



**POLITICS AND DEVELOPMENT
OF CONTEMPORARY CHINA**

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**China and the Global South
in a Contested World Order**
The Changing Dynamics of
Policy and Practice in
an Era of Polycrisis

Jing Gu

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Politics and Development of Contemporary China

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Jing Gu

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For my parents, whose unwavering love, belief and support let me realise my dreams. Who always reminded me that the aim is not only to explain the world, but also to change it.

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This book has emerged from many discussions and interviews over a number of years. I would like to thank all those who have given their time to share with me their knowledge and deep understanding of China, the Global South and international relations. I would also like to thank the incredible students I have the privilege to teach and supervise at IDS. Their interest, insights and willingness to challenge ideas have contributed so much to the thought behind this book. My thanks also go to the various reviewers, who have provided invaluable thoughts, guidance and recommendations. I would also like to thank Naveen Das and the Palgrave editorial team for their support. Most importantly, I owe immense thanks to my family for their encouragement and loving support.

PRAISE FOR *CHINA AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH IN A CONTESTED WORLD ORDER*

“In *China and the Global South in a Contested World Order*, Jing Gu incisively investigates how China’s transformative journey from poverty to global power can serve as an inspiration and source of support for countries in the Global South. She shows how China can help build a dynamic, sustainable, and equitable new global order. This book is not only insightful, but also practical, providing valuable insights into real-world development challenges and cooperation. It is an essential resource for scholars, policymakers, and anyone interested in global development and international relations in an era of rapidly evolving world order dynamics.”

—Justin Yifu Lin, *Dean, Institute of New Structural Economics, Peking University. Former Chief Economist and Senior Vice President, World Bank, author of The Quest for Prosperity: How Developing Economies Can Take Off*

“This book offers a timely and incisive analysis of the evolving dynamics shaping South–South relations in the era of polycrisis. With remarkable depth and clarity, it elevates the perspectives and agency of actors from the Global South, challenging Eurocentric narratives and illuminating the complex interplay of development diplomacy, digital transformation, and multilateralism.

Committed to advancing knowledge production rooted in the Global South, I regard this work as a significant contribution to the decolonization of international development discourse. Gu’s nuanced treatment of China’s role—at once a development partner, political actor, and emerging rule-maker—adds vital insight to ongoing debates around global governance and cooperation. For academics and those engaged in policy, this groundbreaking and insightful analysis is a key work to help understand the changing architecture of development and the potential for more equitable and pluralistic world orders.”

—Xiaoyun Li, *Honorary Dean and Professor at China Agricultural University. Chair of the Network of Southern Think Tanks (NeST), and China International Development Research Network, author of The End of Poverty and the Taming of Inequality: A Manifesto for Personal and Social Action*

“This book looks at the positioning of China within the community of developing countries in the era of polycrisis. In a refreshingly original manner, the author has struck balance with respect to arguing that China has interests in common, and interests that differ, with countries of the Global South. Conceptually sophisticated and empirically rich, it offers a unique tapestry of problematising the complex relationship between China and the Global South, and simultaneously challenges the conventional view of the topics at hand. Jing Gu has skilfully dealt with the burning issue of multilateralism, and international law in the current context of diminishing cooperation and partnerships.”

—Sachin Chaturvedi, *Director General at the Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), author of The Logic of Sharing: Indian Approach to South–South Cooperation*

“Jing Gu has written a book based upon a lifelong experience of fieldwork on Chinese development relations with the Global South. This makes her especially competent to examine closely the complex relations between China and Global South countries. The book is insightful, explaining critical issues of China’s approach to multilateralism and the Global South. It is particularly strong in analysing the growing role of China’s provincial development diplomacy. Gu has given us a compelling and objective account enlivened by her original research. She is a voice for reason in troubled times.”

—Anthony Carty, *Editor in Chief of the Oxford Bibliographies In International Law*; *editor of, inter alia*, *Morality and Responsibility of Rulers: European and Chinese Origins of a Rule of Law as Justice for World Order*

“This timely contribution adds to the growing literature in examining China’s relationship with the Global South. The author’s critique of how China frames its identity as a Global South actor represents a significant inquiry into the perceptions regarding Beijing’s agency in an increasingly precarious international system.”

—Sanusha Naidu, *Senior Research Associate, The Institute for Global Dialogue*, *editor of Africa-China relations: Chinese and African Perspectives on China in Africa; Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon? Africa and China*

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Jing Gu is a Senior Research Fellow and Director of the China Centre at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), UK, and Adjunct Chair Professor in International Development at China Agricultural University. A political economist working at the intersection of global affairs and development, she is widely cited for her research on China's global role and its implications for the Global South. Her work spans international political economy and global development policy, with particular attention to how states, firms, and cross-border investment shape development pathways, including in debates on digitalisation and green development. She is the founding director of the Centre for Rising Powers and Global Development and founder of the China Global Development Knowledge Network. She has led major international research initiatives, including the Rising Powers in International Development programme, and serves on the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) International Development Peer Review College. She has advised international organizations, including the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, with research on the impacts of COVID-19 on Belt and Road investments and SDG outcomes in Asia and Europe. Drawing on extensive fieldwork across China, Africa, and Southeast Asia, she has published widely on BRICS+, South–South Cooperation, China's development policy, and China–Global South relations.

ABBREVIATIONS

AfCFTA	Africa Continental Free Trade Area
AfDB	African Development Bank
AFR	Access to Finance Rwanda
AI	Artificial Intelligence
AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
ANA	Active Non-Alignment
APEC	Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation
ASEAN	Association of South-East Asian Nations
AU	African Union
AUKUS	Australia, United Kingdom and United States
B2C	Business-to-Consumer
BAPA	Buenos Aires Plan of Action
BPTF	BRICS Payment Task Force
BRF	Belt and Road Forum
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
C2C	Consumer-to-Consumer
CABI	Commonwealth Agricultural Bureaux International
CBDC	Central Bank Digital Currency
CIDRN	China International Development Research Network
CLACS	China-Latin America and Caribbean States
CNFA	Cultivating New Frontiers in Agriculture
CNOOC	China National Offshore Oil Company
CPC	Communist Party of China
CPEC	China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

CPTCC	Comprehensive and Progressive Trade Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership
CRA	Contingency Reserve Agreement
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DLT	Distributed Ledger Technology
DSB	Dispute Settlement Body
DSM	Disputes Settlement Mechanism
ELDC	Emerging and Least Developed Countries
EU	European Union
eWTP	Electronic World Trade Platform
EXIMB	Export-Import Bank
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FOCAC	Forum on China-Africa Cooperation
FYP	Five Year Plan
GASCA	Global Alliance for Smart Cities and Smart Villages in Africa
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GDI	Global Development Initiative
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GDSSCF	Global Development and South-South Cooperation Fund
GoC	Government of China
GoR	Government of Rwanda
GPEDC	Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation
GRPS	Global Risks Perception Survey
ICT	Information, Communications and Technology
IDA	International Development Assistance
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
IoT	Internet of Things
IP	Intellectual Property
IR&D	Industrial Research and Development
IRBO	International Rules-Based Order
ITU	International Telecommunications Union
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
LIC	Low-Income Country
LNG	Liquid Natural Gas
MDB	Multilateral Development Bank
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MIC	Middle Income Country
MINT	Mexico, Indonesia, Nigeria, Türkiye
MINTEC	Ministry of Information Technology and Communications (Rwanda)
MOC	Ministry of Commerce (China)

MOFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (China)
MSE	Medium Sized Enterprise
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NDB	New Development Bank
NeST	Network of Southern Think Tanks
NIRDA	National Industrial Research and Development Agency (Rwanda)
NST	National Strategy for Transformation (Rwanda)
ODA	Overseas Development Assistance
OECD-DAC	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development-Development Assistance Committee
P2P	People-to-People
PECC	Pacific Economic Cooperation Council
PIDA	Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
PRIDA	Policy and Regulatory Initiative for Digital Africa
PULSE	Productive Use Leveraging Solar Energy
RAB	Rwanda Agriculture and Animal Resources Development Board
RCEP	Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership
R-DAP	Rwanda Agriculture and Animal Resources Development Board
RMB	Renminbi
RoL	Rule of Law
RURA	Rwanda Utilities Regulatory Authority
SAR	Special Administrative Region
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
SDA	Sustainable Development Agenda
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SEZ	Special Economic Zone
SoE	State-Owned Enterprise
SPNGE	Shanghai Petroleum and Natural Gas Exchange
SRMP	Smart Rwanda Master Plan
SSA	Sub-Saharan Africa
SSC	South-South Cooperation
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics
TC	Trilateral Cooperation
TRIMS	Trade-Related Investment Measures
TRIPS	Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNCLOSS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference of Trade, Aid and Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNOSSC	UN Office of South-South Cooperation
UNSF	United Nations Strategic Framework
US	United States of America
VoGS	Voice of the Global South
VSLA	Village Savings and Loans Associations
WB	World Bank
WEF	World Economic Forum (Davos)
WGI	World Governance Indicators
WHO	World Health Organisation
WTO	World Trade Organisation

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China and the Global South in a Contested World Order

Abstract Jing Gu presents a clear-sighted analysis of China and the Global South. The study highlights key questions and debates in a contested world order, a shifting state system, and in an era of “poly-crisis”. Drawing on concepts of power, interests, and knowledge, the analysis foregrounds perspectives from China and the Global South. Some Chinese scholars stress a natural historical and developmental alignment, while many Western scholars view China primarily as a global power whose reach extends beyond the South. This book offers a balanced, nuanced position: China shares certain interests with the Global South whilst also pursuing distinct, and sometimes divergent, priorities. The relationship is, therefore, more complex than conventional accounts suggest. Gu sets out the central themes, aims, and analytical lens of the study while unpacking the very notion of the Global South as a complicating factor in understanding China’s place in today’s fractured world order.

Keywords China · Global South · Polycrisis · World order

CHINA AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH IN AN ERA OF POLYCRISIS

The world order is changing, fundamentally. The voices of Africa, South America and many other regions of the Global South are louder, their aspirations sharper, their interests deeper than ever before. China and the Global South are at the very heart of this change. The conventional picture is of solidarity, cooperation and mutual benefit, a complementary “fit”. Yet, it is timely to ask just how accurate is this picture? Clearly, China has become a leading and, for an increasing number of developing states in the Global South, the preferred development partner. China’s development partnerships, initiatives and its sponsorship of new institutions and groups spans the world; Chinese enterprises and their brands are ubiquitous. China’s relationship with the Global South and its significance is set within a widespread sense that the established post World War II Western-inscribed “world order” is in increasing flux, transitioning to an, as yet, ill-defined multilateral states system and a new world order. Rivalry and competition between China and the United States (US) is intensifying, the fallout compounded by a “polycrisis” of multiple, interconnected global existentially deeper, threats felt by all simultaneously. The need for amplified voices from the East and Global South, including that of China, has never been more imperative, nor more problematic, as major power competition bites ever more deeply into the global development and wider states’ system and as competition between Global South leadership aspirants intensifies. Policy and practice of China and the Global South is, as a result, in flux and the subject of widespread discussion and analysis.

This is a book about China *and* the Global South. In other words, it explores the “relationship” and the factors that influence it. The various chapters examine specific aspects and assesses the relationship in this era of significant change, new challenges and fluctuating relationships. China has vastly increased its presence in Global South countries over the past decade.

At the same time, the Global South is widely seen as a strongly emerging political voice and economic force in an emerging multipolar system characterised by major power competition. The relationship with China is the focus of attention in the world’s academic, policy and media communities, and widely viewed as forming one of the foundational pillars of a twenty-first century new world order. It is timely,

therefore, to look more closely at the drivers and dynamics, shared and different perceptions and interests and systemic implications of China and the Global South.

The chapters of this book touch on many questions at the heart of the global debate. To what extent and in what ways are China and the Global South “natural” partners? What are the key aspects of China-Global South relations today, why and to whom are they important? What, in fact, is the “Global South”? It is often argued that China’s approach to international relations and to the Global South is different, emerging from its turbulent history and phoenix-like renewal, but how justified are such claims and is there a case to be made for Chinese exceptionalism? There are many diplomatic words expended on fraternity, solidarity and shared interests, but what is the evidence lying beyond the “win-win” discourse, how is China viewed by the leaderships and publics across the regions of the Global South, what are the factors influencing these views, what are the positive and negative issues at play? The current conventional wisdom is that the structure, institutions, principles and values of the post Second World War “world order”, pre-eminence of the United States, and the integrative processes of globalisation and globalised collective cooperation are under intensifying existential threat—principally from the disruptive reformism of China and the Global South. But to what extent is this the case—are Chinese and Global South interests, and those within the Global South itself, really aligned in their visions of a new world order? The world, the “anthropocene”, is beset by multiple, simultaneous, mutually-reinforcing threats in an era of “polycrisis”, and this includes major power competition, most obviously between the US and China. But how and why does this contested world order influence China and the Global South? What are the implications for global sustainable development in the coming decades?

These questions are framed by the tenor of the times. For China, “the deficit in peace, development, security, and governance is growing. All of this is posing unprecedented challenges for human society. The world has once again reached a crossroads in history, and its future course will be decided by all the world’s peoples” (SCIO 2022). Central to this *zeitgeist* is the perception that developing countries of the “Global South” are, collectively, on the rise economically and politically, that their time has come to take centre stage and play a (some say “the”) leading role in re-inscribing the world order. Global opinion is deeply divided, influenced by an ever-more contested world system. This book

explains and assesses the politics of China's approach to global development, focusing on its relationship with the Global South. In doing so, the analysis excavates the nexus of domestic and the international factors and draws out the implications for China's role and impact in global development today. The investigation provides a platform by which to elevate non-Western perspectives and the voices of the East. It brings forward Chinese academic and policy practitioner perspectives from the Chinese and English language literature and from extensive author interviews, discussions and consultations in China and internationally over a number of years.

A sense of "profound change" in the global system is shared by China's political leadership and scholars. China's Social Science Academicians such as Guo Yanjun (2022) and Zhang Yuyan (2023) highlight the "epochal" change underway. They point to three dynamic forces of modernisation: the global expansion of capitalism resulting in the exercise of power to sustain profits; the collective rise of "a vast number of developing countries with the gradual progression of economic globalisation" the world economy's centre of gravity accelerating its shift from the West to the East, disrupting the one-way flow of capital and profit to developed capitalist countries that has "resulted in revolutionary change regarding the balance of international power. It has also become increasingly difficult for the previous international political and economic order to sustain itself; and traditional production methods and lifestyle modes are facing substantial change from clean, green energy and industrial processes and from the new digital and other emerging technologies" (Guo 2022).

Amidst these currents of change and a sanctions-charged major power contest, China is re-balancing towards the Global South, politically, and in a "surge" in exports (Goldman 2024), in direct investment and as S&P Global analysis noted in August 2025 in Chinese firms heading to the Global South in an 'Age of Tariffs', in development and sustainability assistance, and in increased security cooperation. In China's worldview, the Global South "stands out with a strong momentum. Standing at a new historical starting point, the Global South should be more open and more inclusive and join hands together to take the lead in building a community with a shared future for mankind" (China Daily 2024).

There is evident significance for China as a member, economic catalyst and leading advocate in the Global South. This is especially so in its major power relationship with the United States. The victory of Donald Trump in the November 2024 US presidential election renewed the

unpredictability of the first Trump Administration's approach to US-China relations. This has been most obvious in trade. During the 2024 campaign, Trump claimed that, if elected, he would impose an additional across-the-board 10% import tax, and 60–100% tax increase on imports from China, a threat followed through once in Office, but subject to transactional negotiations in Geneva in May 2025, and in South Korea in late October following face-to-face talks between Presidents Trump and Xi. Once in Office, the Trump Administration followed announced 'universal' tariff increases and on imports from China under the 1962 Trade Expansion Act, 1974 Trade Act and the 1977 International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA). Peterson Institute for International Economics (PIIE) analysis has shown that average tariffs reached 127.2% by May 2025, covering 100% of all goods, before falling back to an average of 47.5% by early November 2025, a 26.8% rise under the Trump 2.0 Administration. In response, China's tariffs on all US imported goods hit 147.6% in mid-April 2025, before reducing to 31.9% in November 2025 following the October negotiations.

Given this turbulent global context, China's diplomatic relationship with the Global South is, in part, about helping to construct a global identity, image and status as a responsible major power, one drawn from and embedded in the shared experiences and interests of the Global South countries. This is more than mere political rhetoric, just another strand in advancing "the China story". The focus of China's trade and investment attention and its political-diplomatic effort are directed across all the regions of the "South". This is in order to diversify its foreign relations away from the United States (US) and Western developed economies and promote the Global South as a rising collective entity in its own right and, relatedly, form a strong counterpoint to the US (GoC 2021; Zhang 2023; Xinbo 2023; Minghao 2023; Shixue 2024).

Yet, this book also argues that this is far from a straightforward case of warm sentiments of shared history and solidarity of the marginalised. The Global South is a deepening attraction for China, but one that is problematic for the Beijing leadership for two reasons. Firstly, in the complexity and ambiguity of the term and the reality. Secondly, in placing China "between a rock and a hard place". China is caught between the inescapable challenges as the world's second-largest economy to align with the institutions, processes and interest in sustaining stability and orderliness central to the Global North, and the imperatives to align

with, and be a leading voice in the Global South that derive from being the largest *developing* world economy.

The reality is that there is no easy, universally accepted concept and collective reality for “the” Global South. It is used, increasingly, as a convenient shorthand that masks multitudinous diversity and difference. It is a complex discursive and political amalgam of competing national imperatives and interests with which China seeks alignment. In recognising this complexity, diversity and amalgam character of concept and practice, there is a degree of Chinese scholarly common ground with some Western perspectives on the Global South (Zhou 2024; Yang 2024; Zhao 2023) as the lowest common denominator, with some Western perspectives (Este 2023b).

There is extensive debate over the very idea of the “Global South” in the Western academy. Western arguments range from the view that it is so heterogeneous as to be “pernicious” (Beattie 2023) and that it should be “retired” (Patrick and Huggins 2023), to those who have long argued that the idea represents the insidious impact of capitalism and underdevelopment but has evolved to prioritise power politics (Dados and Connell 2012).

Chinese perspectives largely subscribe to the “win-win” characterisation of China-Global South relations, i.e. that China is “a typical member” of “the Global South” and are “natural allies” (Zhao 2023); in other words, relations are an extension of China’s own development experience as Global South countries are very different from the traditional “Global North” countries (Tang 2024).

A discussion convened in September 2023 by the Chinese newspaper *Wenhuibao*, immediately following the late August 2023 Johannesburg XV BRICS Summit, brought together three Chinese scholars in discussion about the Global South: Xu Xiujun, Zhao Minghao and Niu Haibin.¹ This discussion helps introduce Chinese scholar views of the “Global South”, considered in closer detail later in this chapter. Xu Xiujun argues that “The “Global South” countries are opposed to the

¹ Xu Xiujun, Senior Research Fellow, Deputy Director of Department of International Political Economy, Institute of World Economics and Politics (IWEP), Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and Deputy Secretary-general of China’s Society of Emerging Economies. Zhao Minghao is Senior Fellow at the Institute of International Studies, Fudan University; Member of China National Committee, Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP). Niu Haibin is Associate Research Fellow and Director of Institute for Foreign Policy Studies, Shanghai Institutes for International Studies.

“Global North”.... the “Global South” is not an international organization or political bloc, nor does it have a clear composition of members, but a loose group of developing countries with diverse values, cultural traditions and levels of development”. For Niu Haibin, “The rise of the concept of the “Global South” is a sign of the growing recognition that the distribution of developing countries is global and that their sustainable development agenda has become an important part of global politics, and that the countries of the South are emerging as a global force to express their concerns and act in the global governance system to achieve these demands”. Zhao Minghao develops these points quite cogently, explaining Global South commonality in the pursuit of critical development issues; modernisation problems; “a general vulnerability”; and promoting reform of global governance (Xu, Zhao and Niu 2023).

However, this perspective should be weighed against a degree of “Global South” ambivalence towards China as the second-largest world economy, whilst also “the world’s largest developing country”, technically able to access advocating for reform in organisations such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Moreover, Global South countries today are not simply passive recipients of China’s trade, investment, and enterprises, nor just convenient conduits to re-route Chinese goods into the United States, but also commercial competitors, ideational and ideological contestants with China. These are unsettled waters for the Chinese enterprises to navigate as they pilot their way through the Global South. Whilst China-Global South projects help define “natural” relations, in practice the relationship is very much one of continuity and change. China’s own position on the Global South is not settled, nor fully defined. In many ways, this is as it ought to be, a deliberative conceptual and policy-formulating process. Western critics argue that China’s argument that it is a legitimate member of the Global South is increasingly harder to sustain beyond the discourses of fraternity, solidarity and historical legacy. In other words, their argument is simple, that China is the world’s second-largest economy, with global responsibilities and national interests that, inescapably, align with those of the Global North and, most importantly, support and comply with the corpus of global governance principles, rules and practices. China, however, sees the Global South as offering the material resources it needs, reciprocal trade benefitting each partner, closer relations are a diplomatically strategic counterpoint to the US and ‘mature economies’ in their quest to co-opt China into the global system they have established. Yet there is frustration in China that the