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Outlook for China's Global South Strategy and Its Implications for South Korea

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Outlook for China's Global South Strategy

Since the second half of 2023, China has asserted itself as a member of the Global South. Given the geopolitical role of the Global South in the international community—particularly its potential to act as a “swing state” in the U.S.-China strategic competition—this shift in China's stance suggests that its Global South strategy will not be limited to economic cooperation but will also serve the geopolitical purpose of strategically counterbalancing the United States. China is expected to pursue cooperation with the Global South in the following directions as it seeks to gain an advantage over the United States.

1. Seeking to Build a Multipolar International Order

At a press conference during the Two Sessions 2024, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi noted that the Global South is “a key force for reforming the international order.”¹ Given that China has been advocating for a multipolar international order since the end of the Cold War, this suggests that China intends to use cooperation with the Global South to transform the U.S.-led international order into a multipolar one.

Global South countries act as swing states in the international community, pursuing pragmatic diplomacy to advance their own interests within the framework of U.S.-China strategic competition. From China's perspective, cooperation with the Global South—whose perspectives differ from those of the West—can lay the groundwork for building a multipolar international order favorable to China by undermining U.S. and Western influence in the international community.

2. Spreading a Chinese-style Discourse and Governance System

The four proposals on strengthening cooperation among the Global South, presented by Foreign Minister Wang Yi in July 2023,² align with global initiatives proposed by Xi Jinping, such as the Community of Common Destiny, the Global Security Initiative, and the Global Development Initiative. Through these frameworks, China will seek to disseminate Chinese-style discourses and rhetoric to the international community by incorporating them into joint

statements and agendas as it expands its cooperation with the Global South into diplomatic and security fields.

Increased China-Global South cooperation is also linked to the promotion of Chinese governance systems. As part of its economic assistance to the Global South, China has offered a variety of training programs and promoted its policies and governance systems, arguing that its authoritarian governance systems have contributed to its economic growth. In particular, China has provided advanced technologies and related policies—such as information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure, e-commerce, cyber policies, and next-generation network standards—to countries in the Global South grappling with the digital divide. By doing so, Beijing seeks to spread Chinese technology and standards in the Global South and increase these countries' dependence on China.

3. Boosting Economic Growth

The economic growth of the Global South presents an opportunity to shift economic relations between China and the Global South from unilateral support by China to mutual cooperation. As the Global South emerges as a significant market, China can expand its exports to the region, alleviating its overproduction issue caused by sluggish domestic demand. Additionally, China's establishment of infrastructure and advanced industries based on Chinese technology in Global South countries not only brings economic benefits by securing early dominance in their technology markets but also strengthens support for Chinese technologies and standards in international standards competitions.

Furthermore, cooperation in mineral mining with Global South countries in Africa, South America, and Asia can help China—heavily reliant on overseas supplies of strategic minerals—secure favorable resource supply chains and counter Western efforts to disrupt its access to these critical resources.

Implications for South Korea

If the second Trump administration pursues a foreign policy of isolationism and selective engagement, China will likely exploit this to expand its cooperation with the Global South, disseminate Chinese-style discourse and governance systems, and seek leadership within the region. In this context, the South Korean government should consider the following points while developing its approach to cooperation with the Global South:

1. Recognizing Potential System and Value Conflicts

South Korea must acknowledge that differences in systems and values could arise during cooperation with the Global South. China has actively disseminated Chinese-style discourses and narratives in the Global South to shape public opinion in its favor while promoting its authoritarian governance systems and policies in the region. Although not all Global South

countries will fully embrace Chinese-style discourses or governance models, many may sympathize with them or adopt certain elements to facilitate cooperation with China. If South Korea underestimates this dynamic and instead emphasizes universal values such as freedom, human rights, and democracy, its cooperation with the Global South may yield more limited results than anticipated.

2. *Identifying a Distinct Cooperation Agenda*

To address these challenges, South Korea should identify cooperation agendas tailored to the specific needs of the Global South. While broad agendas—such as expanding the multilateral trading system, stabilizing supply chains, and promoting regional peace and stability—are universally acceptable, they may lack the specificity needed to highlight South Korea’s unique strengths. South Korea should focus on agendas that distinguish it from China and emphasize its competitive advantages. For instance:

- Building infrastructure and digital networks based on South Korea’s superior technology and competitiveness.
- Promoting cultural exchanges and cooperation, leveraging South Korea’s strong cultural influence and soft power.

By pursuing such targeted strategies, South Korea can enhance its cooperation with the Global South while maintaining a distinctive position in contrast to China’s approach.

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(‘중국의 글로벌 사우스 전략: 현황과 함의’, <https://www.asaninst.org/?p=97665>)

¹ “Wang Yi: Jointly Creating a Shining ‘South Moment’ in Global Governance,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC*, 2024.03.07. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjbzhd/202403/t20240308_11256436.html.

² Four Proposals include “eliminate conflicts and jointly build peace”, “reinvigorate vitality and promote development”, “be open and inclusive for common progress”, and “be united and discuss cooperation”. “Wang Yi Puts Forward Four Proposals on Strengthening Cooperation Among Global South Countries”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2023.07.26. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjbzhd/202307/t20230727_11118544.html.



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