

Decolonising Foreign Policy in the Global South

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In our volatile world, each nation-state needs a well-defined set of principles that affirm its right to self-determination. Euro-Atlantic interests have dominated the global discourse since the development of the modern period, influencing the trade, climate, and strategic policies of developing nations. To challenge this hegemony, the countries of the Global South must realise a moral imperative to secure their diplomatic independence. A potent way to achieve this is by operationalising Indigenous Knowledge Systems in foreign policymaking. India, an emerging Great Power, can exemplify an ideologically sovereign nation that applies this decolonial epistemology.

This research piece will explore how traditional knowledge can serve as an important intellectual resource for understanding international relations and designing policies that promote national interest and international cooperation for the marginalised countries of the Global South.

The Need for Indigenising Foreign Policy

Colonial perspectives on international relations emphasise global dominance as the main goal of a nation's foreign policy. This is accompanied by economic extractivism, which exploits the Global South's resources to benefit the North's development ([Irfan, 2021](#)). The ideological principles that justify this hegemony still promote the Western rule-based order as the only legitimate and just global system. This system ranks nation-states in a rigid hierarchy, assuming that developing countries need some kind of intellectual salvation or 'rescue' as they are seen as inherently unable to rethink development or global governance through their own lenses or knowledge traditions ([Jones, 2013; cited in Gricius, 2021](#)). The definition of knowledge is limited to only those empirical truths that are acceptable or convenient to the neocolonial agents of the Global North,

and this reductionism dismisses the experiential learnings, lived realities and documented epistemic structures of the local, indigenous people of the developing world as “unscientific” and “lacking evidence.” The top-down, hierarchical approach to policymaking adopted by the colonial theorists not only fails to reflect on the obvious flaws of this system, but also deliberately uses mechanisms to undermine the inclusive growth and dignified existence of vulnerable communities in the Global South. A striking example of this is the long-term American-backed proxy wars and direct military interventions in West Asia, a key component of the American foreign policy for the “Middle East and North Africa” (MENA) region ([New America, 2023](#)), that claimed countless lives and devastated all developmental institutions in the affected countries. Moreover, the Inter-American Development Bank’s official support for weakening the regulatory provisions in the mining codes of South American countries to attract investment has also served as a corporate tool of USA’s economic diplomacy; leading to the massive displacement of the continent’s Indigenous communities, and damage to some parts of the Amazonian green belt ([Bebbington et al., 2008b; cited in Arboleda, 2016](#)).

In contrast to this, Indigenous Knowledge Systems emphasise a participatory process of information collection, knowledge symmetry, networked operations, decentralisation, community-centric governance models, and the concept of peaceful coexistence as a governing principle. India’s foreign policy of non-interference and non-aggression reflects the larger decolonial epistemology that the nation-state adheres to, more commonly known as the Panchsheel ideals. The main agenda of this intellectual decolonisation is to share power equitably among the developed and developing countries. The scope of decolonial foreign policy can be outlined by the following basic characteristics, some of which have been discussed above. The first is equity, which has been highlighted by the Indian G20 Presidency. This tenure was a landmark event for empowering the agency of Global South countries, as India’s leading initiative to include the African Union as a member of the G20 platform was a symbol of decolonial international relations and policymaking. This initiative aimed to balance the power relations between the traditionally underrepresented, marginalised and low-income countries of the world, by giving them a platform to express their views and opinions in a collective manner, thereby strengthening their negotiating agency in a global forum. The longstanding dominance of the European Union was limited by this measure and marked a powerful attempt to redistribute power and authority fairly between developing and developed nations.

The second principle is participation. Efficient policymaking is achieved only when as much information as possible is collected from as many relevant sources as possible, which is then analysed and discussed in a collective, multistakeholder manner. Listening to the voices of marginalised communities as a core component of making the policy truly inclusive and participatory is a non-negotiable feature ([Krishna, 2012](#)). This principle illustrates the case of the Bolivian President Evo Morales, an Indigenous leader, who significantly improved Bolivia’s development indicators with his policies. Under his rule, Bolivian foreign policy was reformed to strengthen the Bolivian economy and benefit the severely marginalized Indigenous communities. A key aspect of the Bolivian foreign policy was to renegotiate contracts with foreign investors by

nationalizing the energy and mineral companies operating on the country's rich reserves, and transferring this authority to the Government rather than the foreign firms. This gave the Bolivian Government much more power to make crucial decisions about its vital energy and mineral resources, and to prevent or reduce excessive resource extraction. It also boosted national revenues by increasing the flow of profits into the state treasury, which was then invested in education, health and development sectors ([Sarmiento, 2019](#)). Such powerful decolonial foreign policy, enacted by an Indigenous politician, demonstrates how inclusive foreign policymaking can have positive outcomes for disadvantaged groups at home as well. This is something that the Global South should consider as a top priority.

The third principle is that of "collectivized pluralism", which means that marginalized nation-states should join forces to achieve more influence on the global stage. Forums such as BRICS and the African Union show how common development and diplomatic goals can be better expressed if individual states collaborate and present their views based on evidence.

Collectivization and networks like these enhance information symmetry, and the power of numbers gives more credibility to the issues raised by the members of the coalition. This is in line with the visionary ideals of prominent African thinkers such as Kwame Nkrumah and Thomas Sankara, as well as African American intellectuals such as W. E. B. Du Bois, who revived the awareness of "Pan-Africanism", as an anti-colonial, culturally and epistemologically independent way of expressing nationality, nationhood and identity. This form of a shared cultural nationhood can potentially challenge the rigid definitions of "sovereignty", and provide more access to resources, infrastructure and political cooperation for solving common problems through common values (Agyeman, 2016). The African Union, which consists of all fifty-five African countries and is the newest member of the G20, is a diplomatic realization of this Pan-Africanist vision. India's commitment to a more assertive Global South is matched by its concrete efforts to include the interests of the marginalized countries, and to strengthen the potential of South-South cooperation.

Conclusion

The nation-states of the Global South have a rich cultural and historical heritage, which inspired a pluralistic value-based framework, empowering the marginalized communities, and using traditional knowledge systems to facilitate the decision-making process and establish truly inclusive and democratic governance, along with transparency and accountability. India has already adopted these measures in its domestic policies as well, through the 73rd and 74th Amendment to the Constitution that added a layer of state institutions at the grassroots level, in the form of rural and urban self-government institutions that have improved the system by acting as the agency for last-mile delivery of public services. The principles of Panchsheel, and traditional Indian values of non-violence and peaceful coexistence, have been integrated as core elements of the Indian foreign policy; which shows how Indigenous Knowledge Systems have been applied in the realm of international relations.

Likewise, other nations of the South should also draw on their local and indigenous knowledge systems, to prepare a foreign policy framework that prioritizes the interests of its most

underserved communities and regions; as international decisions have domestic repercussions. This process can be started by focusing on the sustainable development sector the most, where socioeconomic decisions not only affect the vulnerable communities' right to a dignified existence, but also the local, endemic ecology due to the threats of climate change. Alleviating climate injustice is a necessity, and the developing nations should realize that foreign policy planning that caters to the elite sections of their domestic population cannot be considered decolonial in any way. A system that ensures domestic growth and a symbiotic developmental cooperation between Global South countries should be encouraged. Securing the interests of the nation in an equitable, participatory and collectivized way- with a prudent space for necessary international partnerships- should be the main goal of decolonizing foreign policy.

About the author



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