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The Rise of the Global South and UN Reform: How Emerging Powers Reshape Multilateralism

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Abstract: The post-World War II international order confronts unprecedented challenges as emerging economies from the Global South gain economic and political influence, creating pressure for structural reforms within the United Nations system. This research examines how emerging powers reshape multilateralism through demands for institutional changes that better reflect contemporary power realities. Using a theoretical framework combining power transition theory with institutional adaptation models, the study analyzes the material foundations of the Global South's rise, investigates specific institutional demands regarding the Security Council, financial mechanisms, and agenda-setting processes, and identifies structural and internal barriers to reform. Case studies of the Paris Climate Agreement, BRICS expansion, and Security Council reform deadlock demonstrate differentiated reform prospects across governance domains. The research proposes a Global South Coordination Mechanism to enhance collective influence in the short term and a “weighted multilateralism” model for long-term institutional transformation. The findings reveal how emerging powers are creating a more pluralistic governance landscape through multiple pathways of contestation, adaptation, and innovation despite formidable constraints on comprehensive reform.

Keywords: Global South; United Nations Reform; Multilateralism; Institutional Adaptation

1. Introduction

The international order established after World War II has encountered unprecedented challenges in the 21st century. Global governance institutions, particularly the United Nations, face mounting pressure to adapt to shifting power dynamics as emerging economies from the Global South gain economic and political influence. This transformation challenges the post-1945 international architecture designed primarily by Western powers. The Global South—comprising nations from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East—has accumulated substantial economic resources, diplomatic influence, and institutional power, enabling these countries to assert demands for structural reforms within international organizations.

The legitimacy crisis of multilateral institutions stems from their failure to reflect contemporary global power distribution. The UN Security Council's permanent membership remains unchanged since 1945, while economic institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund continue to operate under voting systems that favor Western interests. This disparity between institutional representation and actual global power dynamics undermines the effectiveness and legitimacy of the multilateral system. Countries from the Global South view UN reform as essential for creating a more equitable global governance framework that addresses their interests and concerns.

This research examines how emerging powers from the Global South are reshaping multilateralism through their demands for UN reform. The study analyzes the material foundations of the Global South's rise, investigates specific institutional demands regarding the Security Council, financial mechanisms, and agenda-setting processes, and identifies structural and internal barriers to reform. Through case studies of successful and failed reform attempts, the paper evaluates various pathways for transforming global governance institutions to reflect contemporary power realities. The findings contribute to scholarly discussions on institutional change in international relations and provide practical insights for policymakers navigating the complex landscape of UN reform initiatives.

2. Literature Review

The scholarly discourse on the Global South's influence in international organizations encompasses a range of theoretical perspectives and empirical findings. Traditional International Relations theories provide divergent explanations for institutional change within the United Nations system. Realist scholars, such as Mearsheimer (2019), contend that international organizations largely mirror the interests of dominant powers, implying that substantive reform is improbable without fundamental shifts in the global power structure. This view underscores how geopolitical constraints and the reluctance of incumbent powers to cede privilege fundamentally limit the prospects of UN reform.

In contrast, liberal institutionalists offer a more optimistic outlook. Ikenberry (2018) argues that international institutions exhibit adaptive capacities, enabling the gradual integration of emerging powers through incremental adjustments in voting rights, representation, and procedures. This school emphasizes the role of institutional design in accommodating new actors without destabilizing existing frameworks. Keohane and Morse (2016), for instance, highlight cases where institutional adaptations have successfully incorporated new stakeholders while maintaining core governance functions.

Constructivist scholarship illuminates the normative underpinnings of Global South engagement in multilateral arenas. Acharya (2017) introduces the concept of "norm localization," whereby emerging powers selectively adopt, reinterpret, and challenge international norms to advance their interests. This perspective reveals how the reform agendas of Global South nations are driven not only by material interests but also by distinct normative commitments to sovereignty, development, and equity. Towns and Rumelili (2017) further demonstrate how status-seeking behavior influences institutional strategies, as rising powers demand recognition commensurate with their growing capabilities.

Critical theories provide more radical interpretations of institutional change. Drawing on neo-Gramscian analysis, Cox (2012) frames international organizations as arenas of hegemonic contestation, where dominant powers establish structures that perpetuate their advantage. From this viewpoint, meaningful reform necessitates a profound challenge to the ideological foundations of global governance. Postcolonial scholars, such as Chowdhry and Nair (2014), extend this critique by highlighting how contemporary institutions reproduce historical patterns of exclusion rooted in colonial legacies.

Empirical studies have documented specific reform efforts and their outcomes. Gaskarth (2015), for example, examines proposals for Security Council reform, identifying both procedural and substantive barriers that have stalled progress despite prolonged debate. Vestergaard and Wade (2015) analyze voice reform in the Bretton Woods institutions, showing that marginal adjustments in voting shares have done little to alter decision-making dynamics.

A growing body of research further examines the structural inequities perpetuated by current UN architectures. Petrone (2021) and Freddy and Thomas (2023) argue that the Security Council's permanent membership and veto power marginalize developing countries, spurring demands for more representative structures. Studies on BRICS (Duggan et al., 2021) illustrate how emerging economies collectively advocate for reforms to amplify the Global South's voice. Regional perspectives, particularly from Africa (Alene et al., 2023), emphasize the need to address historical underrepresentation. Lees (2023) adds that the endurance of the G77 rests on a shared South–South ideology, which not only shapes voting behavior in the UN General Assembly but also challenges the dominance of the liberal international order.

Despite these contributions, significant gaps remain in understanding the internal dynamics of Global South coalition-building. While considerable attention has been paid to major emerging powers such as China, India, and Brazil, fewer studies investigate how diverse Global Southern constituencies coordinate their reform demands across issue areas. This research seeks to address this gap by examining the interplay between material foundations, institutional demands, and reform outcomes, with particular emphasis on the coordination mechanisms within the Global South and the conditions that shape the success or failure of reform initiatives.

3. Theoretical Framework: Power Transition and Institutional Adaptation

The theoretical foundation for analyzing the Global South's impact on UN reform combines power transition theory with institutional adaptation models. Traditional power transition theory, as articulated by Organski and Kugler (1980), posits that international system stability depends on the satisfaction level of rising powers with the existing order. This framework predicts conflict when dissatisfied rising powers challenge dominant states for system leadership. However, this classical formulation inadequately captures contemporary dynamics where multiple emerging powers simultaneously seek institutional accommodation rather than system overthrow.

An adapted power transition framework better explains current Global South activism within multilateral institutions. Contrary to hegemonic stability theory's prediction that international cooperation deteriorates as hegemonic power declines, emerging powers demonstrate strong commitment to preserving multilateral frameworks while reforming their operational mechanisms. This modified understanding recognizes that contemporary power transitions occur within established institutional environments that constrain and channel rising power behavior. The Global South seeks not to dismantle multilateralism but to reconstitute it on more equitable terms.

The concept of "contested multilateralism" developed by Morse and Keohane (2014) provides analytical leverage for understanding institutional adaptation processes. This framework identifies how dissatisfied states employ strategies of competitive regime creation, regime shifting, and strategic inconsistency to influence existing institutions. When established powers resist reform, Global South countries strategically create or strengthen alternative forums like the BRICS, G20, and regional organizations. These alternative platforms generate competitive pressure on traditional institutions to accommodate emerging power interests or risk irrelevance.

Institutional adaptation theory complements this power transition perspective by specifying mechanisms through which established organizations respond to changing power distributions. Jupille, Mattli, and Snidal (2013) identify four adaptation strategies: institutional maintenance (preserving existing arrangements), institutional layering (adding new elements without dismantling old ones), institutional displacement (replacing existing arrangements), and institutional conversion (repurposing existing structures for new objectives). The interplay between Global South pressure tactics and institutional response strategies determines reform outcomes across different issue areas.

This theoretical framework transcends the false dichotomy between institutional stability and revolutionary change. It recognizes that meaningful reform can occur through complex processes of contestation, negotiation, and incremental adaptation. By combining power transition insights with institutional adaptation models, this research develops a nuanced understanding of how emerging powers reshape multilateralism without necessarily triggering system collapse or violent conflict. This perspective reveals the conditional nature of institutional change, identifying factors that facilitate or impede reform across different UN functions and structures.

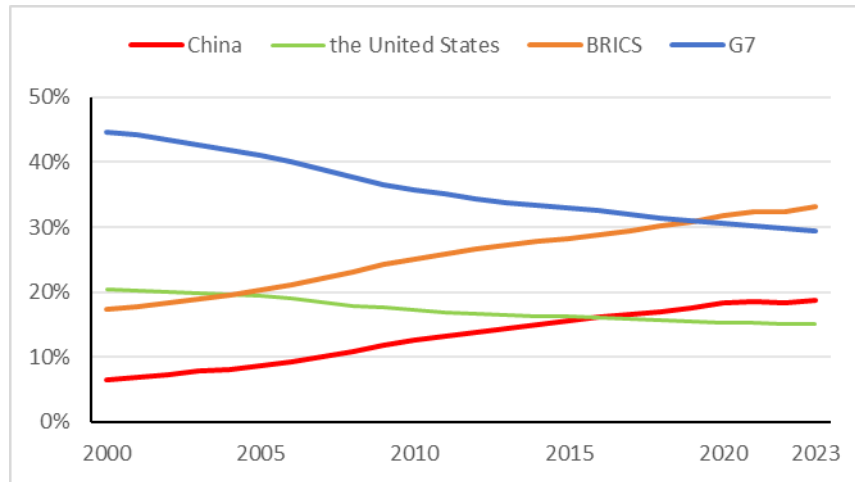
4. The Rise of the Global South: From Capital Accumulation to Demands for UN Reform

4.1 Material Foundations: Economic and Political Capital

The Global South's growing influence in international institutions rests on substantial material foundations. Economic power provides the essential basis for these countries' enhanced international standing. According to IMF World Economic Outlook data (2023), the share of global GDP (measured in purchasing power parity) controlled by emerging economies has increased dramatically over the past two decades. As Figure 1 illustrates, the economic output shares of BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) and the G7 exhibit a striking inverse trend: from 2000 to 2023, BRICS'

share of global GDP rose from less than 20% to 33.15%, while the G7's share declined from 44.66% to 29.48%, with the collective emerging economies surpassing the G7 for the first time in 2020.

Figure 1: Share of Global GDP (PPP) by Country Groups, 2000-2023



In this process, the contrast between China and the United States is particularly pivotal. As the leading representative of the Global South's rise, China's GDP share surged from 6.55% in 2000 to 18.75% in 2023, while the U.S. share fell from 21.9% to 15.05% over the same period. The intersection point of the two curves in 2016 marks a historic shift in the economic balance between China and the United States.

This economic transformation extends beyond the BRICS to include regional powers and middle-income countries across the Global South. Trade patterns reveal the increasing economic interdependence among emerging economies. According to UNCTAD (2025), South-South economic integration already accounts for about a third of global trade, and "the potential of South-South economic integration offers opportunities for many developing countries". As Table 1 demonstrates, developing economies' share of global merchandise exports increased steadily from 29.5% in 2000 to 44.3% in 2023, while developed nations' share declined from 70.5% to 55.7%. This shift reflects the Global South's industrial advancement and growing competitiveness, narrowing developed economies' traditional trade dominance.

Table 1: Share of Global Merchandise Exports by Development Status, 2000-2023

Year	Developed Economies	Developing Economies
2000	70.5%	29.5%
2005	66.1%	33.9%
2010	60.3%	39.7%
2015	57.8%	42.2%
2020	56.9%	43.1%
2023	55.7%	44.3%

Source: UNCTADstat Data centre

Financial resources constitute another critical dimension of the Global South's material power. Foreign exchange reserves held by emerging economies have grown substantially, providing these countries with economic stability and international influence. China holds the world's largest foreign exchange reserves at approximately \$3.2 trillion as of December 2023, with other major Global South economies also maintaining significant reserves. The establishment of new financial institutions, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) with its capital base of \$100 billion and the New Development Bank with initial authorized capital of \$100 billion, demonstrates the Global South's capacity to create alternative financing mechanisms.

The current global governance system exhibits a significant mismatch between economic structures and institutional voice, as clearly demonstrated in Table 2. The data reveals that while BRICS countries collectively account for 34.16% of global GDP (measured in purchasing power parity), exceeding the G7's 28.65% share, their representation remains disproportionately low in key institutions. Most strikingly, China contributes 19.29% of global economic output yet holds merely 6.08% of IMF voting rights, compared to the United States' 16.49% voting share despite its smaller 14.84% GDP contribution. Furthermore, when it comes to IBRD Voting Rights, China holds only 5.86%, significantly lower than the United States' 15.83%, despite its larger economic contribution. These structural disparities highlight the urgent need for governance reforms to better align institutional influence with contemporary economic realities.

Table 2: Comparison of Voting Power in International Financial Institutions, 2025

Country/Group	Share of Global GDP(PPP)	IMF Voting Rights	IBRD Voting Rights	G20 Membership	UNSC Permanent Seat
United States	14.84%	16.49%	15.83%	Yes	Yes
China	19.29%	6.08%	5.86%	Yes	Yes
India	8.49%	2.63%	3.01%	Yes	No
Brazil	2.39%	2.22%	1.90%	Yes	No
Russia	3.49%	2.59%	2.80%	Yes	Yes
South Africa	0.50%	0.63%	0.76%	Yes	No
G7 countries	28.65%	41.24%	39.7%	All members	3 members
BRICS(original)	34.16%	14.15%	14.33%	All members	2 members
BRICS(expanded)	37.97%	16.32%	19.06%	6 members	2 members

Sources: IMF Quotas and Voting Shares, World Bank Voting Powers, IMF World Economic Outlook

Database, 2025 *Values of Share of Global GDP(PPP) are projections from IMF's model

Military capabilities complement economic resources in bolstering the Global South's international position. Defense expenditures among emerging powers have increased significantly, with China's military expenditure reaching \$309 billion (denominated in constant 2023 US dollars) in 2023 according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI, 2023), making it the second-

largest military spender globally. India's military expenditure stands at \$83.3 billion, while Brazil spends \$21.2 billion annually on defense. Beyond financial metrics, several Global South countries maintain sizeable military personnel and possess advanced weapons systems, including nuclear capabilities in the cases of India, Pakistan, and North Korea.

Demographic advantages further strengthen the Global South's position. According to UN Population Division data (2023), the combined population of Global South countries exceeds 6.7 billion people, representing approximately 84% of the world's population. This demographic weight translates into political influence through voting blocs in international forums. In the UN General Assembly, the G77 plus China coalition includes 135 member states, constituting more than two-thirds of the UN membership. This voting power enables the Global South to influence normative developments and agenda-setting in areas like sustainable development, climate change, and global health governance. Within this framework, the expanded BRICS bloc now has 3.66 billion people, serving as a core platform for the Global South. Notably, India has surpassed China as world most populous nation with 1.44 billion people—a demographic shift that significantly enhances emerging economies' bargaining power in international weight redistribution.

These material foundations—economic growth, trade expansion, financial resources, military capabilities, and demographic advantages—provide the basis for the Global South's enhanced role in global governance. The growing disparity between these countries' material capabilities and their formal representation in international institutions drives demands for comprehensive UN reform.

4.2 Institutional Demands

4.2.1 Security Council Reform

Security Council reform represents the most visible and contentious aspect of the Global South's institutional demands. The current structure, with five permanent members holding veto power (P5: United States, Russia, China, United Kingdom, and France), reflects the power distribution of 1945 rather than contemporary realities. The Global South's reform agenda focuses on three dimensions: expanding permanent membership, limiting veto power, and enhancing working methods.

The G4 countries (Brazil, India, Germany, and Japan) propose a Security Council reform plan to add six new permanent seats, including themselves and two African nations, explicitly excluding veto power for new members. This plan aims to enhance geographical representation while recognizing these states' contributions to global governance. The African Union, however, insists on a distinct demand for two new permanent seats with full veto power reserved for Africa, alongside additional non-permanent seats. The Uniting for Consensus group, led by countries like Italy, Pakistan, and Argentina, opposes new permanent seats but supports expanding non-permanent membership with longer-term renewable positions.

Veto reform constitutes a second critical demand. The Global South views the veto as an anachronistic privilege that undermines the Council's effectiveness and legitimacy. Between 2010 and

2023, Russia and the United States collectively cast 32 vetoes, frequently paralyzing the Council on critical issues like Syria, Ukraine, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Reform proposals include restricting veto use in cases of mass atrocities, requiring multiple vetoes to block resolutions, implementing mandatory explanations for veto use, and establishing override mechanisms through the General Assembly.

Working methods reform represents a third dimension of Security Council demands. The Global South advocates for greater transparency in decision-making, expanded consultation with troop-contributing countries, and increased involvement of affected states in Council deliberations. These procedural changes would enhance the Council's inclusivity and accountability without requiring Charter amendments, making them potentially more achievable in the short term.

4.2.2 Financial Mechanisms

The Global South's institutional demands extend to financial governance mechanisms within the UN system. The two Bretton Woods institutions—the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank—maintain governance structures that disproportionately favor Western countries despite significant changes in the global economic landscape. The United States holds effective veto power in both institutions with voting shares of 16.5% in the IMF and 15.8% in the World Bank, while European countries maintain disproportionate influence in leadership selection.

Quota reform constitutes a primary demand regarding the IMF. Despite modest adjustments in 2010 that increased emerging markets' voting power by approximately 6%, substantial discrepancies persist between economic weight and institutional representation. China holds 6.08% of IMF voting rights despite constituting 18.7% of global GDP (PPP), while the combined BRICS nations control only 14.7% of voting rights. The Global South advocates for accelerated quota reviews that would align voting rights more closely with economic realities.

Leadership selection represents another focal point for reform demands. The informal arrangement whereby the IMF Managing Director comes from Europe and the World Bank President from the United States contradicts merit-based selection principles. The Global South advocates for transparent, competitive selection processes open to qualified candidates from all member countries. The election of Brazil's Roberto Azevêdo as WTO Director-General in 2013 demonstrated the potential for emerging economy leaders to head major international organizations when merit-based processes are implemented.

Development financing frameworks constitute a third area of reform demands. The Global South criticizes the conditionality requirements attached to IMF and World Bank financing, arguing that these impose inappropriate policy models and undermine national sovereignty. These countries advocate for financing instruments that provide greater policy flexibility, longer repayment periods, and reduced interest rates for development projects. The establishment of alternative financing mechanisms—including the AIIB, New Development Bank, and Contingent Reserve Arrangement—represents a practical response to perceived deficiencies in existing financial institutions.

4.2.3 Agenda-Setting

Control over the global agenda represents a crucial dimension of institutional power. The Global South has increasingly challenged Western dominance in defining international priorities and normative frameworks across multiple issue areas. This contestation manifests in demands for more inclusive agenda-setting processes within the UN system.

Climate governance illustrates this dynamic. The Global South has successfully shifted the climate agenda from an exclusive focus on emissions reductions toward a more comprehensive approach incorporating climate justice, historical responsibility, and differentiated obligations. The principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities” enshrined in UN climate agreements reflects the Global South’s normative influence. These countries have established loss and damage compensation as a legitimate component of climate action, culminating in the establishment of a dedicated fund at COP27 in 2022.

Global health governance provides another example of agenda transformation. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed significant disparities in vaccine access, with high-income countries securing the majority of vaccine supplies through advance purchase agreements. The Global South, led by India and South Africa, proposed a TRIPS waiver for COVID-19 vaccines and treatments at the WTO. While the final agreement was narrower than initially proposed, this initiative highlighted the Global South’s capacity to place equity concerns at the center of global health discussions.

Digital governance represents an emerging frontier for agenda contestation. Western approaches emphasize market-based solutions, minimal regulation, and free data flows. The Global South has introduced alternative perspectives emphasizing digital sovereignty, equitable access, and data localization. These competing visions clash in forums like the International Telecommunication Union, Internet Governance Forum, and UN Open-Ended Working Group on information security. The Global South’s involvement has expanded the digital governance agenda to include development considerations, bridging digital divides, and addressing algorithmic biases.

The Global South’s institutional demands reflect a comprehensive vision for multilateral reform. These countries seek not merely greater representation but fundamental transformations in how international decisions are made, resources are allocated, and priorities are established. The next section examines the structural and internal barriers that complicate this reform agenda.

5. Contested Reform: Structural and Internal Barriers

5.1 Structural Barriers

5.1.1 Great Power Veto

The veto power enjoyed by permanent Security Council members constitutes the most formidable structural barrier to UN reform. Article 108 of the UN Charter specifies that amendments require ratification by two-thirds of UN members, including all permanent Security Council members. This

provision creates a classic veto player dynamic wherein any permanent member can unilaterally block changes threatening its privileged position. The reform process thus requires unanimity among actors with divergent interests and significant status quo advantages.

P5 countries have adopted strategic positions that effectively preclude comprehensive reform. While publicly supporting “reasonable and necessary” reforms, these powers establish conditions that protect their privileges. France and the United Kingdom have expressed conditional support for Security Council expansion but oppose substantial constraints on veto powers. The United States acknowledges the need for “modest expansion” but insists that any new permanent members must “meet high standards of capability and commitment”. Russia emphasizes that reforms must preserve the Council’s “efficiency and operability” while expressing skepticism about veto limitations.

China presents a complex case as both a P5 member and self-identified Global South leader. Its official position supports “reasonable and necessary” reform with greater representation for developing countries. However, China has consistently opposed Japan’s permanent membership bid and expressed reservations about India’s candidacy, revealing tensions between rhetorical support for Global South representation and specific geopolitical calculations. This ambivalence illustrates how great power competition complicates reform prospects even when rising powers gain insider positions.

Historical reform attempts demonstrate the veto’s paralyzing effect. The 2004 High-Level Panel proposed two expansion models (Model A: 6 new permanent seats without veto; Model B: 8 semi-permanent seats), neither of which gained consensus despite formal UN debates. The 2005 World Summit produced only a vague pledge for “early reform” without concrete steps. The Intergovernmental Negotiations on Security Council Reform established in 2009 have conducted extensive deliberations without producing actionable outcomes. This persistent stalemate reflects not procedural complications but fundamental structural constraints embedded in the Charter’s amendment provisions.

5.1.2 Western-Dominated Institutional Inertia

Beyond formal veto powers, institutional inertia represents a second structural barrier to reform. The bureaucratic apparatus of international organizations develops standardized procedures, organizational cultures, and career incentives that favor continuity over change. This institutional inertia manifests through multiple mechanisms that collectively resist transformative reforms.

Staff composition illustrates this dynamic. Despite formal geographical distribution requirements, Western nationals occupy disproportionate positions in senior UN leadership. A 2023 analysis of Under-Secretary-General positions reveals that Western European and Others Group (WEOG) nationals held 41% of these positions despite representing only 15% of UN member states. This overrepresentation extends to middle management positions throughout specialized agencies. Professional socialization within these institutions often emphasizes Western educational credentials and work experiences, creating implicit barriers for Global South perspectives.

Procedural complexity constitutes another dimension of institutional inertia. Reform initiatives must navigate labyrinthine bureaucratic processes with numerous consultation requirements, sequential

approval stages, and opaque decision rules. These procedures create multiple veto points where reform initiatives can be delayed, diluted, or defeated. The complexity of UN reform processes contrasts sharply with the streamlined decision-making in newer institutions like the AIIB, where simpler governance structures facilitate rapid adaptation to changing circumstances.

Funding dependencies reinforce institutional resistance to change. The UN's regular budget relies heavily on assessed contributions from wealthy member states, with the United States providing 22% of the core budget. Specialized agencies and programs depend even more substantially on voluntary contributions from Western donors, creating implicit influence channels that extend beyond formal governance structures. The threat of funding reductions provides Western powers with leverage to constrain reform initiatives that might reduce their institutional influence.

Knowledge production represents a subtler but equally significant barrier. The conceptual frameworks, analytical tools, and performance metrics used within international organizations often reflect Western intellectual traditions and policy preferences. This epistemic infrastructure shapes how problems are defined, solutions are evaluated, and success is measured. The Global South has challenged these knowledge frameworks through initiatives like the South Centre think tank and the UN University Institute for Natural Resources in Africa, but transforming deeply embedded analytical paradigms requires sustained intellectual investment.

5.2 Internal Divisions Within the Global South

While structural barriers impose external constraints on reform prospects, internal divisions within the Global South create additional complications. These countries share broad commitments to more equitable international arrangements but diverge on specific reform priorities, strategies, and leadership questions. These internal fragmentations undermine the Global South's collective bargaining power in reform negotiations.

Regional rivalries constitute a primary source of division. The Security Council permanent membership debate illustrates this dynamic. Brazil's candidacy faces resistance from Argentina and Mexico within Latin America, while India's bid encounters opposition from Pakistan in South Asia. Within Africa, Nigeria, South Africa, and Egypt each present compelling cases for permanent representation, creating intra-African competition for limited seats. These rivalries enable status quo powers to employ classic divide-and-rule strategies, playing aspiring powers against their regional competitors.

Economic differentiation represents a second fragmenting factor. The Global South encompasses diverse economic profiles ranging from China's industrial powerhouse to least-developed countries in sub-Saharan Africa and small island developing states. This heterogeneity generates divergent policy preferences across issue areas. Middle-income countries prioritize access to technology, market integration, and investment opportunities, while lower-income nations emphasize concessional financing, debt relief, and development assistance. These diverse economic interests complicate unified positions on financial governance reforms.

Political system differences create additional complications. The Global South includes democracies like India, Brazil, and South Africa alongside authoritarian systems like China, Saudi Arabia, and Vietnam. These governance differences affect positions on human rights mechanisms, intervention standards, and transparency requirements within international organizations. Democratic Global South countries may support reforms enhancing accountability and civil society participation, while authoritarian members prefer preserving sovereignty shields against external oversight. These divergent preferences regarding democracy promotion and human rights protection impede coordinated reform advocacy.

North-South cooperation incentives further fragment Global South solidarity. Western powers offer selective benefits to individual Global South countries through preferential trade arrangements, security partnerships, and bilateral assistance. These bilateral inducements create opportunity costs for confrontational multilateral strategies, particularly for smaller states with limited diplomatic resources. The G7's Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment and China's Belt and Road Initiative represent competing patron-client frameworks that potentially undermine autonomous Global South coalition-building.

These structural barriers and internal divisions help explain why reform progress has remained limited despite decades of advocacy and changing global power realities. The following section examines specific cases that illuminate both the possibilities and limitations of Global South influence in reforming multilateral institutions.

6. Case Studies

6.1 Success Case I: The Paris Climate Agreement

The 2015 Paris Climate Agreement represents a successful case of Global South influence reshaping multilateral governance. This agreement marked a significant departure from previous climate frameworks by incorporating core Global South priorities: common but differentiated responsibilities, financial support mechanisms, and technology transfer provisions. The negotiation process and outcome demonstrate how emerging powers can effectively influence institutional design when certain facilitating conditions exist.

The Global South exerted influence through coordinated negotiating blocs during preparatory meetings and the final conference. The Like-Minded Developing Countries group (including China, India, and Saudi Arabia) emphasized historical responsibility and insisted on differentiated obligations. The Alliance of Small Island States highlighted vulnerability concerns and pushed for ambitious temperature targets. The Africa Group advocated for adaptation support and loss and damage provisions. Brazil led technical discussions on carbon market mechanisms. These overlapping coalitions covered different dimensions of climate governance, enabling comprehensive Global South impact on the final agreement.

China and India played pivotal roles as bridges between developed and developing country positions. Both countries made significant voluntary commitments—China pledged to peak emissions around 2030, while India established ambitious renewable energy targets—that facilitated broader agreement by demonstrating major emerging economy engagement. These voluntary commitments represented a strategic concession that protected developing country differentiation while enabling a universal agreement. This balanced approach reconciled traditional developing country positions with the need for comprehensive emissions reduction commitments.

The agreement's institutional architecture reflects Global South influence. The bottom-up approach based on Nationally Determined Contributions replaced top-down emissions targets, addressing sovereignty concerns while enabling universal participation. The enhanced transparency framework includes flexibility provisions for developing countries with capacity constraints. The agreement established a collective finance goal of at least \$100 billion annually for developing countries, with periodic reassessment of this figure. These design features demonstrate how Global South perspectives shaped core institutional elements rather than merely securing marginal concessions.

Several facilitating factors contributed to this successful reform case. First, issue characteristics favored inclusive solutions—climate change requires universal participation for effective response, creating incentives for accommodating diverse perspectives. Second, French conference leadership prioritized procedural legitimacy through transparent working methods and inclusive consultations. Third, civil society mobilization across both Global North and South created political pressure for ambitious outcomes that incorporated justice dimensions. Fourth, scientific consensus provided a shared epistemic foundation for negotiations despite divergent political positions.

The Paris Agreement demonstrates how emerging powers can effectively reshape multilateral arrangements when working through coordinated coalitions, offering constructive proposals that bridge North-South divides, and negotiating within conducive institutional contexts. This case suggests that meaningful reform remains possible despite structural constraints when strategic approach and facilitating conditions align.

6.2 Success Case II: BRICS

The BRICS grouping—initially comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, with expansion in 2024 to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates—represents another successful case of Global South institutional innovation. While operating outside formal multilateral structures, BRICS has established new financial mechanisms, coordination platforms, and normative frameworks that influence mainstream institutions. This case illustrates how parallel institution-building can complement reform advocacy within existing frameworks.

The New Development Bank (NDB) established in 2015 represents BRICS' most significant institutional innovation. With an initial authorized capital of \$100 billion and equal voting rights among founding members, the NDB embodies alternative governance principles distinct from Bretton Woods institutions. The bank implements streamlined approval procedures, emphasizes borrower ownership of

projects, and prioritizes sustainable infrastructure investments. By the end of the first quarter of 2023, the New Development Bank has approved a total of 98 projects for its member countries, with an overall investment of approximately \$33.2 billion, demonstrating operational viability and developmental impact.

The Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA) complements the NDB by providing a \$100 billion currency swap mechanism to address short-term balance of payments pressures. This facility represents a regional alternative to IMF lending that provides faster access with fewer policy conditions. While not yet activated for emergency lending, the CRA's existence enhances member countries' economic resilience and bargaining leverage in negotiations with traditional financial institutions. The arrangement demonstrates emerging powers' capacity to create parallel financial safety nets that reduce dependence on Western-dominated institutions.

BRICS has established multiple coordination mechanisms beyond financial institutions. Annual summits bring together heads of state and government to align positions on global governance issues. Ministerial meetings across sectors including finance, health, education, and science promote policy coordination and knowledge sharing. Research networks link academic institutions across member countries, developing shared analytical frameworks and policy recommendations. These multi-level coordination mechanisms facilitate unified positions in international forums while building technical capacity for autonomous policy development.

The 2024 expansion significantly enhanced BRICS' global representation and resource base. The addition of major oil producers (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Iran) and populous African nations (Egypt, Ethiopia) across two continents broadened the coalition's geographical scope and sectoral diversity. This expansion strengthened BRICS' credibility as a representative Global South platform rather than a narrow great power club. Combined, the expanded BRICS represents approximately 45% of global population and 38% of global GDP (PPP), constituting a meaningful counterweight to G7 influence.

Several factors contributed to BRICS' institutional success. First, shared dissatisfaction with existing governance arrangements created strong incentives for cooperation despite bilateral tensions among members. Second, complementary economic profiles—resource exporters, manufacturing hubs, and service economies—generated mutual benefits from economic coordination. Third, pragmatic focus on concrete initiatives rather than ideological declarations enabled practical cooperation despite political system differences. Fourth, China's economic resources and diplomatic support provided material foundations for institutional development.

The BRICS case demonstrates how parallel institution-building can complement reform advocacy by establishing working alternatives to existing arrangements. These institutions embody different governance principles, demonstrate their operational viability, and create competitive pressure for established institutions to accommodate emerging power preferences or risk diminishing relevance. This approach exemplifies contested multilateralism in practice, using institutional innovation to enhance bargaining leverage within existing frameworks.

6.3 Failure Case: Deadlock in Security Council Reform

In contrast to the Paris Agreement and BRICS cases, Security Council reform represents a persistent failure despite decades of Global South advocacy. The Council's composition remains unchanged since 1965 (when non-permanent membership expanded from six to ten seats), despite dramatic transformations in global power distribution and repeated reform initiatives. This case illustrates how structural barriers and internal divisions can prevent meaningful institutional change even with substantial support from the Global South.

Reform discussions have proceeded through multiple institutional channels without producing concrete outcomes. The Open-Ended Working Group on Security Council Reform (1993-2009) conducted extensive deliberations that identified reform objectives without generating consensus on specific measures. The World Summit (2005) produced general commitments to Council reform but failed to adopt specific proposals despite intensive preparations. The Intergovernmental Negotiations process established in 2009 has conducted annual deliberations for over a decade without transitioning to text-based negotiations. This procedural history demonstrates how institutional processes can create an illusion of progress while effectively maintaining the status quo.

Multiple reform proposals have emerged from Global South countries without securing sufficient consensus. The G4 proposal advocates adding six permanent seats (for themselves plus two African nations) and four non-permanent seats. The Uniting for Consensus group proposes adding ten non-permanent seats with the possibility of re-election, expanding the Council to 25 members without new permanent positions. The African Union demands two permanent seats with veto rights and five additional non-permanent seats for African countries. These competing proposals reveal significant divisions regarding the fundamental structure of a reformed Council.

Veto reform has encountered similarly insurmountable obstacles. The S5 (Small Five) initiative proposed procedural modifications to limit veto use in cases of genocide and crimes against humanity, but withdrew their draft resolution in 2012 facing opposition from permanent members. The ACT (Accountability, Coherence, and Transparency) group developed a Code of Conduct regarding mass atrocity situations that, as of 2023, has garnered 123 signatory states while remaining devoid of enforcement mechanisms. In August 2015, France, with the support of Mexico, proposed voluntary veto restraint in mass atrocity situations, an initiative supported by 105 member states but rejected by other permanent members. These initiatives demonstrate the difficulty of modifying even the procedural aspects of veto power.

Several factors explain this persistent reform failure. First, Charter amendment requirements create insurmountable veto points, as any permanent member can unilaterally block changes threatening its privileged position. Second, regional competitions for limited seats undermine the Global South's collective bargaining power—African, Latin American, and Asian countries advance competing candidates for potential permanent positions. Third, fundamental disagreements exist regarding reform parameters, including Council size, categories of membership, and veto distribution. Fourth, attention

cycles and competing priorities have prevented sustained high-level political engagement necessary for overcoming institutional inertia.

The Security Council case demonstrates how structural barriers can prevent institutional reform despite widespread recognition of legitimacy deficits. This failure case suggests that meaningful reform of core governance structures may require more fundamental power shifts or external shocks that alter the strategic calculations of veto players. The contrast with the Paris Agreement and BRICS cases highlights how reform prospects vary significantly across different institutional contexts and issue areas.

7. Reform Pathways and Recommendations

7.1 Short-Term Strategy: Establishing a Global South Coordination Mechanism

The analysis of successful and failed reform initiatives indicates that enhanced coordination among Global South countries represents a critical prerequisite for effective institutional change. A dedicated Global South Coordination Mechanism (GSCM) would strengthen these countries' collective influence while addressing internal divisions that currently undermine reform advocacy. This mechanism would facilitate position alignment, develop technical capacity, and maintain political momentum across different reform domains.

The proposition for a GSCM is not conceived in an intellectual vacuum but is a direct response to persistent and widespread calls within academic and policy circles for more cohesive Global South action. Scholars of international relations (Acharya, 2016; Stuenkel, 2020; Men, H., & Yu, Y., 2024) have long diagnosed the collective action problem inherent in South-South cooperation, pointing to the fragmentation and bureaucratic inertia of existing platforms like the G77 and the Non-Aligned Movement. Similarly, the demonstrated efficacy of ad-hoc, issue-specific coalitions—such as the BASIC group in climate change negotiations or the developing country G20 within WTO talks—provides a compelling empirical precedent. These cases underscore a clear academic and practical consensus: that targeted coordination can significantly enhance the bargaining power of Global South nations. The GSCM, therefore, seeks to institutionalize these insights by moving beyond generic calls for solidarity to a structured operational model.

The institutional design should balance inclusivity with operational effectiveness. A three-tier structure would ensure broad representation while enabling efficient decision-making: a plenary assembly including all self-identified Global South countries would establish general principles and priorities; a steering committee comprising 15-20 members elected on a rotating regional basis would develop specific reform proposals; and technical working groups organized around issue areas (security, finance, climate, health, digital governance) would provide specialized expertise for negotiations. This structure would ensure both democratic legitimacy and technical capacity.

Operational functions would include policy coordination, knowledge production, and coalition maintenance. The policy coordination function would involve developing common positions on specific reform proposals, coordinating negotiation strategies across multiple forums, and identifying strategic

entry points in ongoing institutional processes. The knowledge production function would establish research networks to develop evidence-based reform proposals, assess distributional implications of competing options, and formulate implementation pathways for adopted reforms. The coalition maintenance function would manage internal disagreements, develop equitable benefit-sharing arrangements, and maintain collective discipline during protracted negotiations.

Institutionalizing the concept of a “community of shared future for mankind” within this coordination mechanism would provide normative foundations for Global South cooperation beyond instrumental calculations. This concept emphasizes common interests in creating a just international order while respecting diversity in development pathways and governance models. By highlighting interconnected destinies across the Global South and North, this framework avoids antagonistic positioning while maintaining principled advocacy for structural reforms. The coordination mechanism would translate this broad vision into specific institutional proposals across different governance domains.

Implementation would proceed through a phased approach beginning with existing platforms. The initial phase would leverage the G77 plus China framework, BRICS outreach sessions, and South Centre analytical capacity to develop pilot coordination initiatives. The intermediate phase would formalize the three-tier governance structure and establish a permanent secretariat, potentially hosted by a rotating Global South country. The mature phase would develop dedicated financing mechanisms to ensure operational independence and sustained engagement across multiple reform processes. This graduated approach would build legitimacy through demonstrated utility while avoiding bureaucratic overextension.

Resource requirements would remain modest compared to potential benefits. Financial contributions scaled according to economic capacity would ensure broad ownership while providing adequate operational resources. Technical assistance from established powers and international organizations could support capacity development without compromising the mechanism’s autonomy. Civil society partnerships would expand analytical capabilities and strengthen connections with broader Global South constituencies. These diverse resource streams would ensure operational sustainability while maintaining independence from external influence.

The coordination mechanism addresses a fundamental collective action problem within the Global South. By reducing transaction costs of cooperation, managing internal disagreements, and enhancing bargaining leverage through unified positions, this mechanism would significantly increase the probability of meaningful institutional reforms. The successful precedent of climate negotiations demonstrates how coordinated Global South engagement can reshape multilateral frameworks when supported by appropriate institutional foundations. This short-term strategy represents a practical step toward more equitable global governance that leverages existing Global South capabilities while building capacity for more ambitious reforms.

7.2 Long-Term Vision: Promoting “Weighted Multilateralism”

Beyond immediate coordination improvements, comprehensive reform requires fundamental reconsideration of multilateral governance principles. The concept of “weighted multilateralism” offers a long-term vision for institutional transformation that balances democratic representation with effective decision-making. This approach, while novel in its systematic formulation, draws inspiration from existing governance models and theoretical debates that seek to reconcile the principle of sovereign equality with the practical realities of differentiated capabilities and contributions. This approach acknowledges legitimate interests in both equal sovereign representation and proportional influence based on capabilities and responsibilities.

The weighted multilateralism model would apply differentiated principles across governance functions. For normative development functions, sovereign equality would remain the guiding principle, with one-country-one-vote procedures ensuring inclusive participation in establishing global standards and principles. For operational implementation functions, weighted influence based on contributions and capabilities would enable efficient resource deployment while maintaining accountability to broad membership. This functional differentiation echoes practices in financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, where voting power is linked to economic quotas, acknowledging that operational efficiency often requires proportional burden-sharing. For compliance assessment functions, independent expert mechanisms would ensure objective evaluation based on agreed standards rather than political considerations. This functional differentiation would avoid the false choice between pure sovereign equality and rigid power hierarchies.

Decision rules would incorporate multiple weighting factors beyond traditional economic metrics. Population size would recognize democratic legitimacy considerations, acknowledging that institutions should ultimately serve people rather than abstract state entities. Vulnerability measures would give greater voice to countries most affected by specific challenges, particularly in areas like climate change where impacts are unevenly distributed. Contribution assessments would consider both financial resources and non-monetary inputs including technical expertise, peacekeeping personnel, and refugee hosting. The inclusion of such multidimensional metrics finds precedent in the allocation mechanisms of global funds like the Green Climate Fund, which considers vulnerability and need alongside donor contributions, and in the complex weighted voting systems of regional bodies like the European Union. This multidimensional weighting would produce different influence distributions across issue areas, avoiding permanent hierarchies.

Implementation pathways would emphasize experimentation and demonstration effects. Regional organizations provide testing grounds for innovative governance arrangements that could later transfer to global institutions. The African Union’s combination of sovereign equality principles with regional economic community representation offers valuable lessons for balancing diverse representation principles. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations’ consensus-building mechanisms demonstrate how inclusive processes can accommodate power asymmetries while maintaining decision efficiency.

These regional experiments provide practical experience with alternative governance arrangements that could inform global reforms.

Institutional pluralism constitutes a critical component of weighted multilateralism. Rather than seeking a single “optimal” institutional design, this approach embraces diverse governance arrangements across issue areas and regions. Complementary institutions with different membership compositions, decision rules, and functional specializations would create a governance ecosystem with multiple entry points for emerging powers. This aligns with the observed reality of “regime complexity” and “contested multilateralism” in global governance, where a ecosystem of overlapping institutions has emerged, each with distinct memberships and rules, offering multiple pathways for influence and cooperation. This institutional diversity would enhance system adaptability while reducing risks of catastrophic governance failures through redundancy and alternative pathways.

The weighted multilateralism concept transcends traditional debates between defenders of the liberal international order and advocates of state-centric multipolarity. It acknowledges legitimate concerns about representation deficits in existing institutions while preserving core multilateral principles of rule-based cooperation and collective problem-solving. By offering a principled yet flexible framework for institutional adaptation, this approach could attract support from both established and emerging powers interested in stable but more equitable governance arrangements.

8. Conclusion

The Global South’s demands for UN reform reflect a fundamental legitimacy crisis in global governance. Material power shifts have created unsustainable disparities between institutional representation and actual capabilities, undermining both the effectiveness and perceived fairness of multilateral arrangements. This research has analyzed how emerging powers are reshaping multilateralism through reform advocacy, parallel institution-building, and normative contestation across multiple governance domains.

The material foundations of the Global South’s rise extend beyond economic growth to encompass financial resources, military capabilities, diplomatic networks, and demographic advantages. These multidimensional resources provide emerging powers with enhanced bargaining leverage in institutional negotiations while enabling the creation of alternative governance arrangements when established institutions prove resistant to change. The Global South’s institutional demands encompass both procedural reforms regarding representation and substantive changes in policy priorities across security, finance, development, and emerging issue areas.

Significant barriers complicate reform prospects despite the Global South’s enhanced capabilities. Structural constraints embedded in institutional design—particularly veto provisions and amendment procedures—create formidable obstacles to formal governance changes. Institutional inertia manifested through bureaucratic procedures, staff composition, funding dependencies, and knowledge production frameworks reinforces these formal constraints. Internal divisions within the Global South regarding

reform priorities, regional leadership, and diplomatic strategies further complicate coordinated reform advocacy.

The case studies reveal differentiated reform prospects across governance domains. The Paris Climate Agreement demonstrates how emerging powers can reshape institutional arrangements when working through coordinated coalitions with clear proposals that bridge North-South divides. The BRICS case illustrates how parallel institution-building can establish alternative governance models while creating competitive pressure for established institutions. The Security Council reform deadlock highlights how structural veto points can prevent formal governance changes despite widespread recognition of legitimacy deficits.

Reform pathways require both short-term coordination improvements and long-term conceptual innovation. A dedicated Global South Coordination Mechanism would enhance these countries' collective influence while managing internal differences that currently undermine reform effectiveness. The weighted multilateralism concept offers a longer-term vision for institutional transformation that balances democratic representation with efficient decision-making through functional differentiation and multidimensional influence metrics.

The analysis indicates that meaningful institutional change occurs through complex processes of contestation, adaptation, and innovation rather than discrete reform episodes. Emerging powers reshape multilateralism through multiple pathways including formal governance changes, procedural innovations, normative developments, parallel institution-building, and strategic inconsistency across forums. This multidimensional approach enables incremental progress despite formidable structural constraints on comprehensive reform.

The Global South's impact on UN reform ultimately reflects these countries' growing confidence and capability as governance stakeholders rather than mere rule-takers. By challenging representation deficits, contesting policy priorities, and developing institutional alternatives, emerging powers are creating a more pluralistic governance landscape that better reflects contemporary power realities. The resulting multilateral system may lack the coherence of hegemonic arrangements but offers greater resilience and legitimacy by accommodating diverse perspectives on global challenges. This evolving governance ecosystem represents neither liberal order maintenance nor radical system transformation but rather adaptive multilateralism suited to an increasingly multipolar world.

While this study highlights the significant role of the Global South in reshaping multilateralism, it also faces several limitations. First, the analysis focuses primarily on major emerging powers such as China, India, and Brazil, which may underrepresent the perspectives of smaller or less influential Global South countries. Second, the case studies selected (Paris Agreement, BRICS, Security Council reform) emphasize high-profile institutional arenas, but further research could explore underexamined domains such as digital governance, migration, or global health in greater depth. Third, the study relies largely on secondary sources and official documents, which may not fully capture the informal diplomacy and behind-the-scenes negotiations that also shape reform outcomes.

Future research could address these gaps by incorporating more systematic empirical data, including interviews with policymakers and diplomats from a broader range of Global South countries, as well as comparative studies across different issue areas. Such work would enrich our understanding of the diversity, internal tensions, and evolving strategies within the Global South coalition, and provide more nuanced insights into the conditions that enable or constrain meaningful reform.

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Author Contributions

The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

Availability of Data and Materials

The data on which the study is based were accessed from a repository and are available for downloading through the following link.

<https://unctadstat.unctad.org/datacentre/>

<https://www.imf.org/en/About/executive-board/members-quotas>

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/about/leadership/votingpowers>

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to report regarding the present study.

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