

Whose Multipolarity? How the Global South is Reframing the Discourse of Global Order

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of a more multipolar international system has renewed debate about the future of global order and the role of the Global South. Much of this debate focuses on changes in material capabilities and the emergence of new centres of economic, political, and strategic power. This article argues that such an approach does not fully capture the agency of Global South states, because international order is also shaped through political language, norms, institutional practices, and competing interpretations of legitimacy. The study examines India, Indonesia, and South Africa as three distinct cases of Global South agency, using qualitative comparative document analysis of official foreign-policy statements, government reports, multilateral declarations, and relevant academic literature published primarily between 2020 and 2026. The cases were selected because they represent different but comparable approaches to autonomy: India's strategic autonomy, Indonesia's independent and active foreign policy and ASEAN centrality, and South Africa's non-alignment, African agency, and BRICS diplomacy. Drawing on Global International Relations and decolonial scholarship, the article introduces narrative autonomy as a concept that complements strategic autonomy, referring to the capacity of states to articulate their interests, identities, historical experiences, and preferred visions of international order while participating in the negotiation of international norms and institutions. Narrative autonomy is examined through three observable dimensions: conceptual articulation, norm reinterpretation, and agenda-setting within multilateral institutions. The comparison shows that the Global South is not a unified geopolitical bloc; instead, its states employ different strategies according to their historical experiences, regional positions, and national interests. The article concludes that multipolarity should be assessed not only by asking how power is distributed, but also by asking who can influence the concepts, norms, and institutional practices through which global order is understood.

Keywords: Global South; Multipolarity; Strategic Autonomy; Narrative Autonomy; Global Governance

INTRODUCTION

The international system is undergoing a period of significant transformation. Economic, political, technological, and military capabilities are becoming more widely distributed, while established institutions and forms of international cooperation are facing growing pressure. The increasing influence of China, India, regional powers, middle powers, and new institutional groupings has encouraged scholars and policymakers to reconsider the structure and direction of contemporary global order.

The concept of multipolarity has consequently returned to the centre of international-relations debates. In its conventional usage, multipolarity refers to an international system in which several states possess significant capabilities and influence. This understanding remains important, but it does not capture the full complexity of contemporary global politics. International order is not produced only through material capabilities. It is also shaped through institutions, norms, political concepts, historical interpretations, and narratives concerning what constitutes legitimate international behaviour.



This distinction is particularly important when examining the Global South. The term "Global South" refers to a broad and internally diverse group of states whose experiences often include colonialism, unequal development, external intervention, and limited representation in international institutions. However, the Global South should not be treated as a single geopolitical actor. Its states differ considerably in their political systems, economic structures, regional priorities, security relationships, and approaches to major-power competition.

The intellectual foundations of this argument can be found in the development of Global International Relations. Acharya (2017a) argues that international relations should move beyond a predominantly Western intellectual history and recognise the agency and historical experiences of societies outside the traditional centres of the discipline. His concept of a "multiplex world" similarly draws attention to a more diverse international order characterised by multiple forms of interaction, interdependence, and political authority.

This perspective has subsequently been developed and contested. Connell's (2007) concept of "Southern Theory" challenges the concentration of theoretical production in Europe and North America and argues for greater recognition of intellectual contributions from societies in the Global South. Sabaratnam (2011), from a decolonising perspective, similarly argues for approaches that challenge Eurocentric historical assumptions and create alternative subject positions from which world politics can be studied. These perspectives suggest that the issue is not simply whether Global South states possess greater material capabilities, but whether their experiences and concepts are able to shape the production of international knowledge and political meaning.

Recent work on multiplexity has further complicated the debate. Sundaram and Parmar (2026) argue that multiplexity should not automatically be understood as a democratisation of international power because new forms of elite competition and co-optation may reproduce existing hierarchies. Their critique is important because a greater number of powerful actors does not necessarily mean that weaker states or societies acquire greater influence over the rules of international order.

Against this background, this article asks:

Does the emerging multipolar order provide Global South states with greater strategic and narrative autonomy, or can new forms of dependence persist despite the emergence of multiple centres of power?

The article advances two arguments. First, Global South states do not follow a single model of strategic autonomy. Their approaches vary according to historical experience, regional institutions, economic structures, and national interests. Second, strategic autonomy has an important discursive dimension that is not adequately captured by material measures of power. States may diversify their economic, diplomatic, and security relationships while continuing to operate within concepts and narratives largely defined by more powerful actors.

To address this problem, the article introduces the concept of **narrative autonomy**. Narrative autonomy refers to the capacity of a political actor to articulate its own interests, identity, historical experience, and preferred vision of international order while participating actively in the negotiation of international norms and institutions.

The article examines India, Indonesia, and South Africa. These cases provide meaningful variation within the Global South. India illustrates strategic autonomy and multilateral reform; Indonesia combines an independent and active foreign policy with ASEAN centrality and strategic flexibility; and South Africa combines non-alignment, African agency, BRICS engagement, and demands for reform of multilateral institutions.

The comparison demonstrates that multipolarity creates opportunities for greater agency, but it does not automatically produce autonomy. The political significance of multipolarity therefore depends not only on the number of power centres but also on the ability of different actors to shape the language, norms, and institutions through which global order is constructed.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Global International Relations and the Global South

The intellectual debate surrounding the Global South has increasingly challenged the assumption that international relations can be adequately understood through concepts and historical experiences developed primarily in Western contexts.

Acharya's (2017b) call for a Global IR seeks to broaden the discipline by recognising multiple historical experiences, regional traditions, and forms of political agency. This does not require abandoning existing theories, but it does require questioning the assumption that European and North American experiences provide universally applicable foundations for understanding international politics.

Connell (2007) develops a related argument through the concept of Southern Theory. His central concern is the unequal global organisation of knowledge production. Social theory has historically been concentrated in institutions located in Europe and North America, while intellectual contributions from the Global South have often been treated as empirical material rather than as sources of theory.

Decolonial approaches make a similar intervention at the level of concepts and historical narratives. Sabaratnam (2011) argues that decolonising world politics requires challenging Eurocentric historiographies, questioning inherited categories, and creating alternative ways of identifying the subjects of international relations. Such work is relevant to the present study because the question of narrative autonomy concerns not simply who speaks in international politics, but whose concepts and historical interpretations are treated as legitimate.

These perspectives provide an important foundation for understanding contemporary Global South agency. However, they do not imply that all Global South actors share a common political vocabulary or strategic objective. Rather, they suggest that international order should be examined as a plural and contested process in which different actors seek recognition for their own historical experiences and political priorities.

Multiplexity, Multipolarity, and Their Limits

Acharya (2017a) distinguishes the emerging international environment from conventional conceptions of polarity by proposing the idea of a "multiplex world." Rather than a simple competition among several great powers, multiplexity emphasises interconnectedness, diversity, and the coexistence of different forms of international order.

Acharya, Estevadeordal, and Goodman (2023) further develop this distinction by examining the relationship between multipolarity and multiplexity. Their analysis suggests that a world with multiple centres of power cannot be understood solely through the distribution of capabilities because international cooperation also depends on interaction capacity and institutional relationships.

At the same time, multiplexity should not be assumed to produce a more equal international system. Sundaram and Parmar (2026) argue that multiplexity can reproduce elite hierarchies when new actors are incorporated into existing structures without transforming underlying relations of power. Their argument introduces an important qualification into optimistic interpretations of pluralisation: diversity among powerful actors does not necessarily translate into democratisation of global governance.

This criticism is particularly relevant to the Global South. A state may acquire more diplomatic options without gaining the capacity to shape the institutional rules governing those options. The emergence of new centres of power can therefore create both opportunities and new forms of dependence.

The present article builds on these debates but shifts attention toward the relationship between material autonomy and political meaning. The question is not only whether Global South states have more partners,

institutions, and diplomatic options. It is also whether they can define and communicate the principles through which those relationships are understood.

Strategic Autonomy and Global South Agency

Strategic autonomy generally refers to the capacity of a state to make foreign-policy decisions without excessive dependence on another power. The concept has particular relevance to states that seek to avoid rigid alignment with major-power blocs.

India's foreign policy is frequently associated with strategic autonomy. Indonesia's "free and active" foreign policy represents a related but distinct tradition, while South Africa's non-alignment reflects its own historical and regional context.

Recent scholarship has also examined Global South agency as an institutional phenomenon. Parthenay (2024), for example, demonstrates how regional organisations can develop forms of agency through institutionalisation and bureaucratic practices. This is important because agency should not be understood solely as the independent behaviour of individual states. It can also be produced through regional and multilateral institutions.

The literature therefore points toward a multidimensional understanding of autonomy. Material resources, diplomatic flexibility, institutional participation, and discursive capacity can interact with one another.

The present article focuses specifically on the last dimension.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative comparative research design based on document analysis. The objective is not to measure multipolarity statistically or to generalise the findings to all Global South states. Instead, the study examines how selected states articulate and communicate their understanding of international order, autonomy, multilateralism, and Global South agency.

The research combines academic literature with publicly available primary documents, including government foreign-policy statements, ministerial speeches, annual reports, summit declarations, and multilateral policy documents. The principal period of analysis is 2020–2026, allowing the study to capture recent developments — including primary statements issued during 2026 — while also placing them within longer foreign-policy traditions.

The analysis proceeds in three stages. First, relevant official documents were identified through their connection to foreign-policy principles, multilateral reform, strategic autonomy, non-alignment, Global South cooperation, or multipolarity. Second, documents were examined for recurring concepts, stated priorities, descriptions of international order, and references to sovereignty, development, representation, and institutional reform. Third, the findings were compared across the three cases using three analytical dimensions: strategic autonomy, institutional agency, and narrative autonomy.

Case Selection

India, Indonesia, and South Africa were selected through a purposive comparative strategy rather than because they are assumed to represent the entire Global South.

The three cases meet three criteria.

First, each is an influential regional actor with an established diplomatic role beyond its immediate region. India is a major South Asian power with extensive relations across competing geopolitical groupings. Indonesia is a leading Southeast Asian actor whose foreign policy is strongly connected to ASEAN and the

Indo-Pacific. South Africa is an important African diplomatic actor with an established role in multilateral institutions and BRICS.

Second, the three states have identifiable traditions of autonomy. India is associated with strategic autonomy; Indonesia with its independent and active foreign policy; and South Africa with non-alignment and an emphasis on African agency.

Third, the cases provide meaningful variation in how autonomy is articulated. India places particular emphasis on strategic autonomy and reform of global governance. Indonesia relies heavily on regional institutional centrality and diplomatic flexibility. South Africa connects non-alignment with African interests, BRICS cooperation, and reform of multilateral institutions.

The purpose of this selection is therefore analytical rather than representative. Comparing these three cases makes it possible to examine whether different historical and institutional settings produce different forms of narrative autonomy.

Analytical Indicators

The concept of narrative autonomy is examined through three observable dimensions.

First, conceptual articulation. This concerns whether a state consistently uses distinctive political concepts to describe its interests and role in world politics. Examples include India's strategic autonomy, Indonesia's "free and active" foreign policy, and South Africa's emphasis on non-alignment and African agency.

Second, norm reinterpretation. This concerns whether states reinterpret established international concepts in ways that reflect their own historical and political experiences. Relevant examples include linking sovereignty with non-interference, connecting multipolarity with greater representation, or reframing development and global governance around Global South priorities.

Third, agenda-setting and institutionalisation. This concerns whether a state's preferred concepts are introduced into multilateral forums, coalitions, declarations, or institutional reform agendas. Narrative autonomy is therefore not treated as simply making statements. It is stronger when political narratives become part of collective diplomatic positions or institutional debates.

These indicators do not produce a numerical score. Instead, they provide a structured basis for qualitative comparison.

Limitations

The study has several limitations. First, it relies primarily on publicly available official documents and therefore cannot fully capture internal diplomatic debates or disagreements within governments. Second, official statements are strategic forms of communication and may not always correspond directly to policy implementation. Third, the study analyses documents primarily in English and therefore cannot fully capture all linguistic and cultural nuances in Indonesian, Hindi, or South African languages. Fourth, the selection of three cases limits the generalisability of the findings.

These limitations do not invalidate the comparison, but they indicate that the findings should be understood as an analysis of official diplomatic discourse and institutional behaviour rather than as a complete account of domestic political debate.

Beyond the Redistribution of Power

Traditional approaches to polarity primarily examine the distribution of material capabilities among states. From this perspective, a transition toward multipolarity occurs when several states possess sufficient capabilities to influence international outcomes.

Contemporary global politics, however, cannot be reduced to a balance among several great powers. International order is also produced through institutions, norms, political concepts, and competing interpretations of legitimacy.

The distinction matters because multipolarity can produce different outcomes. It can increase the diplomatic options available to smaller and middle powers by creating multiple economic and political partners. At the same time, it can generate new dependencies if states simply replace dependence on one major power with dependence on several.

This problem is visible in international economic relations. Global South states increasingly have access to different sources of trade, investment, technology, infrastructure, finance, and diplomatic cooperation. Yet diversification does not automatically produce autonomy. A state can have multiple partners while remaining dependent on external markets, technology, financial systems, energy supplies, or security relationships.

Multipolarity therefore creates **opportunity structures**, but those opportunities become meaningful autonomy only when states possess the domestic capabilities and institutional capacity to use them.

The central issue is therefore not simply whether more poles exist, but whether states can use multiple poles to expand their policy choices and influence the norms and institutions that structure those choices.

The Global South Does Not Speak With One Voice

One of the central problems in discussions of the Global South is the tendency to treat it as a unified political actor.

The Global South includes states with different political systems, economic structures, strategic interests, historical experiences, and regional priorities. India does not have exactly the same objectives as South Africa, and Indonesia does not approach major-power competition in the same way as Brazil or Nigeria.

The diversity of Global South strategies becomes particularly visible when India, Indonesia, and South Africa are compared.

India: Strategic Autonomy and Global Governance Reform

India represents a prominent contemporary example of strategic autonomy. Rather than permanently aligning with a single geopolitical camp, India maintains relationships with multiple major powers while seeking to preserve independent decision-making.

India's official foreign-policy discourse connects strategic autonomy with multilateral reform and greater attention to the priorities of developing countries. Its engagement with the Global South has included initiatives such as the Voice of Global South Summit, while its broader diplomatic strategy emphasises participation across multiple international institutions.

This orientation is directly reflected in India's own diplomatic statements. Addressing the inaugural Voice of Global South Summit, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar described India's G20 presidency as an opportunity to advance "faster rebalancing, more multipolarity and reformed multilateralism" on behalf of states shaped by a shared colonial past and continuing global inequities (Jaishankar, 2023). This framing illustrates how India connects strategic autonomy to an explicit normative claim about representation, positioning itself as a voice for the wider Global South rather than simply diversifying its own partnerships.

This approach suggests that strategic autonomy is not equivalent to isolation. It can instead depend on maintaining several relationships simultaneously.

India's narrative autonomy is visible in the way it connects strategic autonomy with development, representation, sovereignty, and reform of global institutions. The narrative does not simply reject existing

institutions; it seeks to redefine India's role within them and to broaden the issues considered legitimate subjects of global governance.

Indonesia: Strategic Flexibility and ASEAN Centrality

Indonesia provides a different model. Its long-standing "free and active" foreign policy places considerable importance on independence in foreign-policy decision-making while maintaining active engagement with international institutions.

Indonesia's approach is closely connected to ASEAN centrality. Rather than presenting itself as a member of a rigid geopolitical bloc, Indonesia has generally emphasised dialogue, inclusiveness, regional cooperation, and freedom of action.

This orientation has been consistently reaffirmed at the highest level. President Prabowo Subianto has described Indonesia's foreign policy as remaining "independent and active, as well as non-aligned" toward all states (Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia, 2026), a continuity across administrations that suggests the tradition functions as an enduring element of Indonesian national narrative rather than a transient policy choice.

The Indonesian case demonstrates that institutional positioning can reinforce strategic autonomy. ASEAN provides a regional framework through which Indonesia can engage major powers without defining its international role exclusively through competition between them. The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific formalises ASEAN Centrality as the organising principle for this engagement, explicitly favouring dialogue and cooperation over rivalry among major powers (Association of Southeast Asian Nations [ASEAN], 2019), a framing reaffirmed in the 2024 ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on the AOIP (ASEAN, 2024).

Indonesia's narrative autonomy is therefore expressed through the continued relevance of an independent and active foreign policy, regional centrality, and support for inclusive multilateral cooperation.

South Africa: Non-Alignment, African Agency, and BRICS

South Africa represents another distinctive model. Its foreign-policy discourse places strong emphasis on non-alignment, multilateralism, African interests, and reform of global governance.

South African officials have repeatedly presented non-alignment as an important principle for maintaining an independent position amid major-power competition. At the same time, South Africa's participation in BRICS provides an institutional platform through which it seeks to strengthen cooperation among emerging economies and promote reform of international institutions. South Africa's discourse connects multipolarity with questions of representation and institutional legitimacy. Its approach is therefore not limited to increasing South Africa's own influence. It also links global governance reform to African and Global South participation.

This position is explicit in President Cyril Ramaphosa's account of South African foreign policy, which affirms that the country "will not be drawn into a contest between global powers" and instead pursues strategic partnerships on all sides (Republic of South Africa, Department of International Relations and Cooperation, 2023). Ramaphosa ties this stance directly to South Africa's membership of the 120-state Non-Aligned Movement and to sustained calls for a more representative, reformed United Nations Security Council, linking historical non-alignment to contemporary institutional reform agendas.

Table 1. Comparative Overview of Narrative Autonomy Across the Three Cases

Country	Autonomy Tradition	Institutional Arena	Central Narrative	Narrative Autonomy Type	Main Constraint
India	Strategic autonomy (Jaishankar,	Global multilateral institutions and	Strategic independence linked to	Reformist and status-seeking	Material asymmetries and uneven

	2023)	Global South platforms	development, representation, and reform		institutional uptake
Indonesia	Independent and active foreign policy (Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia, 2026)	ASEAN and wider Indo-Pacific institutions (ASEAN, 2019)	Regional centrality, inclusiveness, and freedom of action (ASEAN, 2024)	Regional and institution-centred	Dependence on ASEAN cohesion and institutional effectiveness
South Africa	Non-alignment and African agency (Republic of South Africa, DIRCO, 2023)	BRICS, African institutions, and the United Nations	Representation, African agency, non-alignment, and multilateral reform (Republic of South Africa, DIRCO, 2023, 2025c)	Coalition-based and historically grounded	Divergent coalition interests and the gap between rhetoric and implementation

Table 1 summarises the three cases across the dimensions developed in Section 3.3. It shows that, while all three states draw on distinct historical traditions of autonomy, each channels that tradition through a different institutional arena and each faces a structurally different constraint on converting narrative autonomy into institutional influence.

The three cases demonstrate that the Global South does not have a single model of strategic autonomy.

India emphasises strategic autonomy and global governance reform.

Indonesia emphasises an independent and active foreign policy, ASEAN centrality, and strategic flexibility.

South Africa emphasises non-alignment, African agency, BRICS cooperation, and multilateral reform.

These strategies overlap, but they are not identical.

The Intercultural Dimension of Global Order

The debate over multipolarity also has an intercultural dimension.

International order is constructed not only through military capabilities and economic institutions but also through language. Concepts such as "sovereignty," "democracy," "development," "security," "rules-based order," "strategic autonomy," and "multilateralism" carry political meanings that are shaped by historical experience.

This does not mean that each society has a completely separate understanding of these concepts. Nor does it justify dividing the world into fixed "Western" and "non-Western" cultural categories. Rather, it suggests that political concepts are interpreted through particular historical and institutional experiences.

For postcolonial states, sovereignty may carry meanings associated with historical experiences of colonial rule, external intervention, and struggles for political independence. Strategic autonomy can similarly acquire different meanings depending on whether a state has a history of non-alignment, alliance dependence, or regional institutional cooperation.

The intercultural dimension of global order should therefore be understood as a process of interpretation rather than as a collection of fixed cultural characteristics.

This perspective also connects the article to decolonising approaches to international relations. Sabaratnam (2011) argues that decolonising scholarship requires attention to alternative historical experiences and challenges to Eurocentric categories. Connell (2007) similarly highlights the unequal global organisation of knowledge production.

The significance of these arguments for multipolarity is straightforward: a more diverse international system may create greater opportunities for states to introduce alternative concepts and historical experiences into global debates.

Multipolarity therefore represents a contest not only over **who possesses power**, but also over **whose interpretations of international order receive recognition**.

From Strategic Autonomy to Narrative Autonomy

Strategic autonomy has become an increasingly important concept in contemporary international relations. It generally refers to a state's ability to pursue foreign-policy objectives without being excessively constrained by external powers.

However, strategic autonomy does not fully capture the ideational dimension of political agency.

A state may possess multiple economic and security partnerships while continuing to rely heavily on external narratives about what constitutes legitimate international behaviour. If the categories used to define national interests, development, security, or international legitimacy are largely produced elsewhere and merely adopted, material diversification does not necessarily create full political agency.

This article therefore proposes **narrative autonomy** as a complementary concept.

Narrative autonomy is defined here as:

The capacity of a political actor to articulate its own interests, identity, historical experience, and preferred vision of international order, while participating actively in the negotiation and institutionalisation of international norms.

The concept should be distinguished from several existing ideas.

First, narrative autonomy is related to **discursive power**, but the two concepts are not identical. Discursive approaches emphasise how language and discourse constitute social fields, identities, and possibilities for political action. In this sense, discourse is itself connected to power (see Selby, 2007). Narrative autonomy, by contrast, focuses specifically on the agency of political actors attempting to articulate and institutionalise their own interpretations within an unequal international environment.

Second, narrative autonomy differs from **norm entrepreneurship**. Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) explain norm entrepreneurship in terms of actors promoting new norms through processes of emergence, cascade, and internalisation. Narrative autonomy may involve norm entrepreneurship, but it begins earlier. A state can exercise narrative autonomy by reinterpreting an existing norm or concept even when it does not create a completely new international norm.

Third, narrative autonomy is distinct from general **soft power**. Soft power generally concerns the ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion. Narrative autonomy instead concerns the capacity to articulate one's own political meanings and make them visible and legitimate in international debate. A state can therefore possess narrative autonomy even when its narrative does not persuade other actors completely.

The concept can be observed through three dimensions.

Conceptual articulation

A state demonstrates narrative autonomy when it consistently employs distinctive concepts to explain its international role and priorities. India's strategic autonomy, Indonesia's "free and active" foreign policy, and South Africa's non-alignment and African agency are examples.

Norm reinterpretation

Narrative autonomy also involves the ability to reinterpret established concepts according to particular historical and political experiences. For example, states may connect sovereignty with non-interference, development with greater policy space, or multipolarity with more representative global governance.

Agenda-setting and institutionalisation

Narrative autonomy becomes more consequential when ideas move beyond national statements and enter multilateral institutions, coalitions, declarations, and reform agendas.

These dimensions provide a way to study narrative autonomy without reducing it to subjective impressions. They allow researchers to ask whether a state articulates distinctive concepts, whether it reinterprets existing norms, and whether those interpretations gain institutional visibility.

The relationship between strategic and narrative autonomy can therefore be represented as follows:

Strategic autonomy asks: *Can a state make foreign-policy decisions without excessive external constraint?*

Narrative autonomy asks: *Can a state define and communicate its interests and vision of international order rather than simply adopting categories produced by more powerful actors?*

The two forms of autonomy can reinforce each other.

A state with significant material capabilities but limited narrative autonomy may struggle to translate its interests into accepted international norms. Conversely, a state with strong narrative influence but limited material capabilities may struggle to institutionalise its ideas.

The future of Global South agency therefore depends on the interaction between material resources, institutional participation, and discursive capacity.

The Risk of Multipolarity Without Agency

The emergence of multiple power centres should not automatically be interpreted as the democratisation of international relations.

A multipolar system can remain hierarchical.

If new centres of power simply compete for influence over weaker states, the result may be a redistribution of dependency rather than genuine autonomy. A state could move from dependence on one external actor to dependence on several.

This concern is particularly relevant to developing economies facing constraints related to debt, technology, energy, food security, infrastructure, critical minerals, and access to international markets.

Sundaram and Parmar (2026) make a related argument in their critique of multiplexity. They caution that increasing diversity among powerful actors can coexist with persistent elite structures. Their analysis therefore provides an important counterweight to interpretations that automatically associate a more plural international system with greater equality.

The challenge is to distinguish **multipolarity** from **pluralistic agency**.

Multipolarity describes the existence of multiple centres of power.

Pluralistic agency describes the ability of different actors to influence the rules, institutions, and narratives governing international relations.

The first does not automatically produce the second.

This distinction explains why institutions such as BRICS, the G20, G77, ASEAN, the African Union, and the United Nations matter. These institutions provide spaces through which states can translate preferences into collective positions.

However, institutional participation alone is insufficient. The ability to influence outcomes depends on whether states can coordinate their interests and transform political narratives into institutional practices.

The BRICS process illustrates this tension. The 2024 Kazan Declaration presents the emergence of new centres of power as an important feature of the changing international system and links this development to questions of representation and international institutional reform.

South Africa's participation in BRICS similarly connects multipolarity with the broader objective of a more representative international system.

Yet these institutional developments should not be interpreted as evidence that a unified Global South position has emerged. The diversity of interests within BRICS and other Global South institutions remains significant.

The more appropriate interpretation is that these institutions provide additional arenas in which different states negotiate the meaning of international order.

Policy Implications

The analysis has several implications for policymakers and international institutions.

Treat the Global South as a plural actor

International organisations and major powers should avoid treating the Global South as a single political bloc.

India, Indonesia, South Africa, Brazil, and other states may share concerns about representation and inequality while maintaining different positions on security, trade, technology, and major-power competition.

Recognising this diversity can produce more realistic diplomatic engagement.

Expand issue-based cooperation

Global South cooperation may be more sustainable when organised around specific policy issues rather than rigid geopolitical alignment.

Potential areas include:

- climate finance
- food and energy security
- digital governance
- artificial intelligence governance
- development finance

- technology transfer
- health security
- reform of international financial institutions; and
- representation in global decision-making.

Issue-based cooperation allows states to coordinate where interests overlap without requiring complete strategic alignment.

Strengthen knowledge and narrative capacity

Developing states require greater capacity not only to participate in international institutions but also to produce research, policy ideas, diplomatic narratives, and knowledge.

Universities, think tanks, diplomatic academies, and regional organisations can contribute to this capacity.

Knowledge production is therefore not separate from international power. It is part of the process through which international problems are defined and possible solutions are identified.

Reform institutions rather than simply creating competing blocs

The growing influence of the Global South does not necessarily require abandoning existing multilateral institutions.

A more sustainable approach may involve reforming existing institutions while expanding representation and participation.

South Africa's position provides one example of this approach, linking the transformation of global governance with continued engagement in multilateral institutions.

This suggests that the emerging order may be better understood as a process of institutional negotiation than as the simple replacement of one international order with another.

Recognise communication as part of diplomacy

Diplomatic engagement should take seriously the historical and political meanings attached to concepts such as sovereignty, development, security, justice, and representation.

Effective international communication requires more than translating words. It also requires understanding the historical contexts in which political concepts acquire meaning.

This is increasingly important in an international system characterised by greater political, cultural, and institutional diversity.

CONCLUSION: WHOSE MULTIPOLARITY?

The emergence of a more multipolar international system is an important feature of contemporary global politics. Yet the significance of multipolarity cannot be determined solely by counting the number of major powers or measuring changes in economic and military capabilities.

The deeper question is one of agency.

Who has the ability to define the meaning of sovereignty? Who determines the priorities of global governance? Who influences which forms of cooperation are considered legitimate? Who has the authority to define development, security, justice, and international responsibility?

The experiences of India, Indonesia, and South Africa demonstrate that the Global South is not a unified geopolitical bloc. Its states pursue different strategies according to their historical experiences, regional positions, institutional commitments, and national interests.

At the same time, the three cases demonstrate a common interest in maintaining room for independent policy choices and increasing influence within international institutions.

This article has argued that strategic autonomy should therefore be complemented by the concept of narrative autonomy.

Strategic autonomy concerns the capacity to make independent strategic choices.

Narrative autonomy concerns the capacity to articulate and institutionalise the ideas through which international order is interpreted.

The distinction matters because a world can become multipolar without becoming genuinely pluralistic. Multiple centres of power can coexist with dependency if weaker states lack the institutional, economic, and discursive capacity to shape the rules governing international relations.

The emerging multipolar order therefore presents both opportunities and constraints for the Global South. The opportunities include greater diplomatic space, diversified partnerships, and increased participation in international institutions. The constraints include continued economic dependence, unequal institutional structures, competing external pressures, and the possibility that new forms of power reproduce existing hierarchies.

The central challenge is consequently not simply to increase the number of actors participating in global governance. It is to increase the capacity of diverse actors to influence the rules, concepts, and institutions through which global governance operates.

Ultimately, the future of multipolarity will not be determined only by which states possess the greatest material capabilities. It will also depend on which actors can turn their experiences, interests, and ideas into recognised concepts, institutional practices, and legitimate international narratives.

The central question is therefore not simply:

"Who has power?"

It is also:

"Whose interpretation of the future will shape the international order?"

Declarations

Ethical Considerations

This study does not involve human participants, personal data, experiments, or animals. It is based on publicly available academic literature and official policy and diplomatic documents. Therefore, formal ethical approval was not required.

Data Availability

The study relies on publicly available academic publications, government documents, official speeches, and multilateral declarations. The documents analysed are publicly accessible through the relevant academic publishers and official institutional websites.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest associated with this research.

AI Use Declaration

Generative artificial intelligence tools were used during the preparation of the manuscript for language editing, structural refinement, literature organisation, and drafting assistance. The author reviewed the manuscript, checked the cited literature and publicly available sources, and remains responsible for the accuracy, interpretation, and final content of the article.

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