The Diplomatic Implications of the North–South Divide in the 21st Century

By

Andrew, Blessing Timiebi
+2348164172335,blessingandrew239@gmail.com
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt, Nigeria

Prof. Kingdom E. Orji
Department of History and Diplomatic Studies,
Faculty of Humanities
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt, Nigeria

Abstract

The North–South divide continues to be one of the defining features of the international system in the 21st century. Rooted in the historical legacies of colonialism and imperialism, the divide represents the enduring inequalities between the industrialized Global North and the developing Global South. This paper examines the diplomatic implications of this divide in areas such as trade, climate change, health governance, and global representation. Using a qualitative analytical method and grounded in the Dependency and World-Systems theories, the study explores how the structural imbalance between North and South continues to shape negotiation outcomes and power dynamics in multilateral diplomacy. Case studies from the WTO Doha Round, the Paris Climate Agreement, and COVID-19 vaccine diplomacy illustrate these disparities. The paper concludes with recommendations that emphasize reforming global governance, strengthening South–South cooperation, and promoting technology and knowledge transfer as strategies for bridging the divide.

Keywords: North–South divide; diplomacy; dependency theory; world-systems theory; inequality; South–South cooperation.

Introduction

The world in the 21st century is characterized by profound interdependence. Globalization, technological advancement, and economic integration have linked nations more than ever before. Yet, beneath this web of interconnectedness lies an

enduring reality, the North–South divide. This divide, deeply entrenched in history, separates wealthy industrialized states (the Global North) from developing and underdeveloped nations (the Global South).

Diplomacy, the key instrument through which nations interact, has not escaped the shadow of this divide. From climate negotiations to trade talks and health diplomacy, the divide manifests in the form of unequal representation, economic dependency, and asymmetric power relations. Even as new actors from the South — such as Brazil, India, China, and South Africa — rise to prominence, the structural inequalities between North and South persist.

This paper explores how the North–South divide continues to shape diplomacy in the 21st century, the implications for global governance, and the emerging strategies to promote a more balanced world order.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the rhetoric of global equality and partnership, international diplomacy remains structured along lines that privilege the North. Decision-making processes in global institutions like the United Nations Security Council, International Monetary Fund, and World Bank are still dominated by developed nations.

Trade negotiations, climate change agreements, and global health policies often reveal these disparities. For instance, African nations contribute least to greenhouse gas emissions yet suffer most from climate change impacts, while Northern countries delay or default on climate finance commitments. Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed a deep moral and diplomatic crisis when vaccine nationalism left many Southern countries behind.

The persistence of this divide raises fundamental questions:

Why have global governance reforms failed to create equitable representation?

How do these inequalities affect the conduct and outcomes of diplomacy?

What mechanisms can bridge this structural gap in the 21st century?

This paper seeks to address these questions by analyzing the historical and contemporary dimensions of the North–South divide.

Conceptual Clarification

The "North–South divide" refers to the socio-economic and political disparities between the industrialized, wealthy countries of the Global North and the developing or least-developed countries of the Global South. It is not strictly geographical — Australia or Japan, while often in the Southern Hemisphere, are considered Global North in terms of economic/status (Griffiths, O'Brien, & Walby, 2014; Zhu, 2019).

The divide originated with colonial exploitation: raw materials and cheap labour from colonies enabled industrial growth in Europe and North America. After decolonization, structural inequalities persisted through trade imbalances, limited technology transfer, and unequal access to capital and financial institutions.

Diplomatically, the divide speaks to unequal representation (e.g. voting rights, permanent seats), power asymmetries in negotiations (trade, climate), and conflicting priorities — where the North often sets agendas, and the South must respond from positions of constraint.

Diplomacy

Diplomacy refers to the methods, processes, and institutions through which states and international actors conduct negotiations, manage international relations, and pursue national interests peacefully. It includes various forms:

Bilateral diplomacy – relations between two states.
Multilateral diplomacy – negotiations within international organizations such as the UN, WTO, AU, or WHO.
Economic diplomacy – trade, investment, sanctions, and financial negotiations.
Climate diplomacy – negotiations on global warming, emissions, climate finance, and loss-and-damage frameworks.
Health diplomacy – cooperation on global health challenges, disease control, and vaccine access.

Public diplomacy – state efforts to influence foreign publics through culture, media, and communication.

Diplomacy Within the North–South Divide

Within the context of the North–South divide, diplomacy becomes both a tool and a battleground. Northern states typically possess:
Stronger negotiation capacity
Greater financial and technological power
Larger influence within global institutions
Ability to set or shape the global agenda
Southern states, by contrast, often use diplomacy to:
Advocate for fairer representation
Challenge historical and structural inequalities
Demand equitable access to global resources
Push for development-oriented reforms
Build collective strength through alliances such as the African Union, BRICS, G77, and Non-Aligned Movement
Thus, diplomacy does not operate on a neutral playing field—rather, it reflects the same hierarchies and inequalities that characterize the broader North–South divide. Diplomacy becomes a site where power is exercised, contested, and negotiated, influencing whose interests ultimately shape global policies.

Theoretical Framework

This study is framed by Dependency Theory and World-Systems Theory, both of which help explain the durability of the North–South divide in global diplomacy. Dependency Theory argues that underdevelopment in the South is not a stage on the path to development, but rather a condition caused by historical and ongoing economic relations in which the South is made dependent on the North (Prebisch in Latin America, Frank, and others) (Britannica, "Dependency theory," 2024). Under this theory, diplomatic relations are also shaped by unequal exchange: southern states export raw materials, import finished goods, incur debt, and often accept conditions (economic, political) set by Northern powers or institutions.

World-Systems Theory (Wallerstein, 1974) divides the global economy into core, semi-periphery, and periphery. The core (North) controls capital, technology, and

rules of trade; the periphery (South) supplies raw materials and labor. This theory helps explain how even during negotiations or in multilateral institutions, core states maintain dominance — shaping rules, setting terms of membership, and influencing outcomes of treaties or agreements (Britannica, "World-systems theory," 2024).

Together, these theories allow us to see how structural economic relations map onto diplomatic power: who gets to speak, who gets to set agendas, who bears costs and who reaps benefits.

Methodology

Approach: Qualitative, descriptive, analytical.
Data Sources: Secondary sources including academic journals, reports from UN, WTO, World Bank, peer-reviewed studies, media reports.

Case Studies: WTO Doha Round, Paris Climate Agreement (2015), COP27 Climate negotiations, COVID-19 vaccine diplomacy, United Nations Security Council reform efforts.

Analysis Techniques: Comparative case study method; thematic analysis focused on power asymmetry, representation, equity, outcomes.

Diplomatic Implications of the North–South Divide in the 21st Century

In the 21st century, the North–South divide has continued to shape the dynamics of international diplomacy, including sports diplomacy. This divide, rooted in historical inequalities between developed (Global North) and developing (Global South) nations, affects how global institutions exercise power and make decisions in various areas such as:

Trade Diplomacy and Economic Dependence

Institutions like the WTO purport to promote free trade, yet trade rules and subsidy frameworks often favour Northern producers. For instance, agricultural subsidies in the USA and EU distort global prices, making Southern agricultural exporters less competitive. The Doha Development Round, launched in 2001 with

high hopes for addressing Southern grievances, repeatedly stalled mainly due to Northern resistance on subsidy reform (Hopewell, 2016).

IMF and World Bank structural adjustment programs during the 1980s-90s often forced developing countries to adopt austerity, privatization, and liberalization policies that did not match local needs or development priorities, resulting in social dislocation, loss of public services, and increased poverty (Moyo, 2010).

Climate Diplomacy

The Global South contributes little to historical cumulative greenhouse gas emissions but experiences some of the worst impacts of climate change. While the Paris Agreement (2015) committed to climate finance, promises (such as the US$100 billion per year by developed countries) have been slow or partially fulfilled. At COP27 (2022), southern countries succeeded in establishing a Loss and Damage Fund, a victory for diplomatic persistence, but many argue that the terms, scale, and sources of funding remain insufficient (Banerjee, 2019).

Global Health Diplomacy & Vaccine Inequity

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed deep divide in vaccine access. Rich nations secured vaccine stocks early through direct bilateral deals. Many poorer countries were dependent on the COVAX mechanism, which faced funding shortfalls and supply delays. These disparities have been described using terms like "vaccine apartheid" to highlight how unequal access undermines global solidarity and trust (Kaya, 2021; UN Press, 2022; WHO Director-General) (Vaccine Apartheid: The Separation of the World's Poorest and Most Vulnerable…, 2022; UN News 2022).

African leaders openly condemned hoarding of vaccine doses and intellectual property restrictions that prevented local production (Ramaphosa, 2021, as cited in Amref Health AfricaNews) (Amref, 2021).

Representation and Global Governance

Global institutions replicate power structures from earlier eras. The UN Security Council's permanent membership reflects a mid-20th century order. Southern countries remain underrepresented in permanent seats and veto power. Proposals

like the Ezulwini Consensus from the African Union for UNSC reform have been blocked or diluted.

Other organizations like IMF and World Bank still use voting shares heavily weighted toward wealthy states. Developing countries often lack capacity to negotiate complex financial instruments, giving the North de facto agenda-setting power in many institutional settings.

Human Rights and Political Conditionality

Northern states often use conditionality (aid, trade, sanctions) tied to human rights, governance, or democracy. While sometimes justified on normative grounds, Southern states frequently perceive these as interference or neo-colonial control. For example, sanctions on Zimbabwe, Venezuela, and Iran have sparked diplomatic backlash and claims that Northern powers are unduly influencing internal state affairs under the guise of moral concern.

Emerging Trends & Shifts

South–South Cooperation

Groups like BRICS, the G77, and regional organizations such as the African Union promote collective bargaining power for Southern states. Initiatives like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) show promise in reducing dependency on traditional Northern trade partners, expanding intra-Southern trade and policy coordination.

Technology & Knowledge Transfer

Efforts such as developing local vaccine manufacturing in Africa, renewable energy technology transfer, and digital infrastructure partnerships are emerging as critical levers for reducing gaps in capacity. Prioritizing shared R&D, open licensing, and financial incentives are part of diplomatic negotiation agendas for many developing states.

Reforming Multilateral Norms & Institutions

Reforming voting structures, representation norms, and decision-making rules in global institutions is increasingly a diplomatic priority for the South. Pushing for

changes in IMF quotas, World Bank governance, and UNSC permanent membership are key components of this shift.

Recommendations

Reform Global Governance Structures: Democratize decision-making in key global institutions to match current global population, economic realities, and capacities.

Fulfill Financial & Moral Commitments: Developed states must deliver on climate finance, aid pledges, and equitable vaccine access to rebuild trust.

Revamp Trade Policies: Remove unjust agricultural subsidies, reduce trade barriers, and allow greater market access for developing country exports.

Promote Technology Sharing: Push for intellectual property waivers, shared manufacturing, and technology transfer agreements that empower Southern innovation.

Bolster South–South Diplomacy: Support stronger regional integration, intra-Southern trade, and coordination of diplomatic positions.

Conclusion

The North–South divide remains central to how diplomacy functions in the 21st century. Despite interconnectedness, structural inequality persists in trade, climate change, health access, and global governance. However, emerging alliances and diplomatic strategies from the South suggest a slow shift in the balance of influence. Bridging this divide is both a moral imperative and strategic necessity. For diplomacy to serve peace and cooperation, it must become more equitable, inclusive, and adaptable to the realities of the Global South.

References

Amref Health Africa. (2021, September 25). *African leaders condemn vaccine apartheid as an indictment on humanity*. Amref Health Africa News. https://newsroom.amref.org/news/2021/09/african-leaders-condemn-vaccine-apartheid-as-an-indictment-on-humanity/

Banerjee, S. B. (2019). Decolonizing the climate change regime. *Environmental Politics, 28*(2), 257–278. https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2018.1514312

Britannica. (2024). *Dependency theory*. In *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. https://www.britannica.com/topic/dependency-theory

Britannica. (2024). *World-systems theory*. In *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. https://www.britannica.com/topic/world-systems-theory

Hopewell, K. (2016). *Breaking the WTO: How emerging powers disrupted the neoliberal project*. Stanford University Press.

Kaya, A. (2021). Vaccine nationalism and international cooperation: Lessons from COVID-19. *Global Affairs, 7*(4), 471–488. https://doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2021.2003703

Moyo, D. (2010). *Dead aid: Why aid is not working and how there is a better way for Africa*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

United Nations. (2022, July). *Heavy debt burdens, vaccine apartheid, growing inequality thwarting pandemic recovery in developing countries* [Press release]. https://press.un.org/en/2022/ecosoc7069.doc.htm

Vaccine apartheid: The separation of the world's poorest and most vulnerable and the birth of Omicron. (2022). *Global Public Health*. SAGE Publications. https://doi.org/10.1177/25151355221107975