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Selfish Donor or Saviour in Need?

China's development policy in the context of the New Silk Road

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SELFISH DONOR OR SAVIOUR IN NEED?

CHINA'S DEVELOPMENT POLICY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE NEW SILK ROAD

China's development policy is controversial, especially with regard to the New Silk Road. While some see Chinese investments and loans as an opportunity to facilitate infrastructure development in much of the world, others are concerned about the political calculations behind the aid, and possible negative consequences for its recipients. When comparing China's development policy with Western approaches, it becomes clear that the motives at least for providing development aid hardly differ—the distinction lies rather in the ideologically charged narratives that follow from them, which call into question the legitimacy of a value-based or alternatively a purely pragmatic development policy.

Over the course of the debate on China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the country's development policy has been brought into sharper focus.[1] China's role as a source of development aid is a contentious topic. Some see Chinese funds as an opportunity, as China provides aid in countries where other donors either do not give sufficient support or provide none at all. Sometimes a positive aspect is highlighted: China's approach to development assistance disrupts postcolonial dynamics and enables new South-South cooperation. However, Chinese development policy is also often viewed with scepticism. The central points of criticism are that China is acting out of its own geopolitical self-interest, for example, and that its development funds enable its companies to access new markets. China is also accused of strengthening authoritarian regimes by way of its "unconditional" aid, which undermines the West's efforts to promote democracy and human rights.

In any event, China is indeed challenging the countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) through its development policy. This is not only because, as a significant new actor, it brings a new dynamic to international development assistance, but also because China deliberately presents itself as a donor whose principles differ from Western norms. Likely the greatest challenge, however, comes from the fact that China's approach is well-received and the country is now regarded as an attractive source of aid—not only in the typical developing countries, but in Europe as well.

But how significant, really, is the difference between traditional donors and China? Of what does it consist, and how should China's approach to development be assessed from a left-wing perspective?

EVOLUTION AND SPECIFICITY OF CHINESE DEVELOPMENT POLICY

Over the last two decades, China has gone from being a recipient of development aid to one of the largest donors worldwide. However, China had already begun to send resources abroad by the 1950s, when for example it provided military and food aid to North Korea and Vietnam in their fight against the United States and France. In 1964, during a trip to Ghana, Zhou Enlai, then China's Prime Minister, announced the "eight principles"—a series of ideas on which China's approach to development is still based today, including non-interference in the internal affairs of recipient countries and cooperation between donors and recipients on an equal basis. Above all, competition with Taiwan over diplomatic recognition was a central reason the People's Republic pledged development aid under Mao Zedong. Infrastructure projects in Africa, for example, constituted a massive financial effort for China, reaching a peak in 1973 at 6.9 percent of government spending. Cooperation with Africa was institutionalized in 2000 with the China-Africa Forum, a platform for dialogue that also attracted international attention to Chinese initiatives. China's intention to continue financing infrastructure projects worldwide was underscored once again by Xi Jinping in 2013, with the announcement of the BRI, since then a cornerstone of Chinese foreign policy (Cheng 2019).

The new agenda of the BRI and the increased level of funds for foreign countries made it necessary to reform the organizational system for development assistance established in the 1990s, in which responsibilities for

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1 The terms development aid *[Entwicklungshilfe]* and development assistance or cooperation *[Entwicklungszusammenarbeit]* will be used here in combination, since the focus will not be on German development policy, but on the Chinese approach and that of the OECD countries and Europe. In these cases, various terms—foreign aid, development assistance, and development cooperation—are used. As this text will show, a clear differentiation between aid and assistance is likewise not meaningful, because different financing instruments are used in a broad spectrum of the interests of different actors.

development policy were distributed among various bodies (primarily the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Trade). This system was fragmented and inefficient due to conflicts between diplomatic and commercial interests. For this reason, the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) was founded in April 2018, and tasked with the central coordination of Chinese development assistance. The goal of this new agency is not only to organize the Chinese development aid system more efficiently, but also to ensure greater transparency and a clearer differentiation among various commercial and non-commercial financial streams. In establishing the CIDCA, China was responding to widespread criticism of the opacity of Chinese activities abroad and the mixing of financial aid and profit-oriented investments (Cheng 2019).

In order to understand the specific features of Chinese development assistance, its differences from Official Development Assistance (ODA)—as defined by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD countries—must be clearly articulated. According to the DAC, ODA consists of loans paid by governments with the aim of promoting economic development and improving the living conditions of the recipient countries; they are conferred on privileged terms (with a grant component of at least 25 percent). Since China is not a member of the OECD, the People's Republic does not use the DAC definition with regard to its development aid funds.

Confusion in understanding Chinese development aid is primarily due to a lack of transparency regarding financial transactions. In some cases, financial packages that bundle resources from different sources are offered—a unique feature of the Chinese system. On the one hand, these loans entail certain benefits, but on the other, they also incorporate market-rate elements. In addition, China repeatedly negotiates privileged access to raw materials in recipient countries in return for favourable loans (Groom 2011; Tian 2018: 22). A clear distinction between business-oriented investments and development aid funds is therefore difficult to make, and depends on whether the definition of development cooperation includes state-subsidized investment.

The focus of China's aid is on large infrastructure projects. In this area, support from traditional Western donors declined sharply in the aftermath of a series of failed projects in the 1970s and 1980s that had contributed to the long-term indebtedness of recipient countries. What prevailed, by contrast, was the view that infrastructure development should be left to the private sector, with the focus of support oriented towards poverty reduction as well as education and health endeavours. As a result, infrastructure development was long neglected in many countries that could not afford to undertake it through their own efforts. Chinese loans and investments, which are rarely linked to social and ecological conditions and do not require complicated reporting, are thus quite welcome in many parts of the world. Moreover, China, which itself achieved considerable developmental success through massive infrastructure expansion in a short period, is considered a role model in this regard (Hütz-Adams et al. 2014: 14–17).

Linking development aid to political and economic conditions is now an established practice among Western financiers. These conditions have been adapted and changed repeatedly, as seen, for example, in the structural adjustment programmes of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank in the 1980s and 1990s, or in the focus on democracy and market development after the end of the Cold War. However, the practice of conditionality was always based on the fundamental assumption that donor countries had superior knowledge of how best to effect an economic upswing or an improvement in living conditions in recipient countries.

Conversely, China regularly stresses that despite financial aid, it does not interfere in the internal affairs of other states. This is emphasized expressly as a distinction with respect to the political and economic conditions Western donors link to financial support. In contrast to the traditional donor-recipient relationship, China understands its development assistance in terms of a strategic partnership that aims for a win-win situation, one which meets the interests of both sides. It communicates this approach quite openly (Hütz-Adams et al. 2014: 8).

THE EU AND CHINA IN CENTRAL ASIA

A comparison of the activities of the EU and China in Central Asia[2] may serve as an example illustrating the differences in donor approaches, their local impact, and how they are perceived on the ground. Chinese development aid is usually discussed using the example of Africa. However, Central Asia allows for an important comparison, as both the EU and China are relatively new actors in the region, having become the main sources of development aid since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and given their largely overlapping economic and geopolitical interests there.

China has been providing financial support to Central Asia since the 1990s, but the volume of Chinese loans and investments in Central Asia has risen sharply in recent years, especially since the announcement of the BRI

2 Here defined as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan.

in 2013.[3] China is interested in the natural resources of the region as well as its new markets and the potential it holds for cutting down on production surpluses. There is also a security interest, since the Chinese region of Xinjiang borders Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. For the Central Asian states, cooperation with China is an opportunity to obtain loans for urgently needed infrastructure expansion and also for diversifying their economic partnerships as a means of reducing their dependence on Russian and Western donors.

China's money flows primarily into transport infrastructure and infrastructure for the extraction of raw materials. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which receive the largest share of Chinese funds, are the poorest countries in the region and highly dependent economically on remittances from immigrants living in Russia. As in other regions supported extensively by China, the government of the recipient country receives loans, but in many cases the money is paid directly by the China Export-Import Bank to the Chinese company that has been commissioned to implement a project. Especially in the field of raw materials extraction, loans to all Central Asian states are often granted on the condition that they are repaid in raw materials—a characteristic feature of Chinese development assistance in other parts of the world as well (Bossuyt 2019).

Central Asia is politically and economically quite variable, so the agreements with China and the perception of China in the region are by no means uniform. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, to give two examples, both struck strategic partnership agreements with Beijing in 2013. Institutional structures for bilateral exchange expanded in connection with the intensified cooperation within the framework of the BRI. The Kyrgyz Chamber of Commerce and Industry has been organizing annual forums with Chinese investors for several years, and the Kyrgyz business association now has a branch office in China. Tajikistan, meanwhile, has established a joint economic and trade commission with the Chinese province of Xinjiang (Wolters 2018: 41–43).

Both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have signed agreements with China on the construction of the Kyrgyz and Tajik sections of the China-Turkmenistan gas pipeline. Examples of other major projects in Kyrgyzstan include the north-south highway between Balykchy in the north, and Jalalabad in the south, as well as the renovation of the power plant in Bishkek. Infrastructure projects in Tajikistan are similar in nature and include the construction of roads, tunnels, or power lines (ibid.: 43–47). China not only invests in infrastructure, however, but also supports both countries' construction of schools and hospitals. Moreover, many programmes now exist to promote student exchange and language courses (Bossuyt 2019; Owen 2016).

In their official rhetoric, the states of Central Asia are highly approving of China. For their governments, Chinese financial aid is indeed attractive because it does not require any internal adjustment of political activity by political and economic elites. Furthermore, cooperation with China promises rapid—and above all conspicuous—developmental outcomes. The advantages of the Chinese projects are visible and immediate. New transport routes support trade in the region (and with China), and create jobs in industry and agriculture, for example.

Nevertheless, there are also critical viewpoints to be found in the region. For instance, the sustainability of Chinese projects, economic dependence on China, and mounting debts are being called into question. In various parts of Central Asia, working conditions, low wages, and the limited benefits of Chinese projects for the local population are subjected to criticism (Bossuyt 2019). There have been numerous protests: thousands took to the streets in Kazakhstan in 2016 to demonstrate against land reforms—the protesters feared that the prospect of longer leases would allow Chinese investors to deprive the local population of land (Umarov 2019).

The EU, like China, is interested in economic cooperation with Central Asia and thus in its stability. It imports crude oil and raw materials from the region and exports technology and processed goods to it. EU involvement in Central Asia began in the early 1990s as part of the TACIS programme,[4] which aimed to support post-Soviet states in building a market economy and transition to democracy.

Although Central Asia did not receive much foreign policy attention in the 1990s, the region grew in geopolitical importance for the EU after 11 September 2001, given its proximity to Afghanistan. As a consequence, programmes for border and drug control were launched. With the EU's eastern enlargement, Central Asia grew geographically closer to Europe, and gained additional significance with respect to security policy. There was, additionally, an interest in forming a counterweight to China and Russia in order to secure direct access to the region's natural resources.

These interests led to the EU Central Asia Strategy in 2007, through which aid was once again substantially expanded. Since then, a wide range of areas—including security, infrastructure development, environmental protection, educational projects, democracy promotion, strengthening civil society, and economic reforms—have been supported in the region through a significant number of programmes (Bossuyt 2019). The new Central Asia Strategy of 2019 does not set a fundamentally new course in terms of content or methodology;

3 Figures are available for individual projects as well as, occasionally, information on the annual size of Chinese loans and direct investment in parts of the region (see, for example, Laruelle 2018: viii-ix). However, there are no reliable data for the region as a whole.

4 TACIS is the abbreviation for Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States.

whether the new strategy is more than a declaration of intent remains an open question. This is a frequent criticism of the 2007 strategy, which achieved neither a significant democratization of the region nor greater respect for human rights.

Since 2007, projects within the framework of the Central Asia Strategy which explicitly aim to strengthen democracy, human rights, or the rule of law generally include technical assistance or knowledge transfer. In Tajikistan, for example, office equipment has been made available to authorities, the health sector has been supported through communications infrastructure, and seminars on pension and social legislation have been promoted. However, the implementation of standards is not subject to strict conditions; instead, the EU strategy is based on continuous dialogue. In many cases, however, the Central Asian side's willingness to engage remains purely formal. Discussions on sensitive issues are avoided, seminars on controversial topics are cancelled at short notice, or representatives of civil society are excluded from meetings. A good example of this is the Uzbek reaction to the "Human Rights Dialogue" in 2007, which was accepted, but in which no high-ranking politicians took part, and to which no human rights activists were admitted. Nevertheless, the dialogue was declared by Uzbekistan and the EU to be a positive development regarding the state of human rights there, and was assessed by the EU as sufficient to qualify it for the removal of sanctions. It is therefore hardly surprising that dialogue formats of this kind rarely yield anything in practice (Hoffmann 2010: 97–100).

The states of Central Asia that are most dependent on financial aid, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, must at a minimum demonstrate some degree of cooperation when it comes to implementing EU requirements. Even here, however, there is no recognizable or noteworthy development with respect to EU-set goals, and observers consistently judge the EU to be a donor without any leverage (see e.g. Peyrouse 2017). The reasons for this are to be found, on the one hand, in the fact that energy and security interests are prized above the values agenda, which therefore becomes ineffectual. In addition, there is simply the large volume of programmes, which means that money is distributed by a scattershot approach. This is probably also the reason why the EU, although it is the largest donor of development aid in the region, is hardly perceived as a meaningful actor.

Criticism of the European approach from the Central Asian side also exists. A persistent focus of criticism, beyond Europe's normative influence, is the excessive bureaucracy associated with its funding, which is especially difficult for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to navigate. The disproportionately high salaries of development workers sent from Europe are also viewed with scepticism, as is the lack of transparency regarding the companies awarded contracts with EU programmes. On the other hand, assistance in the educational and cultural sector is seen in a positive light; here, Europe is taken as a role model (ibid.: 3–5.).

HOW LEGITIMATE IS CHINESE DEVELOPMENT POLICY?

How "different" is Chinese development policy? To what extent does it distinguish itself in practice from the financial aid of OECD countries? And how is China to be assessed as a new actor in development assistance?

Critics of the Chinese approach, above all prominent US politicians and advisers like Mike Pompeo or John Bolton (Bolton 2018; Ferchen/Perera 2019), repeatedly describe China as a "predatory" donor acting in its own interest. This criticism implies that other donors of development aid act altruistically, grant favourable loans for humanistic motives, are free of geostrategic considerations and economic interests, or that these interests are at least not paramount in the provision of development aid.

It is not an especially novel insight to conclude that this is not the case, and that the foreign policy and economic interests of donors have always played a decisive role in their decisions to provide development aid. Even a superficial glance at the history of development policy reveals this: US aid to Europe after World War II was closely linked to the idea of creating new investment opportunities for US companies and preventing the spread of communism. In Third World countries, too, development aid during the Cold War was used as a weapon by rival powers to gain political and cultural influence. As a consequence of 9/11, the security interests of the donor states were clearly evident in the distribution of development aid; the "refugee crisis" also led to an increase in such aid for migrants' countries of origin in order to counteract the causes of their flight, with the aim of protecting "Fortress Europe".

Development aid is therefore not distributed among the poorest countries, judged by gross domestic product (GDP), but primarily among potential markets and areas of geopolitical significance. This standard applies not only to bilateral aid agreements (such as those of the USA or Great Britain), but also to the development funds of international organizations (Malik 2018). The aforementioned history of EU involvement in Central Asia also shows that support for the region has developed against the backdrop of global power shifts and the changing dynamics of Europe's security policy and economic interests. In this regard, the Central Asia Strategy is an illuminating document showing the interconnection between self-interest with the rhetoric of aid.

China is not an OECD member and is therefore not bound by the DAC definition of development assistance. As described above, from an OECD perspective, China's development aid funds thus merge with other payments made abroad, such as direct investments. Can China be blamed for this? Other donors of development aid also invest in the countries they support, even if the investors are primarily private companies.[5] However, if one considers the close interdependence of private sector and state interests—while also taking into account the profit interest at the forefront of these investments associated with practices that are questionable in terms of the environment, labour rights, and social issues (see Bello 2019: 46)—the question remains: to what extent does a distinction made by donor countries between direct investment and development aid practically affect recipients?

The EU, for example, is Central Asia's largest trading partner and also Kazakhstan's largest investor. In its case, direct investments by EU countries are many times larger than those from China (Russell 2019). The fact that direct investments do not qualify as development funds according to the DAC definition in no way means that development assistance does not also open profitable channels for Western donors. Examples of this dynamic are the public-private partnerships within the development sector. One factor that has received little attention in the public discussion on development assistance is the significance of low interest rates, which have for years allowed Western donors to borrow money on the financial markets cheaply, and to profit by lending to developing countries at higher rates (Colin 2014). Until 2019, these loans could be declared as development aid money in the definition given by ODA.[6]

The danger of recipient countries' indebtedness is often reported in connection with the debate over Chinese loans. This certainly represents a valid fear, but it should not be limited to discussion of China. The debt of countries dependent on foreign loans is a massive problem to which a number of lenders have contributed over decades. The IMF, the World Bank, the Paris Club, and the private sector are Africa's main debtors. Africa's debt to China accounts for about one quarter of the continent's total debt burden (Jubilee Debt Campaign 2018). Arguments such as those propagated mainly by the US media that China is deliberately driving other countries into a debt trap lack factual evidence supported by scholarly research (Jubilee Debt Campaign 2019).

A further point of criticism with respect to Chinese development aid is its lack of conditionality. Human rights and democracy are overlooked by China, and are not expected when loans are granted. This undermines the policy of Western donors, since authoritarian states are only too happy to accept financial aid that does not require any reform on their part. The accusation is thereby made that authoritarian regimes are strengthened by China's practice of dispensing development aid. The demand for democracy, the rule of law, and human rights have become an integral part of the development policy of Western donors. The EU emphasized this principle in 2005 with the European Consensus on Development. However, it is clear that Western development aid has largely failed to achieve its stated goals. The supported states have not become independent of aid funds, authoritarian regimes have remained in power, functioning democratic structures have generally not been established, and, macro-structurally speaking, the human rights picture has not improved as a result of development aid.

Central Asia is again a good example of this dynamic. The project of training the former Soviet states to become democratic by emulating the Western model has failed. There is considerable scepticism in the region toward the normative approach taken by traditional donors, and very little willingness to reform. This has not meant, however, that the provision of development aid has been restricted as a consequence. On the contrary, it is being expanded (Russell 2019). Of course, this is an outcome of the momentum the development aid sector has developed on its own (it does not want to abolish itself), but it is also due to political concerns, because, as outlined in the Central Asia Strategy, there is much self-interest at stake regarding cooperation with the region.

The problem, then, is not China—but rather the imperial logic underlying the idea of development assistance, which is closely tied to geopolitical interests at a structural level (Escobar 1995). China makes use of this instrument in the same way as the OECD countries do; Chinese development policy can and should therefore be criticized from the same perspective. Yet accusations that China fails to demand democratic and human rights standards of the recipients of its aid betrays a Eurocentrism lacking critical awareness of Europe's own practices. Moreover, this type of criticism overlooks the real core of the problem. Differences between Western and Chinese development assistance in their implementation reveal themselves to be superficial once their underlying motives are compared. Fundamentally, what distinguishes the approaches are in effect the (ideologized) narratives which focus on each respective system's superiority.

Existing social inequalities and economic imbalances will not be eliminated through development aid. Such an achievement would require a fair economic system and a fair trade policy organized around the equitable distribution of our resources, not the profits of individual actors. As long as such a system does not exist,

5 There are of course also many private Chinese investors.
6 In 2019 the OECD modified its evaluation criteria in at least some respects. See www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/modernisation-dac-statistical-system.htm.

however, there must continue to be a discussion about how, and under what conditions, development money can be used sensibly to alleviate need, in certain areas at least, and to support those who lose out under capitalism. In this respect, China's investments can be just as worthy as the West's money—and in many places are possibly even more helpful, because they are allocated less bureaucratically, and can close financing gaps (in, for example, the infrastructure sector). Recognizing this fact is a basic prerequisite for entering into productive dialogue with China on development aid over the long term, and for establishing common goals.

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