

# Why “South” / “North” Framings are not Useful in a Shifting World Order

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**Abstract:** An emerging multipolarity in which many transition economies employ “Global South” framings, often in contrast to a “Global North,” defines international relations. This re-configuration of global discourses and power relations also occurs in the G20, which is led between 2022 and 2025 by countries from the “Global South.” Against this backdrop, this article asks what this “Southernization” implies for the Think20, the think tank process accompanying the G20 by providing research-based policy advice and policy dialogue. In this text, we sketch out how the Think20 process during Brazil’s G20 Presidency and beyond can be strengthened and further developed to bring together the different high-quality research insights represented in the network while forming epistemic friendships to support cooperative global governance.

**Keywords:** G20; think tanks; science systems; policy advice; Global North; Global South.

For years, a multipolar world has been emerging. While longed for by some and fought by others, it is increasingly shaping the realities of international relations. The question negotiated in many ways is not whether we are indeed moving to a multipolar world but rather whether a universal frame of commonly agreed values (i.e., human rights and international law) and a joint institutional landscape (i.e., United Nations and reformed multilateral institutions in the areas of, inter alia, trade, finance, health, and environment) will still bind this multipolar world. Or, instead, whether we witness the emergence of multiple orders, no longer cooperating in a jointly shaped multilateral system but rather standing in (destructive) competition with each other.

This contribution reflects on the prospects of the multilateral system from the perspective of the G20 increasingly emerging as a governance platform where the diversity of interests, value systems, and poles of power come together and, indeed, negotiate reality and the future of our planet. In this, it is crucial to enable evidence-based discussions that actively work against fake news-enabled distortions and polarizations. Moreover, there is a need for scientific diplomatic networks across borders enabling transregionally informed policy advisory activities in the different national contexts of the G20 countries. Against this background, we reflect on the Think20 processes in the current period of four consecutive years of “Southern” G20 Presidencies. We ask whether two years into a four-year stretch of the G20 Presidency hosted by large transition economies in the South—Indonesia in 2022, India in 2023, Brazil in 2024, and South Africa in 2025—we will indeed witness a uniquely “Southern” type of leadership unfold in the G20. We argue that “Southern” is to be understood neither as a geographic nor political category but, instead, as a diplomatic emphasis of difference that calls for a stronger voice and visibility of large transition economies in global governance structures. We observe political, economic, and intellectual leadership of large

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transition economies, aware of their weight in shaping the future but careful to align with either traditional or even more influential emerging poles.

Given this situation, we argue for conscious South-North cooperation in research-based policy advice and science diplomacy efforts. The Think20 can serve here as a platform. Yet, Think20 needs to nurture its independence while investing in a well-coordinated process linked with Think7-advisory processes for assured continuity from one Presidency to the next via think tank deliberations.

## **SCIENCE DIPLOMACY AND THE G20 FOR THE GLOBAL COMMON GOOD**

We are witnessing a reordering of our world. A multipolar world order is emerging. However, which poles, or centers, will shape our future more effectively than others, and whether these centers, the new semi-peripheries, and peripheries will continue to be bound by a universal multilateralism as the basis for constructive cooperation or whether they drift apart into the multiple, coexisting or even competing orders, continue to be negotiated. Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine and the war between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip act as tangible points of reference in the many years of ongoing transregional contestations over the power to make sense, define, and name the state of international relations, as well as formulate and pursue visions of one or multiple futures. At the same time, both wars and the underlying negotiation of global order have to be understood as parts of a wider web of transformational shifts and structural megatrends comprising the climate and biodiversity crisis, the debt crisis in many low and middle-income economies, accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic and inflationary pressures, social inequalities going hand in hand with social polarization, migration, and political destabilization.

The climate crisis is becoming a global reality. July 2023 was globally the hottest July in 120,000 years, according to the Copernicus Climate Change Service of the European Union (Copernicus 2023). In its latest 2023 report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) summarizes that global surface temperature between 2011 and 2020 is 1.1 °C above the global average of 1850-1900 (IPCC 2023, 4). The currently implemented policies for reducing greenhouse gas emissions result in projected emissions that lead to warming of 3.2 °C by 2100, with a range of 2.2 °C to 3.5 °C (at medium confidence) (IPCC 2023, 23).

Each of these temperature gains contributes further to an increasingly unfolding global riskscape, leading to species losses, heat-humidity risks to human health, impacted food production, increases in poverty, and, with this, increased risks for social polarization, political autocratization, social unrest, migration and

possibly multiple forms of open violence. While these social polarization processes have been observable for a number of years in countries on all continents and of all income groups (in high, middle, and low-income economies), they go hand in hand with forms of political autocratization in an increasing number of countries. The varieties of democracy index assess that 72% of the world population lived in autocracies in 2022 (V-Dem 2023).

In addition, the multilateral institutions enabling the international community of nation-states to govern global challenges such as the climate crisis jointly are increasingly tested. The further establishment of competing institutional landscapes of fragmented global governance—as, for example, suggested by BRICS+, the extension of the group of the large transition economies, and the further development of its exclusive institutional landscape (i.e., the New Development Bank) as a counterweight to the G7, the group of large high-income economies—contributes to the structural reordering globally. At the same time, we observe a reform of existing structures, such as including the African Union in the G20. These overlapping trends notwithstanding, we witness the emergence of a multipolar world that is still deciding whether it will be a multipolar world united in a universal global governance system or a world shaped by multiple orders that compete with each other.

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In this situation of heated political contestation, well-reflected, evidence-based, and historically contextualized contributions to transregional discourse are crucial to ensure wise and future-oriented policy-making for the global common good and to actively work against polarization in debates fueled by fake news and one-sided or partial perspectives. This is the aim and mandate of the international Think Tank community, coming together in research-based policy advisory processes such as the Think20 (addressing the G20) and the Think7 (addressing the G7). Both platforms and the institutional and individual-based networks carrying them have, over the years, grown substantially, developed into transregional networks of academic excellence on the one side and transregional political embeddedness on the other, as well as taken numerous steps towards process optimization and institutionalization. Furthermore, think tanks from the BRICS countries come together in the BRICS Academic Forum.

This paper aims to redraw these processes, focusing on the Think20, which currently witnesses four consecutive years of Southern G20 Presidencies. How is this changing the G20 in the context of multiple crises unfolding, and what is the role of the Think20? Regarding the G7 and the Think7 advisory process, we ask whether there is still a role for a Think7, given the historical situation in which the future of our world and our global common good will be determined primarily outside of G7 country contexts and within and by the societies of the G20 (including the African Union). What are the reasons for the coexistence of Think7 and Think20, or the BRICS Academic Forum for that matter, while practicing close interaction and merger in some areas and playing different roles in others?

Finally, what do we draw from these considerations and lived practices for the wider context of science diplomacy in a world of significant turmoil? We argue that the crucial question to the G20 is: Which type of global leadership is being exercised? Following Indonesia’s approach of moderating differences and India’s approach of mobilizing the Indian subcontinent and many aligned low and middle-income economies for the G20, how will Brazil fill this role? In our view, the answer of the Think20 community here should be clear: the world needs scientifically informed and well-reflected intellectual leadership in the interest of humanity and meeting the values of inclusivity, economic and social fairness, and ecological sustainability. Yet, can we also carry this joint understanding into the Brazilian and South African Presidencies? Can we sustain it in a situation of increasing crises and nationalism around the world? How can we carry this into policy-making in 2024 and beyond?

## **SCIENCE SYSTEMS AND SYSTEMS OF EXPERTISE—MULTIPLE OR FRAGMENTED?**

The think tanks of the G20 are operating in science systems characterized by substantial diversity regarding disciplinary versus thematic, applied versus basic research organization, and research infrastructures and mandates concerning independent research and policy advice. There is not one global science system but multiple, largely nationally funded and organized science systems that stand in close cooperation and dialogue with each other and yet are governed within the nationally determined frames of science policy-making.

An internationally recognized indicator for the value attached to science, the frame conditions provided, and the performance capacities of the science system of a country are the gross domestic expenditures (GERD) in research and development (R&D) (public and private). Here, the international best performers (Israel, Korea)

aim for (and reach) 5%, the European Union set the target of 3%, and the African Union of 1% (UNECA 2018). However, actual public R&D expenditures continue to vary substantially between regions and countries. Comparing the countries that led the G7 and G20 in 2022, respectively, Germany invested around 3.11% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) into R&D in 2020, and Indonesia invested 0.28% in the same year. In the year after, the figures (most recent available data) between the two countries holding the respective Presidencies compare as follows: Japan invested 3.27% in 2020, and India invested 0.66% in 2018. In the coming year 2024, Italy's investment of 1.53% (2020) compares to Brazil's 1.17% (2020), displaying a less significant difference (World Bank 2023). On average, public R&D spending continues to vary substantially between high, middle, and low-income countries, with the former investing on average 2.94% in 2020 and the latter around 1.77% if put in relation with the scientific output produced, publication rates, patents, innovations, but also more difficult to measure aspects such as societal science literacies a similar picture emerges (Table 1).

	<b>Presidency 2022</b>		<b>Presidency 2023</b>		<b>Presidency 2024</b>		<b>Presidency 2025</b>	
	<b>Germany</b>	<b>Indonesia</b>	<b>Japan</b>	<b>India</b>	<b>Italy</b>	<b>Brazil</b>	<b>Canada</b>	<b>South Africa</b>
<b>R&amp;D expenditure (% of GDP)</b>	3.11% (2020)	0.28% (2020)	3.27% (2020)	0.66% (2018)	1.53% (2020)	1.17% (2020)	1.7% (2020)	0.61% (2019)
<b>Scientific and technical journal articles (2020)</b>	109.379	32.554	101.014	149.213	85.419	70.292	65.822	15.885
<b>Patent application, nonresidents (2021)</b>	18.747	7.403	66.748	35.306	797	19.566	32.445	9.156
<b>Patent application, resident (2021)</b>	39.822	1.397	222.452	26.267	10.281	4.666	4.710	1.804

Figure 1: Countries that led the G7 and G20 expenditures in research and development (R&D), 2022-2025. Source: World Bank 2023, based on the UNESCO Institute for Statistics data.

On the African continent, public spending for R&D ranges from South Africa with 0.61% in 2019 and Kenya with 0.69% in 2010, followed by 0.51% of GDP in Tanzania in 2013 to 0.35% in Namibia in 2014 and lower (World Bank 2023).

Substantial differences between countries can also be observed in other fields. In agricultural R&D, the African Science and Technology Indicators (ASTI) mention, for instance, that since 2000, the percentage of R&D in agricultural value added dropped significantly (Lowder 2018).

In 2014, 29 of the 48 Sub-Saharan African countries for which data were available invested less than 1% of their agricultural GDP in R&D. This implies that R&D spending is outside the goal of an increasingly knowledge-based agricultural development. Also, with regard to R&D sources, ASTI shows significant differences, with basically all spending coming from the national budget in Namibia and higher dependency on donor funding in Kenya and Tanzania (Lowder 2018).

The above data underline that science and knowledge systems vary substantially globally. Due to the immense differences in the distribution of resources to support and fund research, the substantial differences in what is defined as research and what constitutes science, and the freedoms of research, a strong global fragmentation between and across science systems continues to exist. It marks a substantial discrepancy between, on the one hand, those science and knowledge systems that systematically study global megatrends, often termed as global challenges, that structurally determine the future of our planet; on the other hand, societies amongst those most affected by the global challenges (i.e., climate change, biodiversity loss, or the debt crisis) or that contribute to them (i.e., demographic change, geopolitical reordering, or transregional migration) (Hornidge et al. 2023; Partelow et al. 2020; Taylor et al. 2022).

Further, the ecological limits of our planet challenge the former underlying logic of scientific knowledge production to act as an engine of linear growth and demands a reflection of scientific knowledge production itself, as well as science-to-policy and science-to-practice interfaces (Sumberg et al. 2017). A profound

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change from the inherited global, regional, and national systems of research and knowledge production is required to generate research, science, and innovation systems that offer globally informed and holistic perspectives on how the world can be organized in a climate-stabilizing, decentralized multipolar order, as well as peacefully cooperating with the global common good in mind. More international science cooperation is a much-needed solution to tackle this challenge. While such networks exist in many disciplines and contexts, from basic to applied research, it is also necessary to jointly develop policy recommendations to address global challenges. One network that provides a platform for continuous and joint reflections on policy solutions is Think20, introduced in the next section.

## **CHANGING ROLE OF THINK TANKS VIS-À-VIS THE G20**

The G20 met in November 2008 in Washington for the first time at the level of heads of State and government to discuss emergency solutions to the Global Financial Crisis. This elevation of the G20, which was installed as a technical forum of Finance Ministers and Central Bank governors in response to the Asian Financial Crisis in 1999, was necessary since global problems could not be solved in the established format of the G7 anymore. The G7 realized it needed to cooperate with emerging countries at eye level to effectively respond to global crises, such as the one at hand. The timely and effective crisis response coordinated by the G20 helped to calm financial markets and avoid a breakdown of the global financial system (Cooper & Thakur 2013; Drezner 2014; Luckhurst 2016). In this moment of success, the G20 described itself as the “premier forum for international economic cooperation” (G20 2009).

The description of the G20 as a crisis manager still shapes our conceptions regarding the club governance formats. But the challenges addressed by the G20 today—internally and externally—are substantially different from then. Andrew Cooper (2019) argues that the G20 had morphed from a crisis committee into a steering group, which broadened its agenda beyond financial issues but proved much less effective in tackling slow onset events such as the climate crisis and biodiversity loss or more structural concerns including transregional migration or social inequalities. Following from there, he argues that the G20 today resembles a hybrid focal point that provides a forum for a variety of public—and increasingly private—actors of global governance to address global challenges through deliberation, coordination, and myriads of bilateral meetings on the fringes of the official Summit agenda (Cooper 2019). Due to this thematic opening of the G20, it became more inclusive and receptive to inputs from and engagement of non-governmental actors, such as business and labor organizations, civil society, think tanks, and academia (Luckhurst 2019). In addition, during

the G20 Presidency of India in 2023, the African Union was invited to become a formal member. The addition of the African Union has the potential to increase the inclusiveness of the G20 and further broaden its thematic scope, especially regarding the development challenges of low and middle-income countries.

The Think20 is one of the official Engagement Groups of the G20. The group met in Mexico City for the first time in February 2012 to discuss the Los Cabos G20 Summit agenda (Think20 2012). The meeting brought together a small group of 25 think tank experts from a variety of countries. The Think20 continued to convene workshops and conferences in the following years, often mandated by the respective Presidencies of the G20. In 2017, under Germany’s G20 Presidency, the Think20 process was put

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on a new structural footing by establishing issue-specific task forces that bring together experts from a broad range of countries to work on policy recommendations for the G20 and its various working groups. The Think20 process usually starts with an inception conference to define priorities and bring together experts, and ends with a Summit conference before the leadership role is handed over to the next Presidency. During these two landmark events, a number of side events were convened, topics of particular relevance identified, and co-authoring teams for joint-policy briefs formed. Since 2017, the Think20 process has increased in size and depth of scientific debate during the subsequent Argentinian, Japanese, Saudi Arabian, Italian, Indonesian, and Indian G20 Presidencies.

Especially in the past three years, the G20 and Think20 discussions were shaped by increasingly overlapping crises, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, ocean pollution, food security, social inequalities, and fiscal spaces. The dynamics unfolding at the interface of these multiple crises have been further aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia’s war in Ukraine and, more recently, the war between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

Policy coordination to tackle the multiple crises takes place in an increasingly contested geopolitical environment with divergent alliances cutting directly through the G20. Yet, depending on the crisis at hand, the lines of division vary, and thematically specific alliances inside the G20, the African Union, and beyond are mobilized.

Responses to the debt crises, for instance, are demanded from within the G20 and call upon both the G7 countries as the hosts of private creditors and China as the largest public creditor to help relieve the debt burden of low and middle-income countries, to free public funds to support sustainable development-oriented policies.

Regarding the reforms of the international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, effective encouragement for structural reforms has been built up by non-G7-G20 countries, and the G20 platform under India's Presidency used to build up pressure for reform. The reforms themselves, however, have yet to be taken forward by the institutions and their largest shareholders (G7 countries).

Finally, alliances are also further developed outside of the G20 context. The extension of the BRICS+ Group here serves as an example. From January 2024 onwards, the founding members—Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—will extend the group to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

Thus, on the one side, we observe a strengthening of the G20 as a platform bringing G7 countries, the large transition economies, and the African Union together and enabling joint decision-making outside the context of formal multilateral institutions. On the other side, we observe a proliferation of different groupings in group-based governance, allowing for a flexible building of alliances and utilization of different alliance constellations depending on the topic and issue at hand.

In this dynamic alliance building and re-building, think tanks organized in the Think20 play an increasingly important role in offering science-based policy recommendations based on expertise and deliberation processes across the think tank communities of the G20 countries and beyond. Beyond this basic function, the Think20, as a platform for transnational and transdisciplinary exchange, can also provide a space for Track Two Diplomacy and, more fundamentally, international trust building. There is also a growing need to help bridge the gap between the G20 and the G7, for example, through close cooperation with the Think7, the think tank process of the G7. However, this role of the Think20 is conditional to an efficient and inclusive process and a focus on impact that requires close and continuous interactions with policy-makers.

## **DOES GEOGRAPHY INDEED MATTER IN POLICY ADVICE?**

We ask whether, two years into a four-year stretch of the G20 Presidency being held by large transition economies of “the South,” we indeed witness a uniquely “Southern” type of leadership unfold in the G20. From the perspective of think tank cooperation, the question arises whether there is such a thing as “Southern”

and “Northern” policy advice—in general and as part of the Think20 process.<sup>1</sup> To reflect on this, we first of all distinguish four different types of leadership: economic, political, intellectual, and symbolic. In a second step, we focus on the role of intellectual leadership unfolded by the different Presidencies—here relating it to the leaderships observed within the G7. The focus on “intellectual leadership” is chosen as it is the field of leadership to which the advisory processes of Think20 and Think7 directly contribute. Contributions to the other types of leadership are, of course, aimed to and made through the advisory processes, but the political, economic, and symbolic resources required for their implementation do not lie with the community of think tanks and research institutes carrying the Think20 and Think7 processes.

The framework conditions for the work of think tanks are rapidly changing. In light of the multiple and overlapping crises, think tanks are required to develop effective policy proposals that take into account the complexities of today’s social, political, and economic systems and the planetary, and non-negotiable, boundaries of ecosystems and climate. Rising geopolitical rivalries make deadlocks in international negotiations more likely and, therefore, require think tanks to analyze and propose new models of international cooperation or even engage in Track Two Diplomacy to bridge disagreements and misconceptions among governments. In addition, the safeguarding of so-called “legacy topics” (Berger & Hornidge 2023) becomes more and more important, thus ensuring that previous commitments of G20 and G7 are not forgotten and, furthermore, that G7 and G20 commitments align or—at least—do not contradict each other. The work of Think20 provides both continuity in terms of policy discussions and thinking ahead, identifying pressing policy topics of the future that require G20 and/or G7 attention. This increasingly results in the need to better coordinate the G20 and G7 think tanks, organized in the Think20 and the Think7, to contribute to that end. At the same time, think tanks face increasing skepticism regarding science-based policy advice among policy-makers and the broader public.

Moreover, we observe shrinking spaces for open and critical policy discourses in many countries. Science systems, just as critical, independent media—as sketched out in global comparison above—are underfunded, particularly in low and middle-income countries, resulting in uneven representation in Think20-deliberations. Even more important is the Think20 space for transregional science and think tank cooperation. These spaces for intellectual discussion, reflection on institutional landscape, and policy instruments are often located in the G20 countries. However, more often than not, the Think20 also includes think tanks from

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1. We will focus on the Think20 and Think7 in the following. It also merits analysis to what extent the BRICS Academic Forum displays a unique forum for think tank exchange and how it relates to the Think20. This analysis, however, is beyond the scope of this article.

non-G20 countries, in particular from the region of the country that is chairing the G20 in any given year. The engagement of think tanks in the Think20 often goes beyond the yearly G20 cycle. This continuity allows building trustful relationships across national and disciplinary borders.

In the past two years under Indonesian and Indian Presidencies, we have seen substantial political and intellectual leadership unfolding. The Indonesian Presidency was substantially challenged by a world only slowly moving out of the Covid-19 pandemic, closely followed by tensions revolving around Russia's war in Ukraine. In this difficult situation, the Indonesian government's approach around the theme of "unity in diversity" and with repeated reference to the Bandung Conference in 1955—a moment of newly independent countries coming together in the so-called "non-aligned movement,"—allowed for the careful reestablishment of dialogue beyond difference. The Indian Presidency built on this and used it to (a) carry global governance topics and awareness into the wider Indian society, as well as (b) establish India as a global player on the multilateral level. Under its Presidency's theme—*One Earth, One Family, One Future*—the Indian government mobilized interest, support, and awareness for the future role of India in a multipolar world amongst its own citizens, academia, and private sector, as well as in relation with its international allies, neighbors and competitors.

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In both Presidencies and the accompanying advisory processes, we have seen increasing employment of language that works with geographic identity markers such as "the Global South," "Southernizing Global Governance" or "Southern Think Tanks" (Rising 2023). The term "Global South" is not new, but a term that has received increasing attention in the past years. Its usage ranges from a shorthand term for countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, as well as Small Island Development States in the Pacific and Indian Ocean, to a term replacing World Bank terminology based on levels of GDP or along the Human Development Index of the United Nations with reference to a wider range of criteria relevant to assessing the status of human development besides GDP, also including indicators such as access to health, educational and social infrastructures among others (UNDP 2022).

The term has been criticized widely for neglecting the heterogeneities that exist in the Global North as well as in the Global South, working with a binary

logic and flat ontologies (Haug, 2021). And yet, it is receiving increasing attention and seems to be increasingly used by actors from large middle-income economies located either in the South (i.e., South Africa, or large parts of Indonesia) or also North of the Equator (i.e., China). Yet, some “Southern” countries, such as Australia or New Zealand, are rarely considered “Global South.” Some authors even go so far as to argue that the increasing self-identification as the Global South of some countries on the one side goes back to slowed down economic growth rates and thus a replacement of the term “emerging economies” (Lubin 2023). On the other side, its use is increasingly politicized, especially in countries belonging to the BRICS+ Group, with the intention to underline differences to G7-countries of the North.

Self-identification in opposition to the Global North, which is just as little a unified group as the Global South? We observe the discursive construction of homogeneity of front lines, of seemingly hermeneutically closed “container spaces” North/South (i.e., for instance, values, interests, wealth, lived responsibility in tackling global challenges), and of opposition.<sup>2</sup> Discursive practices contributing to these constructions can also be observed in the Think20 and the interaction processes between Think20 and Think7. At the same time, substantial efforts are undertaken to identify convergences in interests and values between all country groups represented in the G20 again and again, guided by the Agenda 2030 as a common frame to define the future.<sup>3</sup>

So why work with a “Southern/Northern” terminology? Why discursively construct seemingly homogenous groupings in binary opposition to another? We would like to carry the following considerations into the debate:

1. Acknowledge, underline, and celebrate similarities in historical experiences (incl. colonial times) and today’s challenges regarding countries’ positionality in the global order. This, in turn, would require just as much acknowledgment of the differences that exist between different societies within each group (North/South).
2. Celebrate the diversity and pride connected with lived experiences and lifestyles in tropical and subtropical zones (largely represented in South), as well as in more temperate zones (largely represented in North). This would require to regard i.e. Australia or New Zealand as the South and i.e. China as the North.

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2. An example of a platform to further the cooperation of “Southern” think tanks and to strengthen the political salience of the “Global South” narrative is the Cape Town Conversation that took place for the first time at the end of November 2023. Interestingly, Indian and Brazilian think tanks used the occasion of the Cape Town Conversation to hand over the chairing of the Think20 process.

3. The Bellagio Retreat, which took place for the first time in March 2023, is an example of think tanks and thought leaders from the G20 and G7 coming together to enhance the cooperation between the G20 and G7 with the goal of supporting global sustainable development.

3. Remind the former power centers of the world of the many realities beyond their direct gaze; reflect on the “darker side of modernity” (Mignolo 2011); and actively work against global structures that maintain patterns of structurally embedded inequalities, i.e., in the global trade system. This would require further shaping economic and political structures between countries and within societies along the principles of “the social state.”

The above considerations underline the importance of giving differences a voice in order to then meet on equal terms and jointly build a multipolar world order that respects this difference. Yet, what we have observed over the past years is an increasing geopoliticization of the terminology “Global South”/“Global North” as well as of the binary division of the world with G7-countries largely standing for “the Global North” and the countries of G77+China for “the Global South.” This is further enhanced by the fact that the BRICS+ grouping increasingly tries to represent G77+China on the global level. The institutional landscape on the multilateral level is thus developing further in ways that give greater space to multi-alliances. Nation-states of significant economic strength, political influence globally, and demographic strength, in other words, powers that can be considered future poles in a multipolar world, are represented in multiple multilateral platforms and spaces, others are part of one or the other group. Fasulo et al. (2023) argue with regard to India: “Prime Minister Narendra Modi has mastered a ‘multi-aligned’ foreign policy that is strengthening India’s role as a cornerstone of two major trends: the institutionalization of the Indo-Pacific (IPEF, QUAD), and the relaunch of the BRICS as the vanguard of the Global South.”

The pattern of shaping and reshaping transregional alliances—as observable in the past years—is neither defined based on similar historical experiences (i.e., coloniality), economic systems and size (i.e., liberal market economy vs. planned high, middle, low-income economies), or political regimes (i.e., democracies vs. autocracies) nor based on geographic location (i.e. North/South, coastal/landlocked, island/landmass etc.), demographic pattern (i.e. population size & age structure) or relevance to tackling global challenges (i.e. CO<sub>2</sub> emissions or home to biodiversity hotspots). Instead, we increasingly see a pattern of thematic alliance building across all continents and all income groups (low, middle, and high-income countries) emerging but organized around particular themes of collaboration and joint interests. Examples include alliances battling the climate crisis (i.e., the formation of the Loss and Damage Fund, decided on at COP27 and filled with finance for the first time at COP28 in Dubai 2023) or in the transformation of energy systems—i.e., under the name of the Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETPs).

In the first months after the beginning of Russia’s war in Ukraine, we witnessed a Global Alliance for Food Security jointly fighting the food crises in parts of Northern Africa and the Middle East. During the Covid-19 pandemic, after the initial closing of borders, vaccine provision was organized via Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, efforts that since then have led to the establishment of numerous other initiatives to build up production capacities and shape markets for medical and healthcare products across Africa.

Multi-alignment as a strategy in external policy-making seems to be further confirmed when studying the voting pattern within the General Assembly of the United Nations with regard to the conflict between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip and West Jordan on October 27, 2023. India abstained from condemning Israel’s military intervention in the Gaza Strip following the killing of around 1200 Israeli civilians on October 7 by members of Hamas. All other countries belonging to the BRICS Group voted in favor. This difference in perspective was especially noted, as Brazil, India, China, and South Africa (meaning all BRICS countries with the exception of Russia) seemed to be united in perspective regarding Russia’s war in Ukraine. In the two votes at the United Nations General Assembly held on March 2, 2022, and February 24, 2023, all of the mentioned countries abstained from openly condemning Russia’s actions. Their abstention was at that time read as an expression of the urge not to “take sides.” India’s abstention regarding Israel, in contrast, was explained by Prime Minister Modi with reference to religious diversity in India itself.

The examples mentioned above of foreign policy-making in action stand for a number of singular events. While none of them should be overemphasized, we argue that, when looking at these developments over time, we see, first, a pattern of increased “Southern”/“Northern” terminology being employed. And, while we very much support, given everyday life experiences from the South, a much more pronounced voice and visibility in global governance, we observe with concern a geopoliticization of the binary use of Global South/Global North terminology and the flat ontologies it produces. Second, we point to the inconsistencies of the constructed binaries. While some historically grown experiences and structurally determined global positioning act as shared bases for a Southern/Northern identity construction, substantial diversity exists in everyday realities, economic and political positioning in the emerging multipolar order, and the visions of future pursued. We argue that these context-specific differences, that pave the ground for multiple futures, deserve to be celebrated and should have a place in shaping an indeed decentralized multipolar order.

This leaves us with the original but, until now, unanswered question regarding the role of a qualitative “Southernness” in policy advice as practiced in the Think20. The following section will attempt some answers.

## SCIENCE-TO-POLICY INTERFACES FOR A MULTIPOLAR AND COOPERATING WORLD

The Think20 has become a vibrant network bringing together increasing numbers of think tanks and experts from G20 and non-G20 countries, often also involving institutions and experts from the region of the Think20 host. The Think20 is producing increasing numbers of policy briefs that provide science-based policy recommendations for topics on the agenda of the respective G20 Presidency and beyond. Further, a growing number of experts, research institutes, and think tanks from a wide range of disciplines and thematic orientations, and across the countries belonging to the G20 and beyond, are involved in the deliberations of the Think20 task forces and in the meetings such as the inception conference or the Summit.

While this can be seen as a clear success of building this platform for Track Two Diplomacy, we have argued elsewhere to safeguard the Think20-process by paying particular attention to three areas: impact, continuity, and its ability to foster dialogue and exchange (Berger et al. 2021).

1. In order to be (more) impactful, the Think20 should establish closer relations to the G20 policy process itself. An important prerequisite is maintaining close, continuous, and trust-based connections to the official G20 process and, in particular, its various working groups, task forces, and initiatives. Through closer connections with the official G20 process, Think20 task forces are better informed about the priority issues discussed, the demands in terms of analytical input, and windows of opportunity for providing specific policy recommendations.

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2. The credibility and effectiveness of the Think20 depends on maintaining its independence from governmental and other non-governmental actors. In order to ensure independence, the Think20 should base policy recommendations solidly on scientific evidence that is ideally sourced from different bodies of literature, long-term research projects, and geographical contexts.
3. The Think20 is a transnational network characterized by diversity. In order to maintain this diversity, the Think20 must follow an inclusive approach that allows different voices and bodies of expertise to be heard. The Think20 should be open for participation of think tanks from non-G20 countries since they may offer additional expertise and, most importantly, can reflect on the policy recommendations from different geographical perspectives. Diversity in terms of gender, expertise, and background is important for its own sake and to develop policy recommendations based on a broad range of actor networks, addressing different audiences.

These principles stand in a productive tension towards each other. Full independence might conflict with the effectiveness of advice on particular policy challenges, while it might draw attention to other, more pressing topics. Yet, what these three principles additionally underline is twofold:

First, the research and expertise bases of the policy advice provided by the Think20 are absolutely crucial. Long-standing, in-depth research forms the most effective basis for policy advice. It is indeed the expertise of the experts, research institutes and think tanks that carries the Think20 process forward and constitutes the foundation of the science-policy interface and the technical and political advice itself. Thus, it is not geography but expertise that defines the content of the Think20.

While this is absolutely crucial, the brief sketch of the diverse landscape of science systems globally (section 2 above) nevertheless reminds us that the research and expertise base we all operate on is highly diverse. Structures and systems of knowledge production vary in disciplinary, thematic, applied, and basic science orientation. There is no “one” research and expertise basis that policy advisory processes such as the Think20 build on, but many highly heterogeneous ones exist.

This brings us to our second point: there is no, per se, “Southern” or “Northern” research and expertise base. But rather, the empirically-based and theory-led insights generated by multiple, largely nationally organized science systems are brought into close and continuous dialogue with each other and are checked for quality and relevance in different application contexts, here the G20

itself, and from there, a mosaic of transregionally elaborated expertise is drawn. The Think20 does not just practice a Track Two Diplomacy, but it serves as the backbone of bringing highly diverse but thematically connected communities of experts together, and thus, over the years, build the infrastructures of knowing and careful reflection for a transregionally-shaped, joint-ability to know and act upon the global challenges of an emerging multipolar world order.

## OUTLOOK

We argue that the Think20 is a transregional network of research-based expertise that has (a) immense depth in terms of local context expertise (coming out of a multitude of nationally organized science systems) and (b) is brought into close and continuous dialogue with each other to draw lessons out of the multiple research insights that are relevant for all countries within the G20 and beyond, as well as identify common patterns emerging in the research that is of relevance for joint governance of this emerging multipolar world and global common good.

For the G20 and Think20 processes under Brazil's leadership in 2024, this means:

1. Paying attention to the process, foster and harness it in an inclusive, scientifically independent, politically impactful manner;
2. Cherish long-lasting networks grown over many years between institutes, experts, and think tanks involved in order to build on a slowly emerging joint language and a multiperspective analytical lens;
3. Making use of the diversity of the different science systems involved and that the Think20 process rests on, each of them coming with its own strengths;
4. Avoid exclusionary practices or discourses that feed into divisions in the world rather than focus on complimentary convergences.

A “Southernization” of global governance is much needed. While only around 1/8th of the world population actually live South of the Equator, the everyday lived experiences of many social groups in the so-called South have been marginalized for so long that their interests, needs, and visions of the future feature far too little on the level of global governance. The Think20 has a responsibility to carry the aspirations of the future present in the “South” into the level of global governance.

At the same time, it is responsible for doing this in an empirical, evidence-based, and differentiated manner. A geopolitization of geography in which some countries in the South are not included in the “Southernization” while others in the North seem to at times even dominate the definition of “Southernness” should be answered with great caution by the Think20.

Research-based policy advice and science diplomacy are always as good as the quality of expertise and epistemic friendship carried into the processes. It is the contribution that the Think20 can and has to make to ensure that we in the future will live in a multipolar world that constructively cooperates with each other and in the interest of a global common good for all. ☞

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