

RESEARCH ARTICLE

South–South cooperation: What can we learn from South–South security cooperation?

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Abstract

To solve contemporary humanitarian, poverty, and climate crises we need to involve new or more actors and come up with innovative forms of collaborations, partnerships, finance, and solutions adapted to local circumstances. This is one of many reasons for growing interest in South–South security cooperation (SSSC). This concluding article seeks to draw parallels between the growing literature on SSSC and the broader body of literature on South–South cooperation to explore how and to what extent they enrich each other and further our understanding of South–South engagements. The article highlights the heterogeneous and relational nature of SSSC and points to a two-speed global South where larger, (geo)politically more potent and richer countries in the global South assist or export models to, or intervene in, smaller, politically and economically less powerful states. It also highlights internal power dynamics in the global South and carves out the complex ways in which traditional, historically informed power relations also affect the actions of Southern actors.

Keywords: geopolitics; global South; South–South collaboration; South–South security collaboration

Introduction

It could be argued that the nature, intensity, scale, and scope of our contemporary humanitarian, poverty, and climate crises are unprecedented. If we are to come closer to solving these crises, we need to involve new or more actors and come up with innovative forms of collaborations, partnerships, finance, and solutions adapted to local circumstances. This is the argument for interest in, and international support for, a range of initiatives that come under the umbrella of South–South cooperation (SSC). So far, the literature around SSC has been uneven in its scope, dealing predominantly with some vectors of engagement such as aid and investments and chiefly with the big Southern actors of China, India, and Brazil. This has left a gap in the research, in our understanding of areas such as security, peace, and conflict-induced displacement¹ and in analysis of the initiatives of less potent geopolitical actors.

¹Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Patricia Daley (eds), 'Introduction: Conceptualising the Global South and South–South encounters', in *Routledge Handbook of South–South Relationism* (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 1–27; Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, *South–South Educational Migration, Humanitarianism and Development: Views from the Caribbean, North Africa and the Middle East* (London: Routledge, 2015), but see, for instance, Paul Amar, 'Global South to the rescue: Emerging humanitarian superpowers and globalizing rescue industries', *Globalizations* 9:1 (2012), pp. 1–13.

This special issue on South–South security cooperation (SSSC)² seeks to fill this gap by analysing SSSC in both local and international conflicts in Latin America, in West Africa, in Southeast Asia, in Mexico’s collaboration with the Caribbean, in Turkey’s relation to some African countries, and in China’s security cooperation with its neighbours.

The special issue demonstrates that conflict-resolution initiatives and security cooperation increasingly bring in new actors, come up with innovative ways to share experiences, and try out new forms of financing and partnership to solve ever more complex conflict situations. These initiatives often involve collaborations between partners in the global South³ – sometimes in collaboration with partners in the global North.

This is the case in Colombia’s export of security practices to its Latin American neighbours facilitated by the Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean; in inter-African security cooperation as exemplified by the forum involving Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad – the Group of Five for the Sahel (G5) – set up to safeguard security and development in the Sahel and funded largely by the European Union (EU); in Turkey’s close military cooperation with Somalia and Libya; and in Caribbean political leaders’ collaboration with Mexico to stop illegal exportation of US firearms to the Caribbean.⁴

The cases in this special issue on SSSC lay bare that the global South in these accounts is as heterogeneous as in other accounts of SSC – not only do power asymmetries exist between the funder of an SSSC initiative and the pivotal actor, but also between the pivotal Southern actor and less powerful/experienced actors in the global South.⁵ These examples also reveal that SSSC most often involves regional collaborations rather than collaborations between countries of the South because they share histories of structural injustices, languages, and/or borders. The cases are also unlike most accounts of SSC in that SSSC not only is about state-to-state relations but also involves other actors.⁶ They also reveal that the global North often plays a key role as financier, facilitator, designer, or source of inspiration in these interventions – the so-called ‘shaping power of global North actors and institutions.’⁷ The vectors of security engagement are also shown to be

²Tobias Berger and Markus-Michael Müller, ‘South–South cooperation and the (re)making of global security governance’, *European Journal of International Security* (this issue), define SSSC as a ‘relational collaborative effort based on sharing experiences and resources to address security challenges... [that is] involving, but not limited to, at least two actors that historically share a position of marginalization in the global order and can therefore be classified as ‘Southern’.

³Following Thomas Muhr, ‘Reclaiming the politics of South–South cooperation’, *Globalizations*, 20:3 (2023), pp. 347–64 (p. 349), I here distinguish between the ‘global South’ that designates specific countries mostly located in the Southern hemisphere that are characterised either by being former colonies or by being subjected to coloniality and the ‘Global South’ that refers to the relational space of marginalisation created by ‘people’s and places’ shared historical experiences of and resistances to colonial/imperial subalternisation, exploitation and the ensuing material and epistemic structural injustices; see also Tobias Berger, ‘The ‘Global South’ as a relational category: Global hierarchies in the production of law and legal pluralism’, *Third World Quarterly*, 42:9 (2021), pp. 2001–17; Nikita Sud and Diego Sánchez-Ancochea, ‘Southern discomfort: Interrogating the category of the global South’, *Development and Change* 53:6 (2022), pp. pp. 1123–50.

⁴Markus Hochmüller and Markus-Michael Müller, ‘Homologies and modelling in Colombian South–South security cooperation’, *European Journal of International Security*; Yonique Campbell, Anthony Harriott, Felicia Grey and Damion Blake, ‘From the “war on drugs” to the “war on guns”: South–South cooperation between Mexico & the Caribbean’; Adam Sandor, Philippe M. Frowd, and Jana Hönke, ‘Productive failure, African agency, and security cooperation in West Africa: The case of G5 Sahel’; Nebahat Tanrıverdi Yaşar, ‘The Janus-face of Turkey’s global positioning and Turkey’s security engagement with African states: Security isomorphism’ (all in this issue).

⁵See e.g. Emma Mawdsley, ‘South–South cooperation 3.0? Managing the Consequences of success in the decade ahead’, *Oxford Development Studies*, 47:3 (2019), pp. pp. 259–74; Peter Kragelund, *South–South Development* (London: Routledge, 2019). For a discussion of power relations in triangular cooperations, see Cheryl McEwan and Emma Mawdsley, ‘Trilateral development cooperation: Power and politics in emerging aid relationships’, *Development and Change*, 43:6 (2012), pp. 1185–209.

⁶Although the lion’s share of academic literature on SSC has dealt with how, why, when, and with what means ‘high-GDP Southern donor states’ have engaged with ‘low- and medium-GDP Southern states’, a growing body of literature is looking at non-state SSC; see e.g. Carolina Milhorange and Marcel Bursztyn, ‘South–South civil society partnerships: Renewed ties of political contention and policy building’, *Development Policy Review*, 35 (2017), pp. 80–95.

⁷Berger and Müller, ‘South–South cooperation and the (re)making of global security governance.’

often intertwined with foreign policy, aid policy, or broader trade policies.⁸ Many SSSC projects are shown to fail in similar ways to North–South (security) collaborations because they do not take the different context into account – even if geographical proximity, shared histories, shared socio-economic structures, and so on are often argued to be the reason why SSC is needed.⁹ Finally, the cases show that SSSC is not radically changing the overall structure of security cooperation, but rather complementing existing structures – very similar to other vectors of SSC.¹⁰

This special issue also highlights the *relational* character defining SSSC. It points to the ever-changing relationship between Southern partners and between partners in the global South and North, to the power relations underpinning security cooperations, and to the global hierarchies of who is to frame the ‘right’ way to intervene in a conflict and thus to the ‘structural relationship of domination between interconnected entities within a global system.’¹¹

What defines the SSSC revealed in this special issue is, therefore, not that SSSC equals non-Northern involvement, nor that security cooperation is fundamentally different from other vectors of SSC engagement. Instead, these cases of SSSC go ‘from, with and through the global South’¹² and they thereby add new layers to our understanding of SSC.

This concluding commentary seeks to draw parallels between the growing literature on SSSC and the broader body of literature on SSC to explore how and to what extent they enrich each other and further our understanding of South–South engagements. To explore this, the remainder of this commentary is structured as follows. First, I describe how SSC has changed since the term was first coined and then demonstrate the breadth and scope of the concept as it is currently used. This enables me to come closer to a characterisation of SSC before I discuss when it makes analytical sense to use the SSC frame. In the final part of the commentary, I consider how SSSC – and in particular the cases in this special issue – enrich our understanding of SSC.

The birth of SSC

In the broadest sense of the word, SSC describes ‘a wide range of initiatives developed by Southern state and non-state actors in support of individuals, communities and peoples across the Global South.’¹³ The concept is often traced back to the 1955 Bandung Conference where Jawaharlal Nehru and Sukarno, then Indian prime minister and Indonesian president, respectively, brought together representatives from 29 nations and colonies in the decolonising global South to give voice to this part of the world and to address the structural inequalities in the world. The fight against structural inequalities and neocolonialism also characterised the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) that grew out of the Bandung Conference. Both were political in nature – seeking to alter global inequalities and suppression – and they mark the beginning of an era of SSC informed by Third Worldism, socialism, and post-colonialism.

The Lusaka Resolution, which was the outcome of the 1970 NAM meeting, introduced the concept of ‘self-reliance’, which referred to economic cooperation among developing countries and which was perceived as a tool to minimise dependency on colonisers. The idea of collective interests among countries in the global South was further developed in the call for a special entity within the United Nations (UN) system that could promote SSC for development, namely the G77 – named after the number of founding countries. In parallel, the Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity

⁸Xue Gong, ‘Ponder the part of thy feet: How China chooses security cooperation in the Mekong region’, *European Journal of International Security* (this issue); Hochmüller and Müller, ‘Homologies and modelling in Colombian South–South security cooperation.’; Yaşar, ‘The Janus-face of Turkey’s global positioning and Turkey’s security engagement with African States.’

⁹See also Eric Cezne and Jana Hönke, ‘The multiple meanings and uses of South–South relations in extraction: The Brazilian mining company Vale in Mozambique’, *World Development*, 151 (2022), pp. 105756.

¹⁰Behrooz Morvaridi and Caroline Hughes, ‘South–South cooperation and neoliberal hegemony in a post-aid world’, *Development and Change*, 49:3 (2018), pp. 867–92.

¹¹Berger, ‘The ‘Global South’ as a relational category’, p. 2002.

¹²Berger and Müller, ‘South–South cooperation and the (re)making of global security governance.’

¹³Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, *South–South Educational Migration, Humanitarianism and Development*, p. 11.

Organisation, the UN Conference on Technical Cooperation, and the UN Conference on Trade and Development were established to consider the concerns of the countries of the global South. To coordinate and mainstream SSC in the UN system, the UN Office for South–South Collaboration was established.¹⁴

At the aggregate level, these multilateral initiatives did not spark massive trade, investment, and aid flows among countries in the global South,¹⁵ but notable bilateral ties between countries of the global South developed alongside these larger political initiatives. Most bilateral South–South engagements at the time were intermingled with Cold War geopolitics and driven by aid programmes such as the 1,860-kilometre Tazara Railway from Kapri Mposhi in Zambia to Dar es Salaam in Tanzania funded by a Chinese interest-free loan and built in collaboration by 30,000 to 50,000 Chinese railway experts and 80,000 Tanzanian and Zambian workers.¹⁶ Cuba's long-term health operations in other countries in the global South were also driven by geopolitics and framed as aid. They began with the deployment of Cuban health volunteers in Algeria in 1963, the Congo (1965), and Guinea Bissau (1966) and culminated in large-scale deployment of health and military personnel in Angola over more than a decade and a half from the 1970s onwards.¹⁷

Despite the great political promises and cases of successful bilateral SSC, the hype soon faded. This was due to a combination of Cold War intensification that led to superpower alignment rather than South–South alignment, the two oil crises of the 1970s that divided the global South into oil-exporting and oil-importing countries, and the debt crisis caused by the recycling of petrodollars that led to growing internal differentiation among countries of the global South.

Alongside these changes, countries in the global South experienced different development trajectories. While the newly industrialised countries (NICs) of Southeast Asia embarked on structural transformation that led to high growth rates, most sub-Saharan African and many Latin American countries experienced negative growth rates. By the 1990s, these different economic growth trajectories had resulted in a situation in which the NICs, and not least China, spearheaded a process of 'shifting wealth'¹⁸ in the world. Low-GDP Southern states began 'looking east'¹⁹ for development inspiration and funding, and high-GDP Southern states sought ways to transform economic power into political influence. In combination, this double pressure rejuvenated SSC.

SSC rejuvenation

This revived version of SSC took a number of different forms. In the UN system, it was the beginning of a technicalisation and depoliticisation of SSC underpinned by special units, programmes,

¹⁴Kragelund, *South–South Development*; Mawdsley, 'South–South cooperation 3.0?'; Dan Banik and Emma Mawdsley, 'South–South cooperation and global development in a multipolar world: China and India in Africa', *Journal of International Development*, 35:4 (2023), pp. 539–48; Fiddian-Qasimiyeh, *South–South Educational Migration, Humanitarianism and Development*; Sebastian Haug, 'Beyond mainstreaming? Past, present and future of UN support for South–South and triangular cooperation', *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding*, 10:1 (2022), pp. 15–44.

¹⁵Steen Folke, Niels Fold, and Thyge Enevoldsen, *South–South Trade and Development: Manufacturers in the New International Division of Labour* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993); Kragelund, *South–South Development*.

¹⁶Jamie Monson, *Africa's Freedom Railway: How a Chinese Development Project Changed Lives and Livelihoods in Tanzania* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

¹⁷John M. Kirk, *Healthcare without Borders: Understanding Cuban Medical Internationalism* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2015); Daniele Benzi and Ximena Zapata, 'Good-bye Che? Scope, identity, and change in Cuba's South–South cooperation' in Isaline Bergamaschi, Phoebe Moore, and Arlene B. Tickner (eds), *South–South Cooperation Beyond the Myths* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 79–106.

¹⁸OECD, *Perspectives on Global Development 2010: Shifting Wealth* (Paris: OECD Development Centre, 2010).

¹⁹Daniel Large and Luke A. Patey (eds), *Sudan Looks East: China, India & the Politics of Asian Alternatives* (Woodbridge: James Curry, 2011).

and grand publications.²⁰ Elsewhere, geopolitical undertones resumed.²¹ This was the case, for instance, for the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America Trade Treaty, which was invented as a more equal model of regional trade and investment integration and thus an alternative to the market-led globalisation process exemplified in the Free Trade Area of the Americas. It was also the driving force for the India–Brazil–South Africa Dialogue Forum that stemmed from the three countries' dissatisfaction with being invited only as observers to a G8 meeting in 2003. The three countries were regional powers and adopted a Brasília Declaration that called for a reform of the UN Security Council, inclusive growth, social equity, and a reorganisation of the distribution of power in the world. Last, but not least, geopolitics came to matter a lot for what was originally just a catchy acronym to direct investors to new markets outside the global North, namely BRIC. The four countries originally singled out by Goldman Sachs – Brazil, Russia, India, and China – soon institutionalised the acronym, and, by 2009, the leaders of the four countries held annual meetings that called for greater voice and representation in international financial institutions for the countries of the global South. In 2011, BRIC included South Africa and changed its name to BRICS. In January 2024, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates also joined the formation (now BRICS+), such that it came to represent 45 per cent of the world population and 38 per cent of world GDP. This most recent expansion of BRICS+ makes it more relevant for other countries in the global South while simultaneously highlighting that most international financial institutions do not represent the current distribution of economic and political power in the world.²²

This phase of SSC developments was characterised by great enthusiasm – both from the affected actors and from the international development community. While China's present-day activities in Africa are a source of disagreement among analysts and academics,²³ the activities of other Southern actors have tended to be perceived positively. This was the case, for instance, in the early descriptions of the Brazilian mining company Vale S.A.'s investments in Africa. It was portrayed in terms of Southern solidarity and praised for its (potential) ability to transfer experience based

²⁰UNDP, *Human Development Report 2013. The Rise of the South: Human Progress in a Diverse World* (New York: UNDP, 2013); UNCTAD, *South–South Cooperation: Africa and the New Forms of Development Partnership* (New York: UNCTAD, 2010); 'South–South cooperation in international investment arrangements', in *UNCTAD Series on International Investment Policies for Development* (New York: United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2005). The UN also revived the high-level conferences such as that on South–South development in Nairobi in 2009 that led to the Buenos Aires Plan of Action that paid particular attention to the 'proximity of experience' among actors of the global South when they partner to solve problems.

²¹Mawdsley, 'South–South cooperation 3.0?', reminds us that in the phase she identifies as SSC 2.0, SSC was not only about large-scale organisations; SSC was also visible among civil society organisations and activists from the global South. See also Alex Shankland and Euclides Gonçalves, 'Imagining agricultural development in South–South cooperation: The contestation and transformation of Prosavana', *World Development*, 81 (2016), pp. 1–12, for a discussion of how transnational civil society movements have opposed particular SSC initiatives, and Eric Cezne, 'Forging transnational ties from below: Challenging the Brazilian mining giant Vale S.A. across the South Atlantic', *The Extractive Industries and Society*, 6:4 (2019), pp. 1174–83, for an analysis of how critique of the Brazilian mining company Vale S.A.'s activities in Mozambique led to the formation of transnational collaboration between civil society in Brazil and Mozambique.

²²Kragelund, *South–South Development*; Oliver Stuenkel, *The BRICS and the Future of Global Order* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015); *India–Brazil–South Africa Dialogue Forum (IBSA): The Rise of the Global South?* (London: Routledge, 2015); Thomas Muhr, 'Conceptualising the ALBA–TCP: Third generation regionalism and political economy', *International Journal of Cuban Studies* (2011), pp. 98–115; Pdraig Carmody, *The Rise of the BRICS in Africa: The Geopolitics of South–South Relations* (London: Zed Books, 2013); Peter Kragelund, 'Back to basics? The rejuvenation of non-traditional donors' development cooperation with Africa', *Development and Change*, 42:2 (2011), pp. 585–607; Marc Jütten and Dorothee Falkenberg, *Expansion of BRICS: A Quest for Greater Global Influence?* (Brussels: European Parliament, 2024).

²³Compare, for instance, Irene Yuan Sun, *The Next Factory of the World: How Chinese Investment Is Reshaping Africa* (Boston: Harvard Business Review, 2017), who portrays Chinese investment in Africa in very positive terms and sees these investments as the foundation for industrialisation in the continent, with Ian Taylor, *Africa Rising? BRICS–Diversifying Dependency* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2014), who links Chinese presence and investments in Africa with signs of deindustrialisation there.

on cultural and technological similarities and geographical affinities.²⁴ Likewise, South–South humanitarian assistance has been celebrated for its ability to help meet financial needs and to introduce new modalities and organisations, and thereby democratise the field of humanitarianism. It is also praised for the similarities between the givers and the people in need and for the ability to respond rapidly to a crisis. Willingness to give, it is argued, depends in part on geographical proximity and the cultural/historical similarities between givers and recipients.²⁵

The picture is more mixed with regard to growing South–South financial cooperation. On one hand – and in line with the enthusiasm shown for South–South humanitarian assistance – observers have, for instance, applauded financial cooperation for its potential in financing unmet needs in infrastructure development in the global South. Southern financial institutions seem to react more quickly to the needs of the lender, and there is an absence of the political and economic conditionalities of the international financial institutions originating in the global North. This lack of conditionalities is also the main point of criticism regarding South–South finance, as it is argued that the no-strings-attached approach adopted by many Southern financial institutions may lead to poor allocation of scarce resources. There has also been concern voiced about the rapidly increasing levels of debt in many countries in the global South.²⁶ Similarly, South–South finance is criticised for opaque lending practices where credit is mixed with investments. At a more general level, there is growing concern that the rapid increase in new creditors makes it even more difficult to solve the looming debt crisis via debt restructuring agreements because Southern and Northern lenders do not necessarily agree on the terms.²⁷

A new era of SSC?

In the words of Emma Mawdsley, ‘the narrative framing SSC has always been about mutual benefits – diplomatically and economically in particular.’²⁸ This, alongside the framing of SSC around solidarity and marginalisation, Mawdsley argues, has curbed domestic critique of spending time and money in projects in other Southern countries – even if the outcomes of these projects have been unknown. This era may be changing. The sheer growth of SSC has made it more visible to domestic audiences.²⁹ What is more, an increasing number of South–South engagements have turned out to be less positive than first anticipated. This is, for instance, the case for Vale S.A.’s investments in Mozambique and Guinea, where key actors seem to have ‘overlooked basic due diligence considerations’ and instead relied on the impression that the challenges the company would face in Mozambique and Guinea were like challenges in Brazil.³⁰

²⁴Eric Cezne and Ana Saggiore Garcia, ‘The rise and fall of Brazilian extractivism in Africa: Taking stock of Vale’s mining operations on the continent (2004–2022)’, *The Extractive Industries and Society*, 17 (2024), p. 101400.

²⁵Jacinta O’Hagan and Miwa Hirono, ‘Fragmentation of the international humanitarian order? Understanding ‘cultures of humanitarianism in East Asia’, *Ethics & International Affairs*, 28:4 (2014), pp. 409–24; Lisa Ann Richey, Line Engbo Gissel, Opportuna L. Kweka, Pernille Bærendtsen, Peter Kragelund, Herbert Qambalo Hambati, and Asubiye Mwamfupe, ‘South–South humanitarianism: The case of Covid-organics in Tanzania’, *World Development*, 141 (2021), pp. 105375; Daniel G. Maxwell and Kirsten Gelsdorf, *Understanding the Humanitarian World* (London: Routledge, 2019).

²⁶In many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, China is currently either the biggest lender or second only to the World Bank: Joris Gort and Andrew Brooks, ‘Africa’s next debt crisis: A relational comparison of Chinese and Western lending to Zambia’, *Antipode*, 55:3 (2023), pp. 830–52. China is not the only significant creditor. India is fast increasing its overseas lending and so are the Gulf states. ‘Can the IMF solve the poor world’s debt crisis?’, *The Economist* (18 April 2024).

²⁷Diana Barrowclough, Kevin P. Gallagher, and Richard Kozul-Wright (eds), ‘Introductory issues and roadmap to Southern-led development finance’, in *Southern-Led Development Finance* (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 1–17; Gort and Brooks, ‘Africa’s next debt crisis’; ‘Can the IMF solve the poor world’s debt crisis?’.

²⁸Mawdsley, ‘South–South cooperation 3.0?’, p. 262.

²⁹South–South trade, for instance made up 54 per cent of the global South’s total trade in 2022: UNCTAD, *Trade & Development Report 2023. Growth, Debt, and Climate: Realigning the Global Financial Architecture* (New York: UNCTAD, 2023), p. 49.

³⁰Mathias Alencastro and Eric Cezne, ‘The South–South investment that never happened: Vale in Guinea’, *The Extractive Industries and Society*, 13 (2023), pp. 101147 (p. 8).

At the same time, internal heterogeneity within the global South is increasing.³¹ Some countries have begun collaborating with OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) donors and have thereby adjusted how they provide development assistance, how they monitor it, and how they account for it. Others have resisted Northern actors' attempts to make them follow DAC guidelines when providing development aid.³² Similarly, South–South trade patterns are by no means even, with the benefits unequally divided among the countries of the global South. Countries such as Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, and Thailand are both driving this growth and benefiting from it.³³ A similar story could be told about South–South investments that primarily originate in high-GDP Southern states and target neighbouring countries in the global South, countries with large mineral wealth, and/or (large) middle-income countries in the global South. They thereby bypass resource-poor countries in sub-Saharan Africa. In the same way, while the financial 'center of gravity has shifted firmly southwards', and while a plethora of financial actors in principle offer credit at relatively favourable rates to African countries, Southern financial institutions have yet to fill the financial gap for African countries.³⁴

The *degree* to which SSC is indeed different from other forms of cooperation is also increasingly unclear. Some of the (claimed) advantages of SSC, such as technologies adapted to the local context, cost effectiveness, and quick response, are also present in other forms of collaboration.³⁵ The North–South binarisation that characterised earlier eras of SSC thus no longer makes as much analytical sense. Instead, we must also empirically investigate internal power relations among Southern actors.

The internal heterogeneity probably also explains why the very concept of SSC is not adopted by all actors of the global South to the same extent or applied in similar situations. Sub-Saharan African actors, for instance, seem less inclined to promote SSC in the UN compared to Asian actors. African countries have also been hosts to far fewer SSC meetings than their counterparts in Asia and Latin America. In contrast to other actors in the global South, actors representing African countries seem to mostly refer to SSC when Northern actors are also present. The very decision to use or not use the concept reveals internal power relations and differences within the global South.³⁶

So, while the narrative of SSC revolving around solidarity, benevolence, brotherhood, and partnership in pursuit of common interests, and related to affinities and cultural closeness, remains largely unchanged, the reality on the ground seems to be changing rapidly. This special issue on SSSC has gone beyond the 'self-fashioning efforts'³⁷ of Southern actors and instead analysed how cooperation is performed by the actors, how it matters, and for whom.

³¹See also Adam Moe Fejerskov, Erik Lundsgaarde, and Signe Cold-Ravnkilde, 'Recasting the "new actors in development" research agenda', *The European Journal of Development Research*, 29:5 (2017), pp. 1070–85.

³²Which direction the influence goes is unresolved: do Southern institutions adopt procedures similar to the 'established' old ones, is it indeed a two-way process where Southern and Northern actors influence each other, or are Northern donors rather imitating actors in the global South? Emma Mawdsley, 'The "Southernisation" of development?', *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 59:2 (2018), pp. 173–85; Peter Kragelund, 'Towards convergence and cooperation in the global development finance regime: Closing Africa's policy space?', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 28 (2015), pp. 246–62; Barrowclough, Gallagher, and Kozul-Wright, 'Introductory issues and roadmap'. See also Nafissa Insebayeva, 'On becoming a development cooperation partner: Kazakhstan's foreign policy, identity, and international norms', *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 11:2 (2020), pp. 158–73, for an analysis of how Kazakhstan deliberately picks and chooses from characteristics most often associated with Southern development partners and characteristics linked to OECD DAC donors.

³³UNCTAD, *Trade & Development Report 2023*.

³⁴Diana Barrowclough, Kevin P. Gallagher, and Richard Kozul-Wright (eds), 'Southern-led development finance: Rationale, innovations and implications', in *Southern-Led Development Finance* (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 21–48; Barrowclough, Gallagher, and Kozul-Wright, 'Introductory issues and roadmap', p. 5.

³⁵Sandor, Frowd, and Hönke, 'Productive failure, African agency, and security cooperation in West Africa'.

³⁶Sebastian Haug and Cynthia M. Kamwengo, 'Africa beyond "South–South cooperation": A frame with limited resonance', *Journal of International Development*, 35:4 (2023), pp. 549–65.

³⁷Berger and Müller, 'South–South cooperation and the (re)making of global security governance'.

In the SSSC cases described in this special issue as well as in many descriptions of contemporary SSC, the vectors of engagement are highly interwoven, and they often exhibit a high degree of overlap between business and political interests. They also often display close links between development and foreign policy objectives, and between economic concerns and security concerns.³⁸ A closer look at these collaborations, however, shows that not all vectors are equally important. Even if aid has played a pivotal role in the uneven relationship between the global North and the global South, and hence South–South aid cooperation is often portrayed as different from other vectors of engagement,³⁹ SSC aid is most often the vector that accelerates and finances the other vectors of engagement – just as with North–South collaborations. This is also true in many of the cases of SSSC described in this special issue.⁴⁰

When does it make sense to define a collaboration as SSC?

As the preceding sections have shown, SSC is constantly changing. SSC began as a reaction to domination and exploitation from the global North – often framed as ‘autonomous and self-confident cooperative action among developing countries in search of mutual benefits,’⁴¹ solidarity, mutual assistance, and equality between actors in the global South. It then transformed into depoliticised, technical cooperation led and funded by UN agencies. Now, SSC is (also) framed in terms of strategic interest and geopolitics especially by the so-called emerging South. While SSC was originally a way of diversifying from the global North, this is now not necessarily the main aim. Even if the concept of SSC (and associated notions such as solidarity and equality) is still applied to signal an alternative to collaborations initiated by the global North and as an ‘empowering alternative,’⁴² contemporary South–South initiatives do not always abide by the original principles. It has become apparent that countries of the global South are not necessarily equal, and neither are the collaborations that involve two or more Southern partners.

Throughout the history of SSC, the degree to which a project or an intervention framed as SSC has been Southern-led has been questioned. In many cases, bilateral or multilateral actors from the global North have financed the intervention fully or partially or have aided it technically or organisationally. There are also many instances of Southern actors taking over initiatives developed by Northern entities. In these cases, what SSC refers to becomes blurred. This raises the question of when or under what circumstances it still makes sense to refer to a collaboration as SSC.

Despite the changing nature of SSC, it still seems sensible to frame an intervention as SSC when the collaborating partners use the term to describe the intervention – or what Tobias Berger and Markus-Michael Müller refer to as the ‘heterogeneous unity’ of words.⁴³ This very framing signals that it is either framed in opposition to traditional North–South collaboration or that it seeks to build on the original SSC values. So, the framing as SSC points towards differences or historical traits related to SSC.

It also provides analytical value to term an intervention as SSC when the definitions that are used to guide and understand the collaboration differ from the definitions set by Northern actors. This is the case, for instance, regarding most South–South development assistance and also the case with regard to much of China’s state lending to other actors in the global South.⁴⁴

³⁸This mix of objectives not only typifies actors of the global South. Domestic economic and security concerns have also influenced actors of the global North. Carol Lancaster, *Foreign Aid: Diplomacy, Development, Domestic Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

³⁹Fiddian-Qasbiyeh and Daley, ‘Introduction: Conceptualising the global South and South–South encounters.’

⁴⁰Sandor, Frowd, and Hönke, ‘Productive failure, African agency, and security cooperation in West Africa.’

⁴¹José Antonio Alonso and Guillermo Santander, ‘Triangular cooperation: Change or continuity?’, *The European Journal of Development Research*, 34 (2022), pp. 248–71 (p. 249).

⁴²Alencastro and Cezne, ‘The South–South investment that never happened.’

⁴³Berger and Müller, ‘South–South cooperation and the (re)making of global security governance.’

⁴⁴Anna Gelpert, Sebastian Horn, Scott Morris, Brad Parks and Christoph Trebesch, ‘How China lends: A rare look into 100 debt contracts with foreign governments’, *Economic Policy*, 38:114 (2022), pp. 345–416; Johanna Jansson, ‘The Sicomines

Likewise, it makes sense to deem a collaboration as SSC when it signals a new trend in South–South partnerships and therefore provides new analytical insights. This is the case regarding South–South humanitarianism. While countries in the global South have long provided humanitarian assistance via multilateral agencies to other countries in the global South,⁴⁵ it is only of late that the mechanisms and drivers of other types of South–South humanitarianism have been analysed.⁴⁶ Framing it as SSC allows us to examine organisations, power structures, and *modi operandi* that differ from international humanitarianism defined by the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence or from Western faith-based humanitarianism.⁴⁷

It is also beneficial to use SSC as an analytical lens when a collaboration involves actors not typically involved in these types of partnerships and when they bring new knowledge to the collaboration. This is the case in the G5 Sahel analysed in this special issue on SSSC.⁴⁸ Here, the SSC framing forces us to closely examine the types of political strategies, partnerships, and funding structures, and how they relate to already-established structures.

Enriching our understanding of SSC by studying SSSC

The SSSC cases analysed here all point to a two-speed global South where larger, (geo)politically more potent and richer countries in the global South assist or export models to, or intervene in, smaller, politically and economically less powerful states. In particular, this is noticeable in Turkey's security cooperation with African countries and in China's differentiated security cooperation in the Mekong region. It is also noticeable in Colombia's export of security expertise and practice to neighbouring countries in Latin America and in Mexico's collaboration with countries in the Caribbean to fight the spread of firearms. This internal heterogeneity within and across the global South is also present in other vectors of SCC engagement. This commentary has revealed that this also comes to the fore clearly with regards to aid, finances, investments, and trade. Not only are trade, investments, and financial flows concentrated in high-GDP Southern states (and states in close geographical proximity to each other), but it is also only the economically and politically potent countries in the global South that can best use aid as a vehicle to further their interests in other countries in the global South. Power dynamics therefore not only play out in traditional North–South cooperation but also affect (S)SSC and point to the complex ways in which traditional, historically informed power relations also affect the actions of Southern actors.

The studies of SSSC in this special issue also support insights from the broader SSC literature that most South–South engagements are not instigated as a critique of Northern-led engagements but should rather be perceived as a further development of existing North–South collaborations or collaborations financed or supported by actors in the global North.⁴⁹ However, in contrast to some other vectors of South–South cooperation, domestic (security) concerns seem to drive SSSC. As described by in the contributions by Yonique Campbell et al. as well as Han and Khemanitthathai, security concerns coexist with geographical proximity and thus SSSC becomes a pressing domestic

Agreement revisited: Prudent Chinese banks and risk-taking Chinese companies', *Review of African Political Economy*, 40:135 (2013), pp. 152–62.

⁴⁵Financial Tracking Service, 'List of Government Donors', UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, available at: {<https://fts.unocha.org/donors/overview>}.

⁴⁶Anne Meike Fechter and Anke Schwittay (eds), *Citizen Aid and Everyday Humanitarianism: Development Futures?* (New York: Routledge, 2021); Jan Grill, 'Encountering compassion: Venezuelan migrants and emerging forms of humanitarianism in Colombia', *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale*, 31 (2023), pp. 85–102; Richey et al., 'South–South humanitarianism'; Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Julia Pacitto, 'Southern-led faith-based responses to refugees: Insights for the Global North', in Benjamin Schewel and Erin K. Wilson (eds), *Religion and European Society: A Primer* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2019), pp. 195–214.

⁴⁷Cordier Bruno De, 'Faith-based aid, globalisation and the humanitarian frontline: An analysis of Western-based Muslim aid organisations', *Disasters*, 33:4 (2009), pp. 608–28.

⁴⁸Sandor, Frowd, and Hönke, 'Productive failure, African agency, and security cooperation in West Africa'.

⁴⁹Of course, some SSSC initiatives are best understood as a reaction to the Northern-led world order. This is for instance the case in China's securitisation/de-securitisation initiatives in the Mekong region. Gong, 'Ponder the part of thy feet'.

political concern.⁵⁰ While domestic politics (and regime survival) is also a driving force of China's lending and investments schemes in other countries in the global South,⁵¹ collaborations that concern provision of security-related infrastructure, security sector reform, and support for a lawsuit against gun trafficking have more direct effects on the lives of people in the involved countries. Domestic politics in SSSC is therefore not only about the political elite, as in most SSC, but more broadly about the population at large.

Therefore, spatiality comes more to the fore in SSSC compared to SSC. Of course, and as depicted in this commentary, aid, trade, and investments patterns also depict patterns of spatiality. Indian aid primarily targets neighbouring countries, new Southern development banks chiefly have a regional focus, and East Asian investments mostly target other countries in the region;⁵² but neither (this type of) aid, nor trade or investments, affect life and death directly. In contrast, life and death are affected by peacekeeping operations, counter-terrorism, and post-conflict reconstruction. Therefore, geographical proximity seems more important for SSSC than for SSC.

Another defining feature of SSC is cultural proximity (and common language). This is also prominent in the SSSC cases in this special issue. Colombia's export of security expertise to other countries in the region echoes Brazilian investments in Lusophone African countries, and also Gulf countries' aid and investment in countries with a large Muslim population.

Agency is a central theme in both the SSSC and the broader SSC literature. Several contributions in this special issue highlight how and to what extent external actors design, facilitate, and/or finance interventions. Based on these accounts it seems reasonable to assume that the Southern SSSC actors are short of agency, and the degree to which the collaborations are actually Southern-led becomes blurred. However, agency is not necessarily binary. African 'ad-hoc security initiatives are ... shaped by financial dependence on the international donor community',⁵³ but this does not automatically correspond to African security actors having no agency. Rather, the actors described in Sandor et al.'s article in this issue pursue their own interest despite not having the means to finance the operations. They constantly negotiate agency with the other geopolitical actors involved in the initiatives, and they have the agency not to accept an offer. This endless negotiation is also discernible in other collaborations between actors of the global South and between Southern actors and their Northern counterparts.⁵⁴

This special issue on SSSC has also demonstrated the importance of geopolitics. When geopolitics change, so does collaboration. Actors make new alliances, and funding dries up or is allocated to new interventions of higher geopolitical priority. This is a key feature of SSC as revealed in the preceding sections.⁵⁵ Turkey has a double identity as both a NATO member and a member of the global South, and how Turkey uses this double identity to pursue its own aims demonstrates how geopolitics plays out.⁵⁶ Geopolitics is also at play when Mexico reaches out to its neighbours in the Caribbean to balance the power of the United States via security cooperation. At a larger scale, the creation of BRICS+ and the founding of the New Development Bank (in clear opposition to the 'old' international financial institutions) also demonstrate how (changing) geopolitics shapes SSC.

The cases portrayed in this special issue have revealed that the rhetoric of (S)SSC has made distances shorter between partners that previously interacted mostly in the region or with Northern actors. Collaboration has been decentred from the focus on Northern-led forms of cooperation,

⁵⁰ Campbell et al., 'From the "war on drugs" to the "war on guns".'

⁵¹ Pádraig Carmody, Ian Taylor, and Tim Zajontz, 'China's spatial fix and "debt diplomacy" in Africa: Constraining belt or road to economic transformation?', *Canadian Journal of African Studies/Revue canadienne des Études africaines*, 56:1 (2022), pp. 57–77.

⁵² Kragelund, *South–South Development*.

⁵³ Sandor, Frowd, and Hönke, 'Productive failure, African agency, and security Cooperation in West Africa.'

⁵⁴ Pádraig Carmody and Peter Kragelund, 'Who is in charge? State power and agency in Sino-African relations', *Cornell International Law Journal*, 49:1 (2016), pp. 1–23; Jon Phillips, 'Who's in charge of Sino-African resource politics? Situating African state agency in Ghana', *African Affairs*, 118:470 (2018), pp. 101–24.

⁵⁵ Kragelund, *South–South Development*.

⁵⁶ Yaşar, 'The Janus-face of Turkey's global positioning and Turkey's security engagement with African states.'

and there is now an 'observable growing relevance of Southern solutions to Southern security problems'.⁵⁷ The very concept of SSC informs us, therefore, that there are now more arenas in which to learn. This goes for security cooperation but also for cooperation in other areas.

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⁵⁷ Berger and Müller, 'South–South cooperation and the (re)making of global security governance'.