024, more than 180 countries and international organizations have signed agreements with the Chinese government on the BRI. The majority of these countries are developing ones in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America, also known as the global South.

However, China's efforts to advance the BRI have raised suspicion of the United States. Since 2017, the U.S. government has explicitly referred to China as its most

significant rival, and strategic competition has become the overarching framework for the United States to deal with U.S.-China relations. The Biden administration's *National Security Strategy* report, released in October 2022, described China as the greatest geopolitical challenge facing the United States (White House 2022). It also touted a 'decisive decade' for the U.S.-China rivalry (Lee 2022). In this power play between the largest and second largest economies, the United States is increasingly concerned about Chinese influence in the global South comprised of emerging economies and developing countries. Not only are these countries rich in resources and with huge populations, but their influence in international politics is also growing. In the aftermath of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, many countries of the global South did not choose to join the United States and other Western countries in imposing sanctions on Russia. The global South's resistance against the new Cold War between the United States and China is also prominent.

This article attempts to analyze the BRI and the competition between the United States and China in the global South. In order to counterbalance China's growing influence in the developing world by implementing the BRI, the United States has intensified the competition against China in the global South through a series of tactics and moves, such as supporting India as a leader in the developing world, working with American allies through mechanisms such as the Mineral Security Partnership (MSP), and enhancing its efforts to co-opt developing countries in areas such as energy transition, food security and infrastructure. The competition over the global South has important implications for the long game between China and the United States. It also poses the most significant geopolitical challenge to the future development of the BRI.

## 2. The global South and U.S.-China strategic competition

The concept of the global South as an aggregation of developing countries is related to the concept of the Third World. During the Cold War in the second half of the twentieth century, the capitalist countries led by the United States, competed with the socialist bloc centered on the Soviet Union. Outside the two camps, a number of countries in regions such as Asia, Africa and Latin America formed a loose grouping of what the French economic historian Alfred Sauvy described as the Third World. The United States and the Soviet Union engaged in a fierce struggle for the Third World countries in the Horn of Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia and other regions, and it led to the emergence of the global Cold War (Painter 1995). The establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in September 1961 and the Group of 77 (G-77) in June 1964 symbolized the attempts of the developing countries to free themselves from the hegemonic struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union. They 'sought to create an independent path in world politics that would not result in member states becoming pawns in the struggle between the major powers' (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India 2012).

In 1980, the Independent Commission on International Development issued the Brandt Report, which was written under the auspices of the West German politician Willy Brandt. It proposed the concept of the Brandt Line based on GDP per capita, and concluded that there was a huge imbalance in global development and a gap between rich and poor. The developed countries are mainly located north of the

Brandt Line, developing countries are mainly located south of the Line. For this reason, analysts of international affairs refer to the developed countries as the North and the developing countries as the South. For the past decades, the countries of the South have been marginalized and disadvantaged by the Western-dominated globalization and international governance system. After the end of the Cold War, the idea of the global South took shape with the emergence of developing countries as a group and their increasingly important role in world affairs. The international community has tended to view the development and cooperation of the South from a holistic perspective. The adoption by the General Assembly of the United Nations of the *Challenge of the South: Report of the Commission of the South* in 1991 was a landmark event, in which the Commission emphasized the need for the countries of the South to work together at the global level, thus gradually replacing the term Third World with global South.

The rise of the global South is closely linked to the changing position of developing countries in the international economic landscape. According to Kishore Mahbubani (2024), Distinguished Fellow at the National University of Singapore, 88% of the world's population resides in the global South, which is no longer a passive participant on the world stage and the world will belong to the global South in the coming decade. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), India's gross domestic product (GDP) will surpass that of the United States by 2050; and by 2060, the combined GDP of China, India, and Indonesia will reach \$116.7 trillion, accounting for 49% of the total global GDP and three times the size of the U.S. economy (Sheng and Geng 2023). In addition, the global South shares common political legacy and identity. As James Carafano (2023), Senior Fellow at the Heritage Foundation, has argued, many countries of the global South share a history of oppression by colonialism, racism and imperialism.

China insists that it is a member of the global South. Over the past decades, China has achieved a remarkable leap in national strength, becoming the second largest economy in the world after the United States. However, in terms of data such as gross national income (GNI) per capita, China is still a middle-income country. The World Bank defines economies with a GNI per capita of more than \$13,205 (the 2022 standard, which is updated annually) as developed countries, and those below that standard are categorized as upper-middle-income, lower-middle-income and low-income, all of which are developing countries. In 2021, China's GNI per capita was \$11,880, ranking it 68th in the world, which makes it a developing country. In the same year, China ranked 79th in the United Nations Development Program's Human Development Index, comparable to major developing countries. In 2022, China's per capita GDP reached to \$12,741, equivalent to only 1/5 of the developed economies and 16.6% of the United States. Without doubt, China's power is much greater than that of other developing countries in the world. To a certain extent, China has to face a kind of national identity dilemma brought about by the superposition of being a major power and developing country. As Philippe Benoit (2023), Senior Fellow at the Columbia University Center for Global Energy Policy stated, China is a 'hybrid superpower' in the world.

Against the backdrop of the great power competition, the issue of China's national identity has become an important grip for the United States to exert pressure on China. By questioning and weakening China's national identity as a developing country, it can

not only hold down China's economic development, but also undermine relations between China and other developing countries and separate China from the global South.

First, China's developing country status has been questioned by American politicians and analysts. Developing country status is associated with a series of preferential treatments, such as access to loans from the World Bank, special and differential treatment in the World Trade Organization and financial assistance from the United Nations Green Climate Fund. The China hawks in the United States believe that China's rapid development over the past years has been due to its participation in the United States-dominated international economic system, and that China has been granted special and differential treatment by enjoying the status of a developing country in institutions such as the World Trade Organization (Kanwit 2023). This could enable China to obtain some advantages in the competition between it and the United States. In March 2023, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the *China is Not a Developing Country Act*. In June of the same year, the U.S. Senate passed a related bill requiring the U.S. executive branch to develop a plan to end China's developing country status in the international organizations (Zengerle 2023). If China loses the developing country status, its exports will be subject to higher tariffs and heavier carbon reduction obligations, and its concessional loans from multilateral development banks will be greatly reduced.

Second, the United States views the partnership with the global South as an important means of strengthening its competition with China. Michael Schuman (2023), Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council, suggests that China seeks to use the global South to realize its new vision of the international order and to counter the United States and its allies. Thus, the global South becomes one of the main battlegrounds for the intensifying Sino-American competition. John Ikenberry (2024), Princeton University Professor of International Relations, points out that the world is divided into the West, the South and the East three parts, the global West led by the United States and Europe; the global East led by China, Russia; the global South by the developing countries, has not yet formed a clear leader. Ikenberry emphasized that the global West and the global East will compete around the global South, and that the union of the global West and the global South will be a kind of 'nightmare coalition' for China. The United States has made weakening China's relations with developing countries a key part of its efforts to counter-balance China, and it is placing increased emphasis on making a distinction between China and the global South. In October 2022, the Biden administration released its *National Security Strategy Report*, which stated that the United States would not view the world solely through the prism of strategic competition, but would increase its engagement with countries in the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and elsewhere, and would make greater efforts to meet the developmental needs of the relevant partner countries. It may ensure that they remain autonomous in the face of China. In fact, the United States seeks to integrate the competition for the global South with its intensified pressure on China in the areas of trade (supply chain), technology, global governance, and ideology, further weakening China's influence in the international system.

Thirdly, the United States worries about its declining influence on the global South. For a long time, the global South has been dissatisfied with its marginalized position in the West-dominated international order. In the eyes of many developing countries, the United States and its Western allies have adopted double standards on security, human rights and other matters, to the detriment of the interests of the

global South. Although the United States preaches a rules-based international order, in practice it engages in unilateral coercion, resorts to force and imposes its will on others, evidenced by the Iraq war launched by America in 2003 (Chenoy 2023). Matias Spektor (2023), a professor of international relations at the Vargas Foundation in Brazil, argues that discontent in the global South stems from the hypocrisy that the United States has long displayed in its dealings with developing countries. It is also hypocritical for the United States to characterize its rivalry with China and Russia as a contest between democracy and autocracy. It is difficult for developing countries to embrace the West's idea of a rules-based international order when the United States and its allies routinely violate the rules. In the aftermath of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2022, the global South demonstrated that it is not beholden to the West, with countries such as Brazil, India, South Africa, and Indonesia refusing to join the U.S.-led multilateral sanctions against Russia.

According to Sarang Shidore (2023), a senior fellow at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, the global South has sought strategic autonomy by exercising the 'power of denial' on the issue of sanctions against Russia, realizing that limited great-power rivalry is to their advantage, but a new Cold War would jeopardize their interests and disrupt their societies. Former British Foreign Secretary David Miliband (2023) has noted that while the United States and other Western countries have portrayed the Russian-Ukrainian conflict as a contest between authoritarianism and democracy, this narrative has had little resonance in the Global South. Apparently, the autonomy of the global South in the face of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict worried the U.S. and other Western countries, and they proposed to strengthen their ties with the global South in order to regain its trust. During the 59th Munich Security Conference in February 2023, U.S. Vice President Harris, French President Macron, and other Western political elites emphasized the importance of the global South on several occasions. In May 2023, the G7 Summit was held in Hiroshima, Japan. This grouping of most advanced industrial countries vowed to enhance strategic cooperation with the global South. In particular, they seek to strengthen ties with major mineral producers such as Chile and South Africa, and promote new infrastructure investment and trade agreements to integrate more developing countries into Western-dominated value chains, thereby allowing the concept of economic security to have a greater impact outside the G7 (Schneider-Petsinger 2023).

### **3. The BRI and South-south cooperation**

For the BRI, most partners for China are from the global South. As member of the G7, Italy signed an agreement on the BRI with China in March 2019. But in December 2023, it was reported that Italy had quietly exited from the BRI. The importance of developing countries to China can be broadly analyzed from the economic and political dimensions. From the economic perspective, the share of developing countries in the world economy and the rate of economic growth have been on the rise since the beginning of the twenty-first century, and the incremental growth of the world market in the future will mainly come from developing countries. As the UN-led research (2023) showed, the share of trade among developing countries in total world trade has been expanding. For China's foreign trade, the importance of developing countries is becoming more prominent.

From a political dimension, maintaining cooperative relations with developing countries is key to China's peaceful rise. China would like to see an increase in the collective strength of the global South, which is conducive to enhancing its own influence in the international institutions such as the United Nations.

The BRI, which aims to promote the exploration of a new model of South-South cooperation, embodies China's new approach in boosting international development and highlights China's responsibility as the world's largest developing country. Since 2013, the Belt and Road cooperation has extended from Asia and Europe to Africa and Latin America, and more than 150 countries and 30 international organizations have signed cooperation agreements on the BRI with China. According to HSBC Global Research, the initiative involves some 1,800 projects in countries that account for 40% of the world's population. 'International trade and investment are the DNA of the BRI' (Hussain 2020). Between 2013 and 2022, China's trade in goods with the participating countries of the BRI reached a cumulative total of 19.1 trillion U.S. dollars, with an average annual growth rate of 6.4%, which is higher than the growth rate of China's overall foreign trade and global trade during the same period. The proportion of China's trade with the participating countries in China's foreign trade increased from 39.2% in 2013 to 45.4% in 2022. As the flagship project of trade corridor construction, the China-Europe freight train has transported more than 7.6 million TEUs of goods, and reached more than 200 cities in 25 countries in Europe. The project of China-Europe freight train brings benefits to Kazakhstan, Belarus and other developing countries. Since 2013, China has signed 15 FTAs with 21 participating countries, initially establishing a network of FTAs based on the BRI.

In terms of investment, from 2013 to 2022, the cumulative two-way investment between China and the participating countries exceeded 380 billion U.S. dollars, and China's direct investment in the participating countries exceeded 240 billion U.S. dollars. As of June 2023, China has constructed more than 100 overseas economic and trade cooperation zones in the participating countries, with a cumulative investment of nearly 70 billion U.S. dollars. Those overseas economic and trade cooperation zones may create a large number of local employment opportunities and tax revenues. They can also upgrade the level of industrial development in the host countries. In addition, cross-border e-commerce, overseas warehouses and other new modes of business have gained accelerating growth, becoming new driving force for the BRI economic cooperation. By the end of 2022, China has set up 165 comprehensive pilot zones for cross-border e-commerce, with more than 2,400 overseas warehouses, and the proportion of cross-border e-commerce in foreign trade increased from less than 1% in 2015 to 5% in 2022.

Infrastructure is the focal area of the BRI, which may facilitate international trade and enhance the competitiveness of developing countries. China seeks to meet the huge demand of infrastructure in the global South and bring benefits to Chinese enterprises. From 2013 to 2022, the cumulative turnover of China's contracted projects in participating countries reached 1.3 trillion US dollars, covering such fields as transportation, civil construction, electric power, petrochemical engineering and telecommunications. A number of landmark projects, such as the China-Laos Railway, Jakarta-Bandung High Speed Railway in Indonesia, Mombasa – Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway in Kenya, and the Golden Port Expressway in Cambodia, have been completed and put into operation, promoting infrastructure connectivity in the host countries. According to

the World Bank, if all the transportation infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road framework are implemented, they are expected to generate annual global benefits of \$1.6 trillion by 2030, and to lift 7.6 million people out of extreme poverty and 32 million out of moderate poverty in the countries concerned (Bampaliouta 2023).

In addition, the BRI cooperation attaches great importance to people-to-people exchanges, which is key to the soft connectivity. From 2013 through 2023, China has implemented more than 1,600 foreign aid projects in the areas of public health, agriculture, poverty reduction and education in participating countries. For example, China gave assistance to the construction of the headquarter of the African Center for Disease Control and Prevention. Chinese institutions and enterprises have trained 350,000 talents of all kinds for the participating countries. Taking vocational education as an example, more than 400 Chinese and foreign higher vocational colleges and universities have cooperated in running relevant programs. China has set up 27 Luban workshops in 25 participating countries, training high-end technical and skilled workers for the local communities.

Undoubtedly, Chinese efforts to enlarge its footprints and galvanize international cooperation face a number of challenges. The participating countries are difficult to ensure the fiscal sustainability for the infrastructure projects under the BRI. There are concerns in some developing countries on Chinese excessive influence in their own economies. Chinese enterprises have to face up to various political, societal, and cultural risks when they engage in the BRI overseas project. Some Chinese technicians and workers were attacked by the terrorist forces in Pakistan and Kyrgyzstan. How to ensure the safety of BRI infrastructure projects and Chinese personals is a pressing Challenge for China.

In particular, the COVID-19 epidemic has had a serious impact on the BRI, which is a multidimensional crisis of public health, economic recession and social unrest. The COVID-19 outbreak has increased the downward pressure on the global economy. The epidemic has impeded the production and transportation in developing countries, and the global supply chain have been affected. The epidemic made it difficult for the raw materials, machinery and equipment, and spare parts needed for the projects related to the BRI to be available in time. Because of the COVID-19 outbreak, the manufacturers in China and the participating countries have to face challenges such as order cancellation and logistics obstruction. Some participating countries have to suffer from increased economic and political pressure because relevant projects were delayed and returns on investment becomes unexpected low as a result of the pandemic. Those countries lack investment in public health infrastructure and the construction of social safety net, which erode the competitiveness of their economic development in the long run. The COVID-19 outbreak has also triggered turmoil in international investment, and the financial risks confronting the developing countries have grown. With uncertainties in the global economic and financial situation, a number of participating countries such as Zambia are deeply troubled by debt burdens. Some political forces unfriendly to China in those countries take advantage of these problems to shape anti-Chinese sentiments.

China has taken a series of measures to mitigate the adverse impact of the pandemic on the Belt and Road cooperation, assisting Chinese and foreign enterprises. In February 2020, China's Ministry of Commerce and the Development Bank jointly offered financial support to the BRI projects and related enterprises affected by the outbreak,



including providing special capital loans for foreign exchange and setting a reasonable grace period for repayment. In March 2020, the Belt and Road Inter-Bank Regular Cooperation Mechanism (BRBR), initiated by the People's Bank of China, proposed an initiative calling on the financial institutions to make positive contributions to the global fight against the pandemic and maintenance of stable economic growth. In addition, the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council of China, through platforms such as the information monitoring system for the projects undertaken by central government-administered enterprises working overseas, tracks the progress of the major infrastructure projects under the BRI.

In the participating countries, Chinese diplomats and enterprises have worked with the local government and relevant institutions to overcome difficulties. Chinese companies in Bangladesh, for example, have ensured the construction to proceed as scheduled by adopting measures such as recruiting more local staff. In July 2020, the Orange Line Rail Transit Project in Lahore, the first large-scale rail transit project under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, completed its joint trial. The project has been able to offset the impact of the pandemic by taking stringent measures such as online recruitment and remote training. The cooperation under the BRI is especially meaningful for the developing countries, to alleviate the impact of the pandemic and revive their economy. As Mukhtar Hussain (2020), the Head of Belt and Road Initiative and Business Corridors, Asia-Pacific, HSBC Group wrote, 'As a cosmopolitan, high quality and sustainable network for investment and trade flows, the BRI could make a vital contribution to the global recovery. For capital-constrained emerging economies, it may be the best hope for a swift revival.'

Given the fact that globalization in the post-pandemic era may well move toward a more local and regional direction, necessary adjustments should be made to the layout of the BRI. In the face of multiple challenges, China has attempted to readjust the Belt and Road cooperation (Jinping 2023). The main elements of China's efforts to promote the high-quality development of the Belt and Road cooperation include the following: first, it strives to build up infrastructure connectivity network. China proposes to organize the China-European Union Freight Train International Cooperation Forum, and work with all relevant parties to improve logistics corridor between Asia and Europe underpinned by direct rail and highway transportation. China seeks to actively promote the integrated development of port, shipping and trade to boost the silk road maritime economy, and accelerate the construction of the land and sea corridors and an airborne silk road.

Secondly, China will work with participating countries to further deepen practical cooperation. China vows to promote landmark projects and 'small but beautiful' projects involving local communities in relevant countries. The China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank of China will each set up a financing window of 350 billion yuan, and the Silk Road Fund will increase its capital by 80 billion yuan to support the BRI projects in a market-oriented and commercialized manner. China would work with relevant parties to implement the G20 debt relief initiative to promote the economic recovery and sustainable development of the least developed countries. It would monitor and give early warning of fiscal risks, and prevent relevant countries from falling into major debt crisis. Strengthening the safety and security of the projects and personnel involved in the BRI is another focus. In addition, China will push forward with the clean

silk road, which aims to counter the corruption and improve the evaluation system of integrity and compliance of enterprises. China would cooperate with international organizations to conduct research and training on integrity in the BRI projects.

Thirdly, the BRI would attach more importance on promoting green development and technological innovation cooperation. China vows to implement the Belt and Road green investment principles, continuously deepen cooperation in green infrastructure, energy and transportation. China plans to increase support for the Belt and Road International Alliance for Green Development, organize the Belt and Road Green Innovation Conference. It also seeks to build an exchange mechanism for the photovoltaic industry and a network of green and low-carbon experts from relevant countries. China will work with the BRI partners to implement the Belt and Road Science and Technology Innovation Action Plan, expand the number of joint laboratories established by China and other parties to 100 by 2028, and promote exchanges and cooperation in such fields as artificial intelligence. China and many developing countries are willing to foster new economic growth areas in e-commerce, smart cities, and big data industries, which will help bridge the digital development gap. The BRI would increase investment in human resource development, and use digital technologies such as cloud platforms to enhance people's capability in participating countries to access knowledge, meet employment needs and respond to the challenges of technological revolution.

Fourthly, China will improve the international cooperation mechanism of the BRI. A number of multilateral platforms for the Belt and Road cooperation would be strengthened, which cover the areas such as energy, taxation, finance, disaster reduction, think tanks, media and culture. Under the impact of COVID-19, the financial vulnerability of the emerging markets along the Belt and Road has been further exposed and intensified, leading to capital outflow, market shocks and rising debt risks. As stated in the Joint Statement of the High-level Video Conference on Belt and Road International Cooperation, China and the BRI participating countries want to build high-quality, reliable, risk-resistant and sustainable infrastructure and ensure its feasibility, reasonable pricing, inclusiveness and accessibility over the all-life cycle. In order to address various risks, China seeks to deepen cross-border regulatory exchanges and cooperation. It also aims to enhance coordination with the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and other multilateral institutions. China will further support people-to-people exchanges and dialogs on civilizations with the participating countries. China vows to implement 1,000 small-scale livelihood assistance projects by 2028 and promote vocational education through the Luban Workshop and other programs.

#### **4. The Southern strategy of the United States**

The BRI has influenced American perception of China's strategic intention (Cavanna 2018). The United States continues to advance the strategic competition with China, and it attaches more importance to U.S.-China rivalry around the developing countries. Rolland (2022), a senior fellow at the National Bureau of Asian Research, argues that China's implementation of its Southern strategy through the use of policy tools such as the BRI will help end US hegemony. The closer ties between China and the global South may provide a strong foundation for Chinese power while limiting US actions and

influence. In order to counterbalance the BRI and undermine China's national identity as a member of the global South, the United States, together with its Western allies, has vigorously contested the definition of the global South by labeling China as part of the global East. The United States has attempted a divide-and-conquer strategy, supporting countries such as India in their struggle with China for leadership of the global South. The United States has taken a multi-pronged approach in areas such as energy transition, public health, food security and infrastructure to enhance relations with the global South, with a particular focus on bringing in swing states that are resource-rich, important geostrategically and with profitable markets (Kupchan 2023). In addition, the United States has also made efforts on the lever of principles, norms and rules to increase political resistance to China's cooperation with relevant developing countries. It seeks to enhance the influence of the West on the global South through new mechanisms such as the Partnership for Atlantic Cooperation.

First, the United States attempts to capitalize on the internal contradictions of the global South by supporting the leadership of India, Brazil, South Africa and other countries in the global South in order to hedge against China's influence in developing countries. According to Michael Schuman (2023), China faces 'rival from within' in the global South, and there are differences between China and other members of the Global South in areas such as debt and natural resource development. Some in the developing world have even criticized China for its 'neo-imperialism,' and the United States can take advantage of these emerging tensions within the global South to extend its influence. In particular, in the view of Manjari Chatterjee Miller (2024), a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, the United States should give strong support to India as it seeks to establish itself as a leader in the global South and as a competitor to China. India possesses a special identity as a South-West power identity, which is deeply intertwined with the West in terms of strategic goals and values while being deeply rooted in the global South. India seeks to be a bridge between the developed world and the global South and to consolidate its position as a major power by reorienting the global South toward the construction of a new diplomatic equilibrium.

According to Happymon Jacob (2023), founder of the Council for Strategic and Defence Research (New Delhi), China is trying to turn the global South against the U.S.-led order and integrate it into the Chinese-led order, laying the groundwork for China's rising power. While India, despite its misgivings about the U.S.-led order, wants to reform rather than overthrow the existing order. India doesn't have the resources to compete with China, and therefore the United States and other Western countries should cooperate with India to weaken China's appeal to developing countries. In January 2023, India invited more than 120 developing countries to participate in the Voice of Global South Summit, excluding China. In June 2023, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in a joint press conference with U.S. President Joe Biden, stated that the core objective of India's hosting of the G20 Summit was to give voice to the priority concerns of the global South.

In addition, the United States seeks to influence the distribution of power in international mechanisms among countries of the global South, which can dilute China's institutional power and intensify the struggle within the global South over representation in international governance. Suzanne Nossel (2023), a former official in charge of international organizations at the U.S. Department of State, suggests that

the United States should win the support of India and other countries of the global South by pushing for reform of the United Nations Security Council, through which the United States can reduce the distance between countries of the global South and the core circle of international governance, and force concessions on the part of China and Russia. Moreover, the U.S. seeks to capitalize on the friction between developing countries and China by exaggerating the economic risks and debt problems associated with the BRI, stirring up anti-Chinese sentiments in the global South and promoting alternative solutions proposed by the U.S. and its Western allies. Hunter Stoll (2023), a senior fellow at the RAND Corporation, believes that the BRI has been welcomed in Central Asia, but Kazakhstan and other countries also have doubts about China. The United States should seize the opportunity to enhance the investment in Central Asia by promoting U.S. private sector participation through platforms such as the Economic Resilience Initiative for Central Asia (ERICEN) and expanding the influence of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as the International Education Council in the region. Rolland (2022) suggests that the United States needs to pay more attention to developing countries with independent media, nongovernmental organizations, and strong civil societies, which are able to identify the negative impacts of Chinese investment, such as ‘corruption and coercion.’

Secondly, the United States has increased its efforts to draw in the global South through specific issues such as energy transition, mineral security, public health and food security, increasing its support for international development and tying it to the realization of policy objectives such as de-risking from China. In recent years, in order to reduce economic dependence on China, the United States, Europe, Japan and other allies strengthen coordination through mechanisms like the U.S.-EU Council on Trade and Technology and U.S.-Japan Economic Policy Consultative Committee to implement the de-risking strategy. In addition, under the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Western countries are also trying to accelerate the global energy transition process. In this context, the United States has advanced the reshaping of the critical mineral supply chain and the promotion of clean energy as a means to enhance economic cooperation with the relevant developing countries. The multilateral mechanisms such as the Mineral Security Partnership have been established, and the United States seeks use increased investment and assistance as a bait to weaken China’s position in key mineral supply chains such as lithium, nickel and cobalt.

The Biden Administration has provided more than \$1.5 billion in concessional loans to the Clean Technology Fund to support developing countries such as South Africa and Indonesia to better utilize clean energy technologies, and to promote the Just Energy Transition Partnerships that the U.S. has built with relevant countries (US Department of Treasury 2023). In December 2023, the Biden Administration announced the creation of the Energy Transition Accelerator Framework (ETAF) in partnership with Chile, Nigeria, and Dominica. The mechanism, sponsored by the U.S. Department of State, the Bezos Earth Fund, and the Rockefeller Foundation, among others, is designed to provide a platform for innovative carbon financing and to catalyze private sector finance to support energy transition in developing countries and emerging economies. According to preliminary estimates, this mechanism could mobilize between \$72 billion and \$207 billion in funding by 2035 for projects such as developing

a carbon credit standard for the power sector, incentivizing the decarbonization, phasing out fossil-fueled assets, and increasing energy storage, transmission and distribution capacity (US Department of State 2023).

Critical minerals are not only essential for clean energy transformation, but also crucial for the development of high-tech and defense industries, which have become one of the focal points for U.S.-China strategic competition. The United States, in collaboration with Japan, Australia, and the European Union, has increased its efforts to woo the developing countries with rich critical minerals such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Zambia, Tanzania, and Mongolia. The DRC produces about 70% of the world's cobalt, which is an important raw material for electric car batteries, and the country also possesses large quantities of copper, lithium, tantalum, germanium and other critical minerals. Republican Rep. John James, chairman of the U.S. House of Representatives subcommittee on Africa, states that the dominance of Chinese companies in the extraction, processing and refining of the DRC's mineral resources poses a threat to the U.S. economy and national security. The American congressmen have introduced a bill calling for a U.S. national strategy to secure critical mineral supply chains in the DRC (Kavanagh 2023). In August 2023, Mongolian Prime Minister Oyun Erden visited the United States, and the two sides vowed to cooperate in the development of rare earths, copper, and other critical minerals. Mechanisms such as the U.S.-Japan-Mongolia Trilateral Conference have also prioritized this issue. In addition, the Biden administration launched the 'C5 + 1' critical mineral dialogs between the United States and the five countries in Central Asia. The United States would support those countries on exploration, mining and refining of rare earths and other mineral resources (The White House 2023). Central Asia's manganese ore reserves account for 38.6% of the world's total, chromium accounts for 30.07%, and lead accounts for 20%. Through the critical mineral cooperation, the United States seeks to push Central Asian countries to reduce their dependence on China and Russia.

The United States has increased its support for the global South in the area of public health, as the COVID-19 outbreak has made public health challenge more urgent for the developing countries. The Biden Administration supports the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI) and other programs led by the World Health Organization. The United States has donated more than 40 million doses of vaccine to ASEAN countries and has supported the establishment of vaccine manufacturing facilities in Africa and Latin America. The Group of I2U2, which was established in July 2022 by the United States, India, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates, has also identified enhancing vaccine access and improving public health as a key area of cooperation (The White House 2022). The Biden Administration has established a new Bureau of Global Health Security and Diplomacy at the State Department, launched the Global Health Worker Initiative, the Global Laboratory Leadership Program, and other programs to increase the training of clinicians, community health and nursing staff, and public health professionals in developing countries, and supported capacity building for institutions such as the CDC in Africa. In order to play a leading role in addressing food security challenge, the Biden Administration announced more than \$1 billion to respond to urgent global food humanitarian assistance needs and expand the 'Feed the Future' program. The United States launched the Roadmap for Global Food Security mechanism and mobilized more than 100 countries to take actions such as ensuring the openness of

agricultural markets, increasing fertilizer production and supporting climate-resilient agriculture.

Third, the United States is consolidating the power of its allies and partners with new mechanisms to strengthen competition against China in the global South and counter-balance the South-South cooperation promoted by China. Infrastructure has become an important area of the great power competition. In the eyes of American strategists, China's BRI focuses on infrastructure construction in developing countries. By supporting highways, railroads, ports, communication networks and other infrastructure projects, China could transform its economic clouts into geopolitical influence. More importantly, the BRI can be instrumental on enhancing the attractiveness of China's development model in the global South (Repnikova 2022). The United States faces various challenges in the competition on infrastructure. On the one hand, there is a huge demand for infrastructure financing in the global South (Global Infrastructure Hub and Oxford Economics 2017), for which China not only provides a large number of preferential loans, but also has a certain degree of advantage in terms of technology and know-how in infrastructure; on the other hand, the United States has limited resources of its own that can be used to support infrastructure construction in developing countries. In this context, the United States has focused on mobilizing and integrating the strength of its allies and partners.

In June 2021, the U.S., together with the G7 countries, launched the 'Build Back Better World' initiative, which highlighted the need for infrastructure development to adhere to principles such as transparency and good governance. It placed greater emphasis on leveraging private sector investment. This initiative aimed at providing an alternative to the government-led model of infrastructure financing (Savoy and McKeown 2022). However, one year later, the 'Build a Better World' initiative was replaced by the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII). The United States and the G7 countries are committed to mobilizing more than \$600 billion by 2027 to aid infrastructure projects in developing countries. The plan focuses on four areas: health security, digital connectivity, gender equality and equity, and climate and energy security, emphasizing that the infrastructure projects under PGII will reflect a commitment to high environmental, social and labor standards (Moses and Zhu 2022). In September 2023, the United States, India, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, France, Germany, and Italy announced the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor as an important step forward under the PGII. The relevant projects involve ports, railroads, clean energy, undersea fiber optic cables and other areas, such as the construction of railroads connecting the western ports of Angola through the Congo, Zambia to the Indian Ocean. U.S. President Joe Biden emphasized that this is a game-changing investment. The United States seeks to promote the integration of trade and infrastructure networks in India, the Middle East and Europe, which could weaken China's influence on the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and other countries (Samaan 2023).

On 19 September 2023, the White House announced the launch of the Partnership for Atlantic Cooperation with 32 countries in Africa, Europe, North America, South America, and the Caribbean to advance multilateral cooperation on economic development, marine biodiversity and marine ecosystem protection, illegal fishing, and catastrophic weather response. This mechanism, which does not include military security, is

separate from the U.S.-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The move is seen as an effort by the United States to improve relations with developing countries and an attempt to respond to criticism that the United States has ignored the concerns of the global South in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict (Politi 2023). Georgetown University professor Matthew Kroenig argues that this new grouping promoted by the United States is designed to counter the growing influence of China and Russia in the global South; in order to get important swing countries such as Brazil to agree to join, the mechanism has chosen to start with less controversial issues, such as climate change and sustainable development of oceans. The U.S. needs to bring these countries closer to the 'free world' through more robust engagement. According to Christopher Skaluba, head of the Transatlantic Security Program at the Atlantic Council's Center for Strategy and Security, this mechanism for 'Atlanticism' offers a creative and low-cost way to facilitate engagement between Western countries and countries in Africa, South America and the Caribbean, thus making the 'liberal world order' more inclusive; it is a new card in the light of the BRICS expansion and the intensifying strategic competition between the United States and China. The United States will need to invest sufficient focus and resources (The Atlantic Council 2023).

## 5. Conclusion

The return of the global South has become an important issue in world politics, with non-Western forces playing a more prominent role in the international system and aspiring to be more active in reshaping the global rules in the twenty-first century. The BRI has brought China closer to developing countries, and China's international influence in trade, technology and finance has grown. This has triggered strategic anxiety in the United States. The global South has become an arena for the United States to advance its strategic competition with China. By strengthening its ties with the global South, the United States seeks to divide and conquer between China and the vast number of developing countries, and to promote the alienation of the global South from China in order to realize the goal of outcompeting China. However, the United States faces various challenges in implementing this strategy, such as the impact of domestic political polarization, lack of policy consistence, limited resources to invest, and divergent interests between the U.S. and its allies. Under the influence of the 'America First' mentality, Washington's willingness to invest in global public goods has declined, and it has placed greater emphasis on the clubbish public goods. More importantly, the global South countries are unwilling to become pawns in the great power rivalry, and they are trying to maintain their flexibility by identifying with the multipolar order and adopting hedging strategies. James Traub, a senior fellow at the Center on International Cooperation at New York University, believes that, in the face of the new Cold War, the countries of the global South seek to promote the Nonalignment 2.0 movement in the spirit of pragmatism. They do not want to take sides between the major powers such as China and the United States.

In the meantime, China needs to recognize that the BRI is a double-edged sword that could complicate its relations with the developing countries. To some extent, the concept of the global South is a product of constructivism. It is quite challenging to cultivate and maintain Southern Solidarity. It needs to enhance the BRI cooperation and implement

the Global Development Initiative among other programs proposed by China. Beijing must be more responsive to the concerns of developing countries, and invest more on projects in areas such as food security, green energy and digital infrastructure. China needs to recognize many difficulties faced by the global South and its pragmatic orientation of non-Western but not anti-Western, and strive to improve effectiveness and efficiency of its cooperation with developing countries, so as to safeguard its influence on the global South. This will be necessary for dealing with the long game between China and the United States in decades to come.

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