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RCAS Commentary

The Global South and the Xi-Trump-Putin Equation

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RCAS aims to become a leading research institute and think tank on Asian affairs in the Indo-Pacific region. To date, RCAS has conducted research programs on maritime disputes in the South China Sea (SCS), China's relations with the Indo-Pacific states, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), terrorism/counterterrorism in the Afg-Pak region, and so on. It is committed to promoting maritime cooperation, regional integration, and regional peace in the Indo-Pacific region at large.

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RCAS has also published hundreds of articles, and its researchers have been interviewed in various local and international media outlets, such as *The Diplomat* in the United States, *East Asian Forum (EAF)* in Australia, *Bangkok Post* in Thailand, *Jakarta Post* in Indonesia, *Lian He Zao Bao*, *Think China* in Singapore, *South China Morning Post (SCMP)*, *China-US Focus* in Hong Kong, *CGTN, Global Times, World Affairs* in China.
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The Global South and the Xi-Trump-Putin Equation

Sujit Kumar Datta

The upcoming historic meeting of Chinese President Xi Jinping, US President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin in Shenzhen on November 19, 2026, is poised to be a pivotal event in modern international politics. China's Foreign Ministry confirmed the meeting, which is unprecedented in the history of the organisation, to be held on the sidelines of the APEC 2026 conference, where the leaders of three big powers whose decisions affect the global security balance, economic governance and geopolitical dynamics will meet. The three leaders have met several times face-to-face, but it is the first-ever joint meeting of symbolic and strategic importance. It is no ordinary conference for the Global South; it is a historic gathering of three great leaders who are making history. It's about the future of the distribution of power, economic opportunities, strategic autonomy and the influence of the developing world in a power-obsessed world.



▲Internet.

The Xi-Trump-Putin equation is a testament to a new geopolitical landscape in which old alliances, strategic competition and economic integration are now being woven side by side. China's efforts to get Washington and Moscow to the same table are already a diplomatic success. This meeting is a chance for Xi to showcase China's increased role in the world and its desire to make Beijing a key global diplomatic hub. Meanwhile, Trump is looking for diplomatic successes as a way to enhance his global footprint on issues of nuclear weapons, trade talks, the Middle East, and more. Putin will probably

be concentrating on securing a good deal in diplomacy over Ukraine, on sanctions and Russia's wider approach to its international relations.

But the key is: what does this diplomatic relationship imply for the Global South, which includes developing nations around the world, from Asia to Africa, Latin America and beyond? Power is largely concentrated among major players and created institutions within the international economic and political system, which has been developing nations' struggle. It's time to change this imbalance in the new multipolar order. The increased economic strength of China, the growing relationship between Russia and the developing countries and the military and financial superiority of the United States are other diplomatic options available to developing countries. The Shenzhen summit is likely to impact some of the most critical issues that the Global South will be facing, including international trade, energy security, food security, access to technology, financial support for development and global conflict resolution.

Geopolitical uncertainty could be diminished for developing economies if Xi and Trump, and Putin, can establish a way to manage their disagreements. However, should this battle reemerge between these powers, the potential for economic splitting increases as well, and the small states will find themselves facing 'geopolitical demands' from different sources. Therefore, we have the right to expect diplomacy in the Global South, but at the same time we must be wary of the prospect that the interests of the Global South may be subservient to the interests of the big powers' strategic games.

The impact of the war in Ukraine has not been confined to Europe for the Global South. The developing world economies have been hit much harder by the rise in energy prices, food insecurity, shortages of fertilisers and trade disruptions in the international market. Countries of Africa and Asia, especially those that rely on imports of energy and agricultural products, have been under severe economic pressures. China has never shown the same interest in arms reduction as Washington or Moscow has, but the Shenzhen talks could be an opportunity to talk about transparency, strategic stability and unintended escalation.

However, the biggest short-term beneficiary could be the Chinese motherland to which it belongs. The Chinese president's double invitation to Trump and Putin at the same time bolsters Beijing's bid for a greater role in international affairs. Increasingly, China has claimed to be a champion of multilateralism and economic development and a multipolar international order. In these areas, Beijing has been strengthening relations with the Global South via the Belt and Road Initiative, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and through increasing cooperation in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

The Shenzhen summit should also pave the way for a more general discussion of the reform of global governance. They are still important institutions, like the United Nations, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, but the developing

world often complains that the latter are still not adequately represented or influential in today's economic and demographic situation. The Global South needs to be better represented in international financial governance, climate finance, restructuring of international debts, and technological development and international security.

But only a multipolar contest between Washington, Beijing and Moscow should not define the future of multipolarism. It should also embody the shared vision of states wanting economic justice, political independence and sustainable development. It is crucial that smaller countries have legitimate avenues to engage in international decision-making in a multipolar international order, and not merely become battlefields for great powers.

The summit between Xi, Trump and Putin that the three leaders had planned in Shenzhen could be a key moment of 2026. It is unclear whether it will result in any tangible deal on Ukraine, a nuclear security pact or a resolution over the tensions between the United States and China in the Middle East. Three powerful heads are still positioned; however, significant evidence of the continued relevance of 'Top Diplomacy' in an increasingly polarised world. The meeting is an occasion for Xi to boost China's international image. It provides Trump with an opportunity for strategic and economic decisions. For Putin, it is another chance to further Russian diplomacy and to defy international isolation.

Last but not least, the military triumphs of three strong leaders should not decide the fate of the international order. The Global South should not be a mere onlooker in great power diplomacy and should be an active player in the creation of the rules, institutions and priorities of the new world order. The key thing to remember about the summit in Shenzhen is that Xi, Trump and Putin are sitting down to negotiate, but more importantly, whether their actions will create a more balanced international system in which small nations also will play a role.

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About Author



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