

25-Oktyabr, 2026-yil

**CHINA’S GLOBAL SOUTH DIPLOMACY: HOW THE LANGUAGE OF
SOVEREIGNTY AND DEVELOPMENT SHAPES ITS INTERNATIONAL ROLE
(2022–2026)**

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*Глобально-южная дипломатия Китая: как язык суверенитета и развития
формирует его международную роль (2022–2026 гг.)*

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Магистратура, 1 курс

*Направление: Международные отношения и современные политические
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тараққиёт тили унинг халқаро ролини қандай шакллантиради (2022–2026 йиллар)*

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Abstract: *The article examines how the People’s Republic of China uses the language of sovereignty and development to build its role as a leader of the Global South in 2022–2026. Drawing on constructivist approaches to norms and status, the study analyses China’s official discourse – the Global Development, Security, Civilization and Governance Initiatives, white papers and speeches by its leaders – and compares it with China’s actual practice: the expansion of BRICS, mediation in the Middle East, zero-tariff treatment for the least developed and African countries, and its policy in Central Asia, including Uzbekistan. The author argues that these two vocabularies are not mere rhetoric. They allow Beijing to present itself simultaneously as a defender of the existing UN-centred order and as an advocate of its reform, to turn the shared historical experience of developing countries into political support, and to win votes in international institutions. At the same time, the effectiveness of this discourse is limited by the gap between words and deeds: trade imbalances, debt problems, territorial disputes and competition with other “voices” of the Global South, above all India. China’s role is therefore best described as that of a selective and contested, rather than recognised, leader of the Global South.*

Keywords: *Global South, China, sovereignty, development, discourse, Global Development Initiative, Global Governance Initiative, BRICS, Central Asia, Uzbekistan.*

Аннотация: В статье рассматривается, как Китайская Народная Республика использует язык суверенитета и развития для формирования своей роли лидера Глобального Юга в 2022–2026 годах. Опираясь на конструктивистские подходы к нормам и статусу, автор анализирует официальный дискурс КНР – Глобальные инициативы в области развития, безопасности, цивилизации и глобального управления, белые книги и выступления руководства страны – и сопоставляет его с реальной практикой: расширением БРИКС, посредничеством на Ближнем Востоке, режимом нулевых пошлин для наименее развитых и африканских стран, а также политикой в Центральной Азии, включая Узбекистан. Делается вывод, что эти два понятийных ряда не являются лишь риторикой. Они позволяют Пекину одновременно выступать защитником существующего порядка с центральной ролью ООН и сторонником его реформы, превращать общий исторический опыт развивающихся стран в политическую поддержку и получать голоса в международных институтах. Вместе с тем эффективность этого дискурса ограничена разрывом между словами и делами: торговыми дисбалансами, долговыми проблемами, территориальными спорами и конкуренцией с другими «голосами» Глобального Юга, прежде всего Индией. Поэтому роль Китая точнее описывать как избирательное и оспариваемое, а не признанное лидерство.

Ключевые слова: Глобальный Юг, Китай, суверенитет, развитие, дискурс, Глобальная инициатива развития, Глобальная инициатива по управлению, БРИКС, Центральная Азия, Узбекистан.

Аннотация: Мақолада Хитой Халқ Республикаси 2022–2026 йилларда Глобал Жанубнинг етакчиси сифатидаги ролини шакллантириши учун суверенитет ва тараққиёт тилидан қандай фойдаланаётгани таҳлил қилинади. Нормалар ва мақомга оид конструктивистик ёндашувларга таянган ҳолда муаллиф ХХРнинг расмий дискурсини – тараққиёт, хавфсизлик, цивилизация ва глобал бошқарув соҳаларидаги Глобал ташаббусларни, оқ китоблар ҳамда мамлакат раҳбарияти нутқларини ўрганади ва уни амалиёт билан таққослайди: БРИКСнинг кенгайиши, Яқин Шарқдаги воситачилик, энг кам ривожланган ва Африка мамлакатлари учун нол божхона тартиби, шунингдек, Марказий Осиёдаги, жумладан Ўзбекистондаги сиёсат. Хулоса қилинишича, ушбу икки тушунчалар тизими шунчаки риторика эмас. Улар Пекинга бир вақтнинг ўзида БМТ марказий ўрин эгаллаган мавжуд тартибнинг ҳимоячиси ва уни ислоҳ қилиш тарафдори сифатида чиқиш, ривожланаётган мамлакатларнинг умумий тарихий тажрибасини сиёсий қўллаб-қувватлашга айлантириш ва халқаро институтларда овоз тўплаш имконини беради. Шу билан бирга, бу дискурснинг самарадорлиги сўз ва амал ўртасидаги тафовут билан чекланади: савдо номутаносиблиги, қарз муаммолари, ҳудудий низолар ҳамда Глобал Жанубнинг бошқа «овозлари», аввало Ҳиндистон билан рақобат. Шу боис Хитойнинг ролини эътироф этилган эмас, балки танловли ва баҳсли етакчилик сифатида тавсифлаш тўғрироқ бўлади.

Калит сўзлар: *Глобал Жануб, Хитой, суверенитет, тараққиёт, дискурс, Глобал тараққиёт ташаббуси, Глобал бошқарув ташаббуси, БРИКС, Марказий Осиё, Ўзбекистон.*

INTRODUCTION

Few terms have spread through international politics as quickly in recent years as “Global South”. Once used mainly in academic writing as a softer substitute for “Third World” or “developing countries”, it has become, since roughly 2022, a category that great powers actively compete to represent. The war in Ukraine, Western sanctions and the debate over food and energy prices made it clear that most states of Asia, Africa and Latin America did not want to take sides automatically, and their votes, markets and resources acquired new value.¹

China has been among the most active participants in this competition. Chinese leaders describe the country as “a natural member of the Global South” and insist that China will always belong to the developing world, even though it is the world’s second-largest economy and a leading creditor.² This self-positioning is supported by a dense vocabulary in which two words stand out: sovereignty and development. They run through every major Chinese foreign-policy initiative of the period, from the Global Development Initiative to the Global Governance Initiative announced in 2025.

The aim of this article is to examine how the language of sovereignty and development shapes China’s international role in 2022–2026, what it allows Beijing to achieve and where its limits lie. The article proceeds from the assumption that discourse in foreign policy is not just a cover for “real” interests but a tool that helps create coalitions, define what is legitimate and secure status.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The study draws primarily on constructivism. A. Wendt showed that the interests and identities of states are not given in advance but are formed through interaction and shared ideas.³ M. Finnemore and K. Sikkink described the “life cycle” of international norms, in which “norm entrepreneurs” promote new ideas, persuade other states and seek a “tipping point” after which a norm spreads by itself.⁴ From this perspective, China’s initiatives can be seen as an attempt to act as such an entrepreneur, promoting an interpretation of sovereignty and development that differs from the liberal one.

The second relevant line is the literature on status. D. Larson and A. Shevchenko argue that rising powers seek recognition not only through material power but also through “social creativity”, that is, by redefining the criteria of prestige in areas where they have an advantage.⁵ For China, development is precisely such an area: the experience of lifting

¹Haug S., Braveboy-Wagner J., Maihold G. The ‘Global South’ in the study of world politics: examining a meta category // *Third World Quarterly*. — 2021. — Vol. 42, No. 9. — P. 1923–1944.

²Wang Yi. Press Conference on China’s Foreign Policy and External Relations at the Second Session of the 14th National People’s Congress. — Beijing, 7 March 2024. — URL: <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn>.

³Wendt A. *Social Theory of International Politics*. — Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

⁴Finnemore M., Sikkink K. *International Norm Dynamics and Political Change* // *International Organization*. — 1998. — Vol. 52, No. 4. — P. 887–917.

⁵Larson D.W., Shevchenko A. *Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy* // *International Security*. — 2010. — Vol. 34, No. 4. — P. 63–95.

hundreds of millions of people out of poverty is presented as a model that other countries can learn from. This is close to J. Nye's concept of soft power, although Beijing's version relies more on state-led programmes than on the attractiveness of society and culture.⁶

Sovereignty itself is a contested concept. S. Krasner famously called it “organized hypocrisy”, since great powers proclaim the principle of non-interference while regularly violating it.⁷ For many post-colonial states, however, sovereignty remains a protective norm, a guarantee against external pressure, and China appeals precisely to this understanding. R. Foot has shown how Beijing, in UN debates on human protection, consistently emphasises the primacy of the state and its consent, gaining sympathy among developing countries.⁸

Assessments of China's purposes vary. N. Rolland and E. Economy see in China's discourse a consistent project to create a world order more favourable to authoritarian states.⁹ A.I. Johnston, by contrast, warns against speaking of a single “liberal order” that China either accepts or rejects: in different areas, Beijing supports, uses or challenges different “orders”.¹⁰ A. Acharya's idea of a “multiplex world”, in which no single power can impose its rules, is also useful here.¹¹ This article builds on the latter perspective and treats China's discourse as a means of gaining influence within a plural, rather than a hierarchical, system.

METHODOLOGY

The study uses qualitative discourse analysis combined with a comparison of statements and practice. The main sources are official documents of the PRC for 2021–2026: speeches by Xi Jinping and Wang Yi, concept papers of the global initiatives, white papers, joint declarations and the final documents of summits. The analysis identifies recurring key terms and the meanings attached to them, after which it checks how these meanings are reflected in concrete actions in three areas: building coalitions and institutions; economic and development cooperation; and the protection of political interests in international organisations. Particular attention is paid to Central Asia and Uzbekistan as a region where China's discourse is tested in direct interaction with neighbouring states.

Historical Roots of the Discourse

China's current vocabulary has deep roots. The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, formulated in 1953–1954 in agreements with India and Myanmar, already put mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity and non-interference in internal affairs at the centre. At the Bandung Conference in 1955, Zhou Enlai used these principles to present the PRC as part of the Asian-African community. In 1974, Deng Xiaoping, speaking at the UN General Assembly, set out Mao Zedong's “three worlds” theory and declared that China belonged to the third world and would never become a superpower.

It is significant that Beijing deliberately revives this heritage. In June 2024, at a conference marking the 70th anniversary of the Five Principles, Xi Jinping called them an

⁶Nye J.S. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. — New York: PublicAffairs, 2004.

⁷Krasner S.D. *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy*. — Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

⁸Foot R. *China, the UN, and Human Protection: Beliefs, Power, Image*. — Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

⁹Rolland N. *China's Vision for a New World Order* // NBR Special Report No. 83. — Seattle: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2020; Economy E. *The World According to China*. — Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022.

¹⁰Johnston A.I. *China in a World of Orders: Rethinking Compliance and Challenge in Beijing's International Relations* // *International Security*. — 2019. — Vol. 44, No. 2. — P. 9–60.

¹¹Acharya A. *The End of American World Order*. 2nd ed. — Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018.

“open and inclusive” basis for international relations and announced new measures to support the Global South, including training programmes and scholarships.¹² The appeal to the past serves an important function: it allows China to present itself not as a new claimant to leadership but as a long-standing member of the “family” of developing countries that shares their experience of colonial humiliation and struggle for independence.

The Language of Sovereignty

In Chinese discourse, sovereignty performs at least three functions. First, it is a defensive norm. Beijing invokes non-interference against criticism over Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Tibet and Taiwan and seeks to make this position collective. A telling example is the vote in the UN Human Rights Council in October 2022: a Western proposal to hold a debate on the human rights situation in Xinjiang was rejected by 19 votes to 17, with 11 abstentions, and most of the votes against came from Asian and African states.¹³ The language of sovereignty thus turns a bilateral sensitivity of China into a matter of principle for many states that fear similar pressure themselves.

Second, sovereignty is used as a basis for an alternative concept of security. The Global Security Initiative, put forward in April 2022 and elaborated in a concept paper in February 2023, combines respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity with the idea of “indivisible security” and attention to the “legitimate security concerns of all countries”.¹⁴ This combination allowed Beijing, in its position paper on the Ukraine crisis, to call for respect for the sovereignty of all countries while avoiding condemnation of Russia.¹⁵ Many countries of the Global South, which themselves preferred neutrality, found this stance more understandable than its critics in the West did.

Third, sovereignty underpins China’s image as a mediator that does not impose conditions. The restoration of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, announced in Beijing in March 2023, and the “Beijing Declaration” signed by fourteen Palestinian factions in July 2024 were presented as evidence that China respects the choices of the parties and does not seek to export its political model.¹⁶ The practical results of these initiatives remained modest, but their symbolic value lay in showing that a non-Western power could act as a broker in a region traditionally dominated by the United States.

Finally, the Global Civilization Initiative, announced in March 2023, extends the logic of sovereignty to values. It calls for respect for the diversity of civilisations and states that countries should not impose their own values and models on others.¹⁷ In effect, the right to choose one’s own path of development becomes an element of sovereignty, which is

¹²Xi Jinping. Carrying Forward the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence to Jointly Build a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind: Speech at the Conference Marking the 70th Anniversary of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. — Beijing, 28 June 2024. — URL: <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn>.

¹³UN Human Rights Council. Draft decision A/HRC/51/L.6: Holding a debate on the situation of human rights in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, China. Voting record. — Geneva, 6 October 2022.

¹⁴The Global Security Initiative Concept Paper / Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC. — Beijing, 21 February 2023. — URL: <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn>.

¹⁵China’s Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis / Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC. — Beijing, 24 February 2023.

¹⁶Joint Trilateral Statement by the People’s Republic of China, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the Islamic Republic of Iran. — Beijing, 10 March 2023.

¹⁷Xi Jinping. Join Hands on the Path Towards Modernization: Keynote Address at the CPC in Dialogue with World Political Parties High-level Meeting. — Beijing, 15 March 2023. — URL: <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn>.

particularly attractive for governments facing Western criticism over democracy and human rights.

The Language of Development

If sovereignty is mainly a protective concept, development is the positive core of China's offer. The Global Development Initiative, announced by Xi Jinping at the UN General Assembly in September 2021, links China's experience directly to the UN 2030 Agenda and identifies priority areas such as poverty reduction, food security, health, climate and the digital economy.¹⁸ A “Group of Friends” of the initiative was formed at the UN, and the initiative was soon presented as complementing the Belt and Road Initiative.

In this discourse, development is understood in a specific way. It is seen as a precondition for human rights and stability rather than their consequence, and the right to development is put on a par with, or above, political freedoms. The 2023 white paper on a “global community of shared future” states directly that development is “the master key” to solving all problems.¹⁹ For many governments of the Global South, whose populations expect jobs, roads and electricity, this sequence sounds more persuasive than conditional Western aid.

The practical side of the development discourse has also changed. After the problems of 2018–2020, when large BRI projects faced debt difficulties and criticism, Beijing shifted towards “small yet smart” projects. At the third Belt and Road Forum in October 2023, Xi Jinping announced eight steps that included both large loans and a focus on green development and livelihood projects.²⁰ The Forum on China–Africa Cooperation summit in Beijing in September 2024 promised RMB 360 billion in financing over three years and ten “partnership actions”.²¹

Trade has become an increasingly important tool. From December 2024, China granted zero-tariff treatment on 100 per cent of tariff lines to the least developed countries with which it has diplomatic relations, and in June 2025 it announced that this treatment would be extended to all 53 African countries with which it has relations. The measure came into force on 1 May 2026, during the China–Africa Year of People-to-People Exchanges.²² Against the background of rising tariffs in the United States, Beijing presented this decision as proof that it, unlike the West, keeps its markets open to the developing world.

From Words to Institutions: BRICS, the SCO and the Global Governance Initiative

The two vocabularies are most fully combined in China's approach to reforming global governance. China was among the main supporters of BRICS expansion, agreed at the Johannesburg summit in August 2023. From 1 January 2024, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates joined the group, Indonesia followed in January 2025, and a category of partner countries was created at the Kazan summit in October 2024. In Chinese discourse,

¹⁸Xi Jinping. Bolstering Confidence and Jointly Overcoming Difficulties to Build a Better World: Statement at the General Debate of the 76th Session of the United Nations General Assembly. — New York, 21 September 2021.

¹⁹A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions: White Paper / The State Council Information Office of the PRC. — Beijing, September 2023.

²⁰Xi Jinping. Building an Open, Inclusive and Interconnected World for Common Development: Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation. — Beijing, 18 October 2023.

²¹Forum on China–Africa Cooperation Beijing Action Plan (2025–2027). — Beijing, September 2024.

²²Wang Yi. Press Conference on China's Foreign Policy and External Relations at the Fourth Session of the 14th National People's Congress. — Beijing, 8 March 2026.

the expansion is presented not as the building of an anti-Western bloc but as an increase in the “representation and voice” of developing countries.

The culmination of this line was the Global Governance Initiative, which Xi Jinping put forward on 1 September 2025 at the “SCO Plus” meeting in Tianjin. It rests on five core concepts: sovereign equality, international rule of law, multilateralism, a people-centred approach and a focus on real actions.²³ It is notable that sovereign equality comes first and that the initiative is presented as grounded in the UN Charter. In May 2026, a Group of Friends of Global Governance, with the participation of representatives of more than 60 countries, met at UN Headquarters and adopted a communiqué calling for a greater voice for the Global South, reform of international financial institutions and the rejection of unilateral coercive measures.²⁴

This construction allows Beijing to occupy a convenient position. On the one hand, it presents itself as a defender of the UN, international law and multilateralism, that is, of the foundations of the existing order. On the other, it criticises the distribution of power within that order, for example in voting quotas at the IMF and the World Bank, and calls for reforms in favour of developing countries. As J. Weiss and J. Wallace note, such selective support for some elements of the order and challenge to others is characteristic of China’s behaviour as a whole.²⁵

The Regional Dimension: Central Asia and Uzbekistan

Central Asia shows clearly how China’s discourse works in its immediate neighbourhood. Here, respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity has a direct practical meaning for states that gained independence only in 1991 and are sensitive to any external pressure. At the second China–Central Asia summit in Astana in June 2025, the leaders signed the Treaty on Permanent Good-Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation, which enshrined mutual support for sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity.²⁶

For Uzbekistan, China’s development language coincides largely with its own reform agenda. During President Shavkat Mirziyoyev’s state visit to China in January 2024, relations were raised to an “all-weather comprehensive strategic partnership for a new era”, and the parties emphasised cooperation in industry, energy, transport, agriculture and poverty reduction.²⁷ The China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway project, the intergovernmental agreement on which was signed in June 2024, is seen in Tashkent as a way of overcoming the country’s landlocked position.

At the same time, Uzbekistan does not simply accept China’s framework. Its policy remains multi-vector: Tashkent develops relations with Russia, the European Union, the United States, Turkey, the Gulf states and South Korea, and attracts investment from various sources. Uzbekistan uses the language of development and sovereignty in its own interests,

²³Xi Jinping. Speech at the “Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Plus” Meeting. — Tianjin, 1 September 2025. — URL: <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn>.

²⁴Joint Communiqué of the Meeting of the Group of Friends of Global Governance. — New York, 28 May 2026. — URL: <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn>.

²⁵Weiss J.C., Wallace J.L. Domestic Politics, China’s Rise, and the Future of the Liberal International Order // International Organization. — 2021. — Vol. 75, No. 2. — P. 635–664.

²⁶Treaty on Permanent Good-Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation between the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Republic of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and the Republic of Uzbekistan. — Astana, 17 June 2025.

²⁷Joint Statement of the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of Uzbekistan on a New Era of All-Weather Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. — Beijing, 24 January 2024.

as an argument for diversifying partners rather than for depending on one of them. This confirms the observation of S. Hameiri and L. Jones that recipient countries actively shape the content of China’s initiatives rather than merely receiving them.²⁸

The Limits of the Discourse

Despite its successes, China’s discourse faces several constraints. The first is the gap between the image of a “developing country” and the real scale of the Chinese economy. China’s trade surplus approached one trillion dollars in 2024 and exceeded that level in 2025, and the flow of cheap industrial goods has led a number of Global South countries, including Brazil, Mexico, South Africa and Indonesia, to introduce anti-dumping and protective measures. For these states, China is not only a partner in development but also a competitor that threatens their own industrialisation.

The second constraint concerns debt. Although research has largely refuted the thesis of a deliberate “debt trap”, the difficult restructurings in Zambia, Sri Lanka and other countries have shown that Chinese lending also creates dependency and conflicts of interest.²⁹ Third, the language of sovereignty is undermined when China itself is a party to territorial disputes. In the South China Sea, Beijing’s rejection of the 2016 arbitral award and its pressure on the Philippines and Vietnam make its appeals to international law less convincing to its neighbours.

Finally, China does not have a monopoly on representing the Global South. India, which hosted several “Voice of the Global South” summits in 2023–2024 and secured the admission of the African Union to the G20 during its presidency, offers an alternative based on democracy and non-alignment. Brazil, Indonesia, South Africa and the Gulf states also pursue independent strategies. As D. Shambaugh noted, China remains in many respects a “partial power” whose global presence is broader than its actual influence.³⁰

Discussion

The analysis shows that the language of sovereignty and development performs different but complementary functions. Sovereignty is mainly defensive and coalition-building: it unites states that fear outside interference and allows China to gather votes in the UN and other forums. Development is mainly attractive and status-related: it presents China as a successful model and a source of resources, and allows it to claim moral leadership without assuming formal obligations of an alliance kind.

In terms of norm dynamics, China has clearly acted as a norm entrepreneur in 2022–2026. Its initiatives have received formal support from dozens of states, and the terms “Global South”, “right to development” and “sovereign equality” have become part of the common vocabulary of many international meetings. However, it is too early to speak of a “tipping point”. Support for China’s initiatives is often declaratory, and states join them because the cost of doing so is low and the potential benefits are real, not because they share Beijing’s views.

²⁸Jones L., Hameiri S. *Debunking the Myth of ‘Debt-trap Diplomacy’: How Recipient Countries Shape China’s Belt and Road Initiative*. — London: Chatham House, 2020.

²⁹Brautigam D. A critical look at Chinese ‘debt-trap diplomacy’: the rise of a meme // *Area Development and Policy*. — 2020. — Vol. 5, No. 1. — P. 1–14.

³⁰Shambaugh D. *China Goes Global: The Partial Power*. — Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

The constructivist perspective also helps explain why China persists with this discourse despite its limits. For Beijing, recognition as a leader of the Global South is a status resource in its rivalry with the United States. Even partial success in this field reduces the effectiveness of Western attempts to isolate China and increases its weight in debates on the future of global governance.

CONCLUSION

In 2022–2026, the language of sovereignty and development became the central tool of China’s Global South diplomacy. It allowed Beijing to link its historical identity as a developing country with its current ambitions, to present its global initiatives as an extension of the UN Charter and to turn the shared grievances of post-colonial states into political capital. The institutional results of this strategy – BRICS expansion, new groups of friends at the UN and the Global Governance Initiative – show that this discourse has a real effect.

At the same time, the leadership that China claims remains selective and contested. Developing countries welcome Chinese markets and investment, but they also defend their own interests, compete with China and turn to other partners. The example of Central Asia and Uzbekistan shows that the language of sovereignty works both ways: the same principle that China offers its partners also gives them the right to choose. China’s role in the Global South is therefore best described not as hegemony but as influential, yet negotiated, leadership. Further research could focus on how individual Global South states adapt China’s vocabulary to their own goals and how this affects the content of China’s initiatives themselves.