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## Geopolitics, the Global South and Development Policy

Stephan Klingebiel

### Summary

This policy brief discusses the new geopolitical and geo-economic context and its significance for the Global South and the development policies of Western actors.

The systemic confrontation between China and the USA, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but also the seizure of power through a military putsch in Niger, among other places, show: The environment for global cooperation efforts has become much more difficult. Actors in the Global South are no longer just participants on the sidelines of geopolitical conflicts, but are taking an active role. Western countries and Russia make strong efforts to woo them. At the same time, China and India in particular aspire to leadership roles as leaders for the Global South.

The following points are of particular importance:

- (1) The changes in the international system have given the Global South as a group (despite the enormous differences between the actors in this group) a new impetus of identity – similar to the West. It is noteworthy that this North/South bloc formation makes other possible commonalities less pronounced. This applies above all to the attempt – which has been less successful so far – to strengthen the identification of open democratic systems as a mark of belonging. For many debates and alliances, the identification “Global North/South” is formative. Formation of North and South camps is not helpful for finding international solutions. Approaches to counteract entrenched bloc formations and to create effective formats for exchange and understanding are therefore important.
- (2) From the perspective of Southern actors, the existing international order is a deeply unjust system that primarily protects the interests of the West, and especially those of the USA. Political offers from the West that do not really lead to structural changes are unlikely to arouse interest in the Global South, and will instead favour counter-designs – be they from China with its claim to leadership for the Global South or Russia.
- (3) In principle, the development policy of OECD actors has important potential to help shape the realignment of relations with the Global South. The policy field is, on the one hand, a proof of international credibility (among other things, fulfilment of international obligations) and, on the other hand, an approach that makes it possible to work with operational means on international problems in the first place.
- (4) Western development policy is likely to face further difficult situations with risks of escalation and failure (such as Niger and Afghanistan) in the face of multiple tensions in developing regions. Development policy should reflect the geopolitical context even more consciously in strategy and action. The defining geopolitical context harbours the danger that the original development policy task – sustainable development of the partner countries – will be overshadowed.
- (5) Overall, it should be an important concern to rethink how international burden-sharing for development and climate finance agendas is organised. Here, it is important to consider both the actors from the Global North and those from the Global South.

## Introduction: The Global South as an Active Actor

Far-reaching geopolitical upheavals have characterised international relations in the recent past. The systemic confrontation between China and the USA, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the seizure of power by putsching militaries in Gabon and Niger as well as earlier in Mali and Burkina Faso, and last but not least the complete capture of Afghanistan by the Taliban show: The environment for global cooperation efforts has become much more difficult. Global cooperation has taken considerable steps backwards in recent months or years. Populism and autocratic trends in all regions of the world are seriously damaging global cooperation efforts. Scope for finding common solutions – above all in combating climate change – is difficult or even impossible, and in turn itself forms part of international lines of conflict.

The Global South is to a considerable extent the scene of these conflicts of a political, economic and often also military nature. However – and this is an essential difference compared to earlier periods: Countries of the Global South (Haug et al., 2021) – not in the sense of a homogeneous monolith, of course – are now essential co-creators in international relations (Ishmael (Ed.), 2022). This applies first and foremost to China, but also to India and other actors from the BRICS group and beyond. How India, South Africa, Brazil, but also smaller states (such as Rwanda) behave towards Russia and China is of considerable international importance, as shown by the votes in the United Nations General Assembly or participation in Chinese development initiatives or the participation in the Africa Summit organised by Russia (July 2023) in St. Petersburg.

The geopolitical upheavals ultimately affect all policies in Europe and the rest of the OECD world. This applies to the classic fields of foreign and security policy, climate and energy policy, but also increasingly to other policy fields such as agricultural or science policy. Western development policy focuses on the Global South (Klingebiel, 2022a) – this is a fundamental characteristic of the

policy field. In this respect, the question is of great importance: What does all this mean for development policy concepts and narratives, and likewise for operational implementation?

## Development policy: After the honeymoon period

In Western development policy, the Russian aggression in Ukraine has enormously reinforced a trend: Development issues are much more closely interwoven with geopolitics and geoeconomics (especially energy and raw material security) than in the past. A phase after the Cold War phase allowed development issues to be pursued relatively free of other considerations. “How can development policy be organised as effectively as possible in the interest of the partner countries?” and “How can a long-term global sustainability strategy be supported?” were overarching questions that determined this phase. Central milestones in this regard are represented by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), adopted in 2000, and the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) from 2015, based on the 2030 Agenda. The ambitious Paris Climate Agreement, also reached in 2015, shows how a window of opportunity for international agreements could be temporarily exploited.

Western development policy through the countries represented in the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee (DAC) was able to concentrate to a large extent on improving its aid/development effectiveness in the partner countries (Bracho (Ed.), 2021) – in retrospect, a phase in which the policy field was able to concentrate on its professionalisation quite undisturbed by adverse framework conditions.

However, a post-aid-effectiveness phase has been evident for some years now (Brown, 2020; Calleja et al., 2022). The first signs of this could be observed in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. It is now abundantly clear that development policy is in a new phase. US President Trump’s populism generally became a catalyst for the decline of cooperative global approaches to solutions.

Something which is also of great importance for the international development discourse: The formerly proactive and highly visible British role in development agendas is largely absent, at the latest after Boris Johnson became Prime Minister.

While it is relatively easy to conclude that the old paradigm of a development policy that is as “effective as possible” has faded, it is less easy to pinpoint what constitutes the new development policy profile. Three central international changes come into play here: Firstly, a political claim of the Global South to shape global governance has evolved into a core dimension of international relations. Secondly, the growing importance of the Global South affects many policy fields, but of course development policy is one of them. Development issues have moved to the centre of political discourse in a hitherto unknown way and are thus also subject to the danger of being instrumentalised for other interests. Thirdly, it becomes apparent that international climate finance is a central challenge that is predominantly served by development finance, thus significantly changing the character of development policy. This change also has strong links with geopolitics (such as the rise of countries central to renewable energy).

## **Geopolitics through development agendas**

One crucial turning point has been and is the use of the development initiatives initiated by China for offensive geopolitics in the Global South, especially since the 2017 Communist Party Congress (Nath & Klingebiel, 2023). The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has been being implemented since 2013, has set new standards for how an infrastructure initiative can massively change countries (e.g. Pakistan). Incidentally, this is an initiative that is not only aimed at developing countries, but encompasses a total of 180 countries and institutions.

Other Chinese initiatives have been added in recent years, including the Global Development Initiative (GDI) (2021), which is valued by many developing countries. At the beginning of 2023, the

Global Security Initiative (GSI) agreed on by the group of BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) was added. The Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) published in March 2023 shows the range of the initiatives and the close links between them.

Looking at China and Indo-Pacific policies of OECD actors shows how (from the initially supportive view of China’s South-South cooperation) BRI in particular quickly advanced in recent years from a rather niche development policy issue to a main instrument of the struggle for power in international relations.

The Russian invasion of February 2022 acted as an extreme accelerator of overarching trends. This applies above all to the dimensions of (i) geopolitics, (ii) geoeconomics, and especially energy and raw material security.

i. Firstly, in geopolitical conflicts, actors in the Global South are no longer merely participants on the sidelines, but active co-players which many actors are trying to win over (Western states, Russia, and other countries of the Global South themselves (especially China and India)) (Klingebiel, 2022a). Interestingly, this is particularly evident on the African continent, where Russia (McGlynn, 2023), China and Western actors are racing to launch diplomatic initiatives and development projects (such as the European Union’s (EU) Global Gateway initiative). Russia can score points to some extent with an anti-colonial narrative referring to the former support of liberation movements by the Soviet Union (which, however, also included Ukraine) – for example in South Africa and Namibia. Military cooperation (arms deliveries, military training, etc.) and the role of mercenaries (especially the “Wagner Group”) and, on a case-by-case basis, food access are likely to be even more important. China’s role (Vines & Wallace, 2023) is partly military, but what has been much more influential in the last two decades is the close economic ties, from intensive trade relations to significant digital and transport infrastructure development.

The key UN resolutions condemning Russian aggression in March and October 2022 show: The Global South is not a homogeneous group. However, above all the G77 association (association of developing countries at the United Nations) and partly through other associations (BRICS group, etc.) succeed in maintaining and recently even strengthening the identity as a group despite manifold differences. Actors of the Global South do not derive their increased geopolitical role solely from the confrontation of the USA/the West with China and from Russia's imperial policy, but from a variety of issues – from climate change to sport (Agrawal, 2023).

All in all, actors (individual countries, but also associations such as the G77 and the BRICS countries) of the Global South have emancipated themselves politically in a new way – this is something Western governments have had to realise many times in recent months when trying to convince other countries to isolate Russia. Many developing countries do not favour any political camp affiliation. Non-alignment is therefore currently a much-strained political principle of action (Sidiropoulos 2022), sometimes better understood in reality as multi-alignment.

Pedagogical political approaches by Western actors have been debunked in recent months, with counter-arguments pointing to double standards. Rwanda's President Kagame, for example, points out that it is not up to Western actors to decide on cooperation between African states and China or Russia. Since February 2022, South Africa has vividly demonstrated that, in this case, non-alignment or neutrality can serve as a bogus argument to whitewash an erratic policy that can hardly be explained in terms of argumentation, and which ultimately supports Russia's imperial actions.

- ii. Second, it shows how trade, finance and investment policies are increasingly geared towards pursuing geopolitical goals. One of the most visible signs of this new relevance of geo-

economics are the economic linkages of, for example, African countries with China (Babic et al., 2022). China is now the most important trading partner for around 30 African countries. The country in particular has important leverage with developing countries that are indebted to it – also vis-à-vis Western creditors, as is shown by the debt situation in Zambia, for example.

Even if the very variably managed BRI projects in the past have given way to a more cautious and structured approach in the meantime, the dependencies on China which have developed still remain large. Of course, this does not only apply to important cooperation partners in developing countries (particularly visible in Pakistan, for example), but also to OECD countries, some of which want to use friend-shoring or de-risking concepts to free themselves from supply chain dependencies, especially on countries with which they have little political common ground (Müller, 2022). In terms of development policy, the formerly one-sided focus on socially and ecologically sustainable production conditions in developing countries is now under pressure to incorporate geopolitical conditions and the country's own security of supply.

One factor closely linked to this is access to scarce raw materials and to fossil and renewable energies in developing countries. This increasing prioritisation can be seen not least in important political decision-makers, for example from the European Union, making trips to development regions. At the same time, it is becoming clear that renewable energies will play a defining role in the future geopolitical map of the world. Especially with the enormously growing role of green hydrogen, which has great potential in various countries of the Global South (such as Mauritania) due to the conditions there for solar and wind energy, it is evident that development policy is becoming increasingly active here, but at the same time faces fundamental conflicts of objectives: Is it a



question of development policy improving energy access for developing countries and poor population groups there, or is this about the use of renewable energies for the respective donor countries?

These trends are already shaping global development discourses – whether at the United Nations General Assembly in New York or the OECD in Paris or the G20 meetings. They also set the course for how development policy will be shaped in the future in terms of the selection of partner countries and sectoral themes.

China's infrastructure investments in particular have made the development policies of European actors and the USA less visible on the African continent and elsewhere. Sometimes explicitly, sometimes more covertly, all relevant OECD actors have presented their counter-designs to China. Most recently, Japan has made BRI the central reference point in a new development policy strategy. Similar to the Chinese approach, Western development initiatives that seek to counter BRI projects include funds that come from development budgets, but equally go beyond them. This is especially true for the EU's Global Gateway, which sees itself as a "value-based, high-quality and transparent infrastructure partnership". Whether all these offers can convince partners in the Global South remains to be seen.

## **What does all this mean for the relationship of the West with the Global South and for development policy?**

### ***Bloc thinking trumps value commonalities: New alliances hard to create***

The political changes in the international system in recent years have been profound. They have given the Global South as a group a new identity boost – similar to "the West" and important Western economic and security associations (especially NATO, OECD, G7). The relationship

between important alliances of interests or values and thus also the relationship with the Global South and important groups within this category will be of greater importance to the West in the future. One overarching grouping is the G77; in addition, there are groupings such as the BRICS group and numerous other regional or non-regional groupings.

At the same time, the differences and, to a large extent, the fragility within both groupings are considerable – one example is shown by Trumpism, which has stood in the way of a consolidated approach by the West and could stand in its way again in the future. The enormous political and economic heterogeneity of the Global South and the low institutionalisation of interests in the form of effective institutions (for example, compared to the functionality of the OECD) set limits to the unity of the group. This does not in itself stop it from gaining momentum (for example in the form of numerous applications for membership in the BRICS group in the run-up to the summit in August 2023) and also the establishment of institutions (such as the founding of the New Development Bank in 2015).

It is noteworthy that the bloc formation seems to make other commonalities across north-south borders less pronounced. This applies above all to the attempt to strengthen the identification of open democratic systems as a mark of belonging. Here, especially India and to some extent Brazil under Lula show that the identification "Global North/South" trumps the value-based affiliation to a group of democratically constituted countries.

The situation is similar in international climate policy. There is likely to be little commonality of interests here between China (as the world's largest CO<sub>2</sub> emitter) and many Pacific islands (as a group of countries extremely affected by the impacts of climate change). Nevertheless, the relevant drivers of climate change from the Global South succeed in relativising their own responsibility (which exists alongside the central role of many OECD countries as emitters). Thus, even rich countries like Saudi Arabia and Qatar can avoid

contributing to international climate finance due to a lack of peer pressure from the Global South.

Entrenched camp formation is not helpful in finding solutions in all areas; it stands in the way of better international cooperation and hinders a proactive approach that builds on trust. Approaches to counteract entrenched bloc formations and to create effective formats for exchange and understanding are therefore important. Examples of issue-specific alliances that do not organise themselves according to North-South patterns can point the way. This applies, for example, to the High Ambition Coalition to limit global warming, which spans several groups of countries.

### ***Global participation beyond Sunday speeches***

From the perspective of Southern actors, the existing international order is a deeply unjust system that primarily protects the interests of the West and especially those of the USA (Fortin et al., 2023). Political offers from the West that do not really lead to structural changes are unlikely to arouse interest in the Global South, and will instead favour counter-designs – be they from China with its claim to leadership for the Global South or Russia.

The political and economic power shifts in favour of actors from the Global South are already a reality. Symbolic politics continue to dominate the agendas of the crucial global governance structures. The major international development banks have so far been unable to convince their main shareholders to act on a larger scale. This applies to the major development and climate finance debates – one example is the Paris Summit on Development and Climate Finance in June 2023 – which ultimately exhaust themselves in rhetorical gestures, and the unwillingness among privileged countries to change the UN Security Council with its outdated structures dating from the phase immediately after the Second World War.

Real reforms of global governance structures beyond cosmetic changes are therefore enormously important. The new seat of the African Union

(AU) in the G20 points in the right direction. At the same time, corresponding announcements are hardly enough. A possible solidification of global structures in favour of a bipolar system – the USA and China – would be a step in the wrong direction, especially since the Chinese initiatives in particular show that the country is willing and able to use and expand its position of power in the Global South.

### ***Development policy as a formative approach***

Development policy is not the only instrument for shaping relations with partners in the Global South. Nevertheless, on the one hand, the policy field continues to be an external proof of international credibility (for example, on the basis of the question: Do OECD countries fulfil their commitments with respect to ODA [Official Development Assistance]?) and, on the other hand, an approach that can be used to work on international problems in a concrete way. Development policy is able to tackle local or global problems with tangible measures, be it improving health care where health systems are weak (including countering epidemics such as Ebola) or accelerating the transformation in favour of renewable energies.

Development policy funds are highly concessional public funds or grants that can be used where other resources (such as access to international capital markets at reasonable conditions) are not available or prove not profitable enough. There are also opportunities to shape development policy with large and relatively economically strong developing countries. With India, various OECD countries have agreed on triangular cooperation approaches in recent years, and with China, too, for example, the German and Chinese governments confirmed in June 2023 that individual joint triangular cooperation projects should take place for the benefit of other developing countries (OECD countries have, however, almost completely phased out bilateral development cooperation with China). Such an approach has been practised with Latin American partners for many years.

It would therefore be wrong to underestimate or overestimate the development policy options of

the EU and the OECD as a whole. China will continue to play a hugely important role in this regard for many developing countries, from Pakistan to Tanzania. Russia has little to show in terms of public and private development investments; this will remain true after the second Russian-African summit in St. Petersburg in July 2023. Russia mainly uses destructive action as a *spoiler* – military cooperation (from arms supplies to the use of Wagner mercenaries) and the provision or instrumentalisation of food and fertiliser (Singh, 2022).

In principle, development policy has great potential to contribute to the reorientation of relations with the Global South. It has established dialogue and cooperation structures with governmental and non-governmental partners in the Global South, it can take a concrete approach to dealing with global challenges, and it is committed to joint global changes in global governance structures. All this also requires independent action to counter the risk of instrumentalisation for short-term interests.

### ***Strengthening the strategic capacity of development policy***

Africa's role in a more geopolitically and geoeconomically relevant context is considerable. The successful military coups in Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso represent a drastic negative turnaround for the populations there in recent weeks or years. Relevant African actors such as the AU and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have condemned the illegitimate action against democratically elected governments. From a European perspective, the overthrows also represent a massive step backwards. The coups are likely to be associated overall with significantly more instability and destructive competition from external actors on the African continent.

Former colonies of France are particularly affected by this trend of instability. France's post-colonial policy (*Françafrique*) of cementing unequal relations has contributed to such an escalation of conditions over decades. Other European partners

and the EU have largely failed to distance themselves from this. This is partly due to an insufficient independent strategic capacity on Africa-related issues (including expertise from the countries/from the region). This applies to development policy, but also to foreign and security policy and other policy areas. In Afghanistan, despite massive military and civilian investments, the Western states involved were unable to prevent the Taliban from recapturing all parts of the country. The challenges are enormous for development policy as well as for diplomacy/foreign policy and security policy.

For development policy, further difficult situations with risks of escalation and failure are likely to arise in view of diverse tensions in developing country regions. Development policy should therefore reflect the new geopolitical context even more consciously in strategy and action. Likewise, whole-of-government approaches (DDD – defence, diplomacy, and development) should be reviewed and evaluated against the background of the new experiences. At the same time: Ultimately, options are particularly risky if they do not use civilian options, which development policy in particular offers, to influence situations.

### ***Burden sharing***

Development policy is in many ways a traditional approach (Bracho et al. (Eds.), 2021). Its origins have much to do with the Cold War and a classic division of the world into North/South. Many former developing countries are now among the relatively better-off industrialised countries – such as Portugal or South Korea. Other countries became wealthy as petroleum economies; this is true of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, for example. China is still considered a developing country based on international classifications, but will probably be removed from the list of DAC recipient countries at least in the foreseeable future.

A number of developing countries have begun to engage in development cooperation in recent years and decades; the origins of this South-South cooperation date back to the 1950s (Bandung



Conference 1955) (Chaturvedi et al. (Eds.), 2021). Countries such as China, India, Mexico, and Brazil, but even poor states like Rwanda are active in this field.

In principle, it can be argued that South-South cooperation can be a form of global burden sharing – through financial benefits or through knowledge exchange. At the same time, development policy has been and is increasingly used as a geopolitical and geo-economic instrument that is essentially oriented towards the national interests of the providing country; this can be well demonstrated for the USA as the largest OECD donor country, but also for China as the most important South-South cooperation provider.

The development policy system for creating common standards and transparency for Western countries is based on the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD. The central part of the system is the introduction and monitoring of what can be counted as Official Development Assistance (ODA) in the first place. There are various weaknesses of the system – for example, ODA statistics have been inflated by including in-donor refugee costs, and the definition of ODA has been softened over the years. ODA as a norm system nonetheless remains important (Bracho et al. (Eds.), 2021).

South-South providers have not yet established such a common approach to creating standards and reporting. Joint approaches with OECD actors are not sought by the majority of this group.

Especially with regard to economically strong developing countries, a higher degree of commitment and transparency in this area would make sense. Especially with a view to future needs for international climate finance (which is predominantly ODA-funded), it would make sense, on the one hand, to involve the main emitters from the group of traditional industrialised countries in fair shares (which is still generally not the case) (Klingebiel, 2022b). On the other hand, the important emitters should also be included here for which no commitments have yet been made; this applies to China as the main global emitter (in

absolute figures) as well as to the Arab oil economies (Qatar occupies first place in relative per capita terms) and even South Korea (due to an outdated classification of the country as a developing country for climate finance obligations).

Overall, it should therefore be an important political goal to rethink existing approaches to international burden sharing for development and climate finance agendas. The OECD's ODA approach has conceptual and political weaknesses. At the same time, however, the degree of commitment and transparency is unlikely to be politically achievable through completely new approaches (such as Global Public Investment – GPI). In this respect, there is much to be said for further reforming ODA (which has been insufficient so far), but not for replacing it with something completely new. A better recording and transparency system for South-South cooperation would be desirable, especially in geopolitically difficult times.

Most of the momentum in the coming years is likely to be in international climate finance. The fair burden on OECD economies has still not been achieved here; this would also be crucial in order to make southern emitters share responsibility in a politically convincing way. The countries of the Global South that are relevantly favourable to climate change and/or economically capable of doing so should in the future be measured against a principle of participating in climate finance approaches.

## **Conclusions: Development policy between values and interests**

Global cooperation is a key prerequisite for overcoming cross-border challenges. This applies to pandemics as well as to violent conflicts and, last but not least, climate change.

Despite the need for more and qualitatively better international cooperation, the conditions required for it are strikingly unfavourable – from populist and nationalist governments in the Global North and the Global South to systemic competition between China and the USA and imperial Russian policies.

The origins of the OECD countries' development policies are directly related to geopolitics. In this respect, the dominance of geopolitics and its impact on other policies are anything but new. At the same time, today's conditions are, from many points of view, completely different from how they were during the Cold War – for example, with regard to the urgency of climate change and the formative role of many actors in the Global South.

Development policy, understood primarily as an approach to overcoming poverty, is largely an outdated model. This has to do with the fact that, on average, developing countries have better socio-economic conditions than they did just a few decades ago. And it has to do with the increased need that global challenges have taken on a new urgency. In this respect, Western development policy today is much more an approach to providing global public goods – such as security and preservation of the natural environment.

For Western development policy, the question arises in a new way as to how its relationship to other policy fields and interests of actors can look. It should change in times of fundamental upheaval. The question of the relationship between values and interests is important here. It is of a principled nature, but also of enormous importance as a compass for concrete decisions. After years of dealing with supply chains, does development policy need to focus more on strategic aspects of raw material and energy supply for the donor country in addition to production conditions in developing countries? Is the EU's geopolitical Global Gateway initiative a project worth supporting in terms of development policy? How should the development cooperation relationship with autocratic regimes look under the new international conditions?

The following points should be considered for such positioning.

Firstly, values-based politics is directly relevant to international credibility: The assumption that values can find a place in times of fair weather but do not endure in times of crisis fails to recognise the role of trust, credibility and transparency in international relations. The debates at the United Nations on Russia's policy of aggression have made it clear how double standards (for example with regard to the Iraq military intervention of 2003) or the lack of reforms in global governance structures directly affect security interests. Development policy can be a relevant policy field in cooperation with the Global South.

Secondly, many debates are insufficiently complex because they are monothematic: Global challenges – ranging from inequality to climate change to the legitimacy of political rule – are difficult in themselves and often cannot be meaningfully captured by dichotomous patterns (autocracies versus democracies; “North” versus “South” etc.). It is important for development policy to deal with this complexity. To consider only the “neediness” of a country (independent of the importance of governance for existing problems, for example) would be such a shortcut, as would setting governance as the sole criterion for selecting cooperative relationships. Conflicts of objectives are particularly visible with regard to China, where many economic, security-related and human rights-related issues, among others, play a role.

Thirdly, there are conflicting goals that should be discussed transparently: For development policy and other policy fields, it makes a difference whether and how contradictions are addressed. The process of weighing and prioritising is what makes politics.

At its best, politics is based on long-term goals and matching strategies. The multiple crises in times of fundamental uncertainties force policies to be formulated in the form of strategies – even if this is extremely difficult in the face of rapidly changing foundations.

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