

Chinese 'aid': redefining cooperation and donor coordination

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The debates on the politics of Chinese engagement with African development have been infused with increasing concern over Chinese use of aid in exchange for preferential energy deals. Normative liberal discourse criticizes the Chinese for disbursing 'rogue aid' and undermining good governance in the African continent. These criticisms not only ignore the longer term and more diverse aid relations between China and various African countries, but the criticism itself is part of an ideological attempt to present western aid in a more favourable light. This paper aims to develop these debates through an historical and deconstructive analysis.

First, through a deeper historical analysis of China's aid to Africa, the continuities and differences in relation to other donors' approaches and over time are explored. We show that China's recent interests in Africa are built on longer histories of cooperation which have tended to be couched in terms of solidarity and development rather than aid. Current 'aid' is tied into geopolitical agendas, economic cooperation as well as to specific resource acquisitions. The governance of this aid is increasingly complex and diffuse as the Chinese state becomes privatised and fragments into different ministries and regions, all having some part to play in African interventions. In many senses, given that all aid is politically and economically motivated, the Chinese are not behaving much differently from previous industrial powers intent on accessing African resources. Some authors are sceptical about China's interest in Africa as a form of 'south-south cooperation', which is more progressive and less selfish, suggesting it might be the more familiar and hegemonic 'north-south relationship'. But where they do appear different from western powers is the types of political relationships they operate through, as well as envisage for, Africa.

This brings us on to our second major thesis, which is how different ideologies and practices of governance are used by *both* the Chinese and the western donors (who are critical of China) to conceal their own interests. At the heart of the debate is the myth of 'apolitical' aid. What is interesting is that the Chinese use a version of aid as 'apolitical', when they see a separation of 'business' from 'politics', most notably in their past dealings with Sudan. And now in comparison to the cold war period of 'ideological' engagement with the South, China's self-styled rhetoric is non-ideological engagement. The key is that in superpower confrontations binaristic ideological discourses are inevitably deployed, which seek to demonise the other and is so doing legitimize one's own approach. At present we see heavy criticisms of Chinese aid. The first flaw in the critique of Chinese aid, concerns the double standards bound up in recent approaches by western donors. The second problem with the demonisation of China's aid is that it is changing in light of international pressure. In practice China's presence as an 'alternative' to Washington, and demonstrated amply by the Angola case, permits African leaders to 'triangulate' between donors.

We conclude with an agenda for future research around grounded analysis of the unfolding of politics in African countries affected by Chinese aid. However, as demonstrated in Sudan, China's non-interference policy did not bring the expected positive results, resulting in a shift away from non-interference to a more managed

engagement with domestic politics. The impacts of this shift could be profound, as China is seemingly willing to undertake a more responsible role in international issues and negotiations. It is this nascent co-operation that is seen as key to the realisation of Millennium Development Goal 8 – to develop a global partnership for development. Such multilateral processes are important but for many it will be the country level in Africa where the realities of aid ‘coordination’ and effectiveness will be negotiated. The move towards multi-donor support groups and donor partnerships at the country level will be testing grounds for China’s willingness to enter the mainstream of donor activity.

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