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Mutual Delegitimization: American and Chinese Development Assistance in Africa



POSTED: MARCH 30, 2018 AT 2:19 AM / BY SAIS REVIEW / COMMENTS (0)

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Introduction

Amidst the emergence of rising or re-emerging powers and purported American decline,^[i] the increasing economic and political influence of China in the African continent has raised suspicion among Western donor countries. China's assistance is now seen as "rogue aid" that defies the normative nature of Western development assistance and effectively undermines Western efforts to improve governance in Africa.^[ii] China is generally referred to as being part of the so-called group of "emerging donors," in contrast to "established donors," which are members of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation & Development (OECD) and its Development Assistance Committee (DAC) that codifies norms and rules relevant to development assistance.^[iii]

According to the OECD, official development assistance (ODA) can take eight broad forms, and donors provide it either on a bilateral or multilateral basis. Namely, ODA consists of "budget support, contributions to pooled programs, project-type interventions, technical assistance, scholarships, debt relief, other administrative costs and certain expenditures in the donor country concerning development assistance."^[iv] Such transactions only count as development assistance if low and middle income countries are the recipients and if the transactions are concessional, in the sense that at least one quarter of the transaction is a grant.^[v] This definition excludes military aid as well as export credits.

The emergence of a new powerful group of donors next to the established Western donors reflects the idea that the 21st century may witness a return to the Cold War competition between great powers and competing ideologies. This is evidently seen in the conflicting justifications underpinning development assistance projects in eligible countries. The established donors seek to enhance development by invoking good governance and, consequently, portray Chinese assistance as rogue due to their neglect of issues of human rights and democratic reforms. China, on the other hand, frames its assistance as mutually beneficial and non-interventionist in internal affairs, which implicitly condemns Western assistance as rogue due to its violation of state sovereignty.

The struggle for leadership in the international development strategy in Africa can, therefore, be seen as part and parcel of a wider hegemonic rivalry between the US, as an established status quo power, and China, as a re-emerging power. Such a characterization renders Chinese assistance threatening to the established donors' dominance because the various Chinese justifications of development assistance are thought to be delegitimizing Western ideas of development assistance. With Chinese aid perceived to be more attractive for

eligible countries.[vi] Western states could face significant losses in their spheres of influence. Kagan argues that foreign policies of autocratic states, such as China, ultimately aim at safeguarding the economic welfare and political survival of autocratic rule.[vii] In a similar vein, Kurlantzick argues that China's variety of capitalism substantially defies neoliberal ideas of managed economies due to the preponderant role of the state in the largest Chinese enterprises.[viii]

Thus, this article deals with the following puzzle: What are some of the key ideas and discourses that underpin China's development assistance to Africa? Do those ideas and discourses relate to the context of an emerging conflict between established status quo powers, such as the US and key EU countries, and rising powers such as China? If so, how and to what extent can China's ideas of development assistance to Africa be regarded within the context of a wider struggle among global powers? Due to space constraints, our aim herein is exploratory and conceptual-analytical, by which we present our preliminary arguments using illustrative examples and probative empirical evidence.

This paper contributes to an important yet still emerging debate in global governance scholarship and policy by offering two arguments. First, in contrast to the dominant understanding that Chinese aid has 'no strings attached,' we show that US and Chinese aid strategies champion their own geostrategic national interests, thereby invoking the *realist* paradigm in our analysis. Whereas the US government considers socio-political transformation in an aid recipient country as a key condition for foreign assistance, Chinese foreign aid strategy primarily fosters its own national economic interests by employing Chinese nationals in foreign aid projects, while also enhancing the global footprint of state-funded Chinese contracting companies. Second, by arguing that China and the US aid strategies suggest an ongoing power struggle in the international development sector, this paper deploys both realist and constructivist insights in international relations theory. Particularly, the fact that the US and China uphold their geostrategic and economic interests in the African continent by carefully customizing their aid packages shows the realist underpinnings in contemporary development aid politics. Whereas the US government under the Obama administration criticized Chinese aid for its purely economic goals of extracting raw materials and lack of regard for the political turmoil in aid recipient countries, Beijing promoted a sense of political parity with aid recipient states by focusing only on economic projects, while turning a blind eye on the domestic governance problems. In so doing, the Chinese state buys the political support of aid recipient governments whose democratic credentials are deemed problematic by Western aid donors, such as the US. Such processes of legitimization deployed by Beijing and Washington echo *constructivist* insights that underscore how ideas and intersubjective perceptions of legitimacy do matter in as much as hard economic interests shape foreign aid strategies.

Contending Ideas for a Global Power Struggle

From a realist perspective, development assistance is conceptualized as one of the tools of political influence available to nations to promote their national interest abroad.[ix] This particular idea about the nature of development assistance is supported by empirical studies, including those by Rai, who argues that the US has been largely successful in using development assistance to incite the recipient's voting behaviour in the General Assembly of the United Nations to conform to US positions.[x] On the other hand, Rai states that the Soviet Union has been more effective in rewarding or punishing countries for their voting behaviour through development assistance. Similarly, China has effectively employed the strategy of the Soviet Union with regard to its development assistance and subsequent diplomatic expectations. For instance, countries with diplomatic ties to Taiwan, rather than to China, do not receive any assistance until they engage diplomatically

with China.^[xi] Regardless of the possible diverging nature of Western and Chinese development aid programs, China's rising influence in Africa is reflecting the broader process of power transition occurring in contemporary global politics. According to Nye, the US, although remaining the most powerful state, will become less dominant in this century, as other state and non-state actors are gathering more resources crucial for asserting power in the world stage.^[xii]

The realist conception thus perceives development assistance as one of the tools to further strengthen China's economic power as well as its political sphere of influence. Whether Chinese development assistance also attempts to challenge the normative aspect of the Western world order is a key research interest of liberal scholars. G. John Ikenberry, for instance, argues that China will probably conform to the liberal world order established by the United States after the Second World War due to the inherent material incentives of being part of it.^[xiii] However, the nature of Chinese development assistance to Africa motivates critical interrogation of the legitimacy of the Western idea of promoting good governance and democracy through development assistance. In light of the notion that identities and interests mutually constitute each other,^[xiv] a constructivist stance on development assistance allows a thorough analysis of how the Chinese idea of development assistance to Africa can indeed represent a fundamental challenge both in terms of material and ideational power to the United States.

A combination of realist and constructivist perspectives, thus, takes into account material and ideational aspects in the interplay of American and Chinese development assistance to Africa. This frames American and Chinese aid strategies as demonstrative of a renewed global competition of ideas, in which the idea of the US as the most influential actor in international development aid is no longer widely accepted.^[xv] Such an ideational struggle is, however, closely intertwined with material aspects, because the justifications for development assistance are ultimately aimed at delegitimizing the competing offer. With regard to development assistance, an empirical finding asserting a fundamentally different nature of Chinese assistance would challenge the scope of the norms established by Western donor countries. In contemporary global politics, it is necessary to provide "credible claims to using one's power and position for seeking out actions and outcomes that serve shared interests, and using authority and power in the service of those actions and outcomes."^[xvi] As demonstrated below, China embraces this discourse of mutual benefits. An active delegitimizing effort by China towards Western ideas of development assistance can be perceived as threatening to the West as it undermines what was once primarily a Euro-American affair.

The next section compares Chinese and American ideas and discourses that underpin their respective development assistance strategies in Africa. Norms are seen as standards of appropriate behaviour that give meaning and a sense of stability to the world.^[xvii] The increasing influence of China on the African continent suggests that the norms promoted by the US in its aid programs (e.g. democracy, good governance, and human rights) face difficulties in gaining traction in African domestic politics.

Comparing American and Chinese Development Assistance to Africa

The main organ responsible for institutionalising a common Western idea of development assistance is the OECD DAC. The definition formulated in 1972 states that "concessional transactions by official agencies aimed at fostering the economic development and welfare of developing countries" is considered as official development assistance.^[xviii] The key DAC norms include transparency in reporting assistance flows and the progressive untying of assistance to the least-developed countries.^[xix] This second norm is, however, still not

completely implemented, which means that recipient countries continue to be required, to a certain extent, to import goods from the donor country. In the case of the United States, the OECD DAC estimates that as of 2016, over one third of US bilateral assistance remained to be tied, especially with regard to “US-patented pharmaceuticals, motor vehicles and food aid.”^[xx] Western ideas of development aid have evolved considerably since the Second World War. In the 1960s and early 1970s, the idea of modernist development dominated the Western approach. Accordingly, with a considerable amount of foreign aid, developing countries ought to be lifted out of their “underdeveloped” stage towards the level of progress achieved by developed countries. Underlying the modernist approach to development is the idea that societies evolve in stages from traditional to mass consumption, assuming that the society of mass consumption is the most desirable model. Development should, therefore, focus on three key areas that enabled the modernisation of the Western economies, namely: urbanisation, industrialisation, and market economy.^[xxi]

The 1980s and 1990s have reflected the rise of neoliberal ideas in Western economies as structural adjustment programs have been incorporated into conditional development assistance. The core aim of the so-called “neoliberal state,” according to Harvey, is to “facilitate conditions for profitable capital accumulation on the part of both domestic and foreign capital.”^[xxii] Under the era of the Washington Consensus and the guidance of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the US Treasury, structural adjustment programs conditioned policy changes through development assistance. These policy conditions essentially attempted to implement the neoliberal state, with policies such as “prudent macroeconomic policies, outward orientation, and free market capitalism.”^[xxiii] Many Western countries effectively crowded-out other donors in these two decades, providing 95 percent of all aid compared to about 65 percent of worldwide development assistance in the 1970s.^[xxiv] US assistance is generally conditional on policies of economic liberalisation and good governance, reflecting the American core idea that the global spread of democracy is the most valuable protection of their national security.^[xxv] Despite the assistance provided and the supposedly beneficial conditions attached, Western assistance might have hampered growth in Africa.^[xxvi] Notwithstanding the intensive Western dominance in development assistance of the 1980s and 1990s, Africa has not been able to effectively close the gaps between it and other regions. Comparing the Human Development Index of Africa with regions in the Global South, such as South Asia, Latin America, the Arab States, or East Asia, shows that Africa has become relatively more underdeveloped over the period 1990 to 2015.^[xxvii] According to the OECD, the African continent has, however, been receiving by far the largest share of global development assistance since the 1990s, with about 40 percent on average of total assistance disbursed by OECD countries per year.^[xxviii]

In contrast to Chinese development priorities, the nature of Western development assistance aspires to foster not only economic development, but a more explicit socio-political agenda that aims to transform the political structure of recipient countries. The United States for example, the biggest donor to African states, attributed 50 percent of total assistance dispersed to Africa in 2014 to the social sector. Most of the assistance in the social sector is invested in population and reproductive health, which constitutes 30 percent of total disbursed assistance. Most of the spending in this category relates to the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief.^[xxix] Another 30 percent of total US assistance is attributed to the humanitarian sector. In contrast, merely 7 percent has flown into the productive sector, and 2 percent into the economic sector.^[xxx] According to the Chinese State Council’s White Paper on Foreign Aid of 2014, such disbursement trends contrast sharply with Chinese development assistance, considering that Beijing dispersed almost half of its total assistance to projects of economic infrastructure, in the period 2010 to 2012. Another 30 percent was dedicated to social and public infrastructure, and 15 percent to goods and materials.^[xxxi] In addition, whereas the US government is generally transparent with its foreign aid data (e.g. USAID Greenbook), the Chinese government opts to obfuscate its aid programs’ exact amounts, specific institutional recipients, and implementation

strategies.^[xxxii]

In terms of financial and geographical considerations in aid strategies, the United States and China portray similarly contrasting aid allocation profiles. Over the period from 2000 to 2013, the United States disbursed roughly 90 billion USD in official development assistance to Africa, which is threefold more than China's amount of official development assistance over the same period. Considering official development assistance and other official flows (such as export credits), the gap between the US and China is much narrower: over the period 2000 to 2013, the US spent merely 14 percent more than China in total development assistance to Africa.^[xxxiii] For both China and the US, the African continent is the main recipient of development assistance, with 50 and 30 percent of total global assistance, respectively.^[xxxiv] The geographical distribution within Africa, however, differs among the two donors. In the period 2013 to 2017, Ethiopia, Kenya, and South Sudan have been the top recipients of US assistance in Africa.^[xxxv] On the other hand, Zimbabwe, Angola, and Ghana received the largest number of Chinese projects, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, and Ethiopia received the most Chinese assistance in monetary terms in the period 2000 to 2013.^[xxxvi] Despite the US focus on improved governance, the top US-recipients have been scoring similarly low in terms of democratic liberties and political rights as the top Chinese recipients.^[xxxvii]

According to the most recent US Strategy toward Sub-Saharan Africa, dating from 2012, the United States government cooperates with states in the region for the purpose of "strengthening democratic institutions; spurring economic growth, trade, and investment; advancing peace and security; and promoting opportunity and development."^[xxxviii] As for the strengthening of democratic institutions, the Strategy identifies five specific actions that will be pursued by the United States, which include the promotion of good governance, the respect of human rights and the freedom of press, and a credible democratic process and strong democratic norms, among others. According to the US Agency for International Development (USAID), contemporary global interconnectedness means that instability anywhere on the planet has the ability to affect the United States itself. USAID's efforts are portrayed as "directly enhancing American—and global—security and prosperity."^[xxxix] A core justification for the provision of development assistance by the United States postulates that the "USAID's critical role in our nation's effort to stabilize countries and build responsive local governance; we work on the same problems as our military using different set of tools."^[xl] Contrary to the military, however, the agency claims that the primordial objective is the prevention of conflict, which is "smarter, safer and less costly than sending in soldiers."^[xli]

The broad strategy set by the White House translates to tailored, country-specific strategies that take the form of plans valid for three to six years. The Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) demonstrates the conditionality applied in US development assistance, in the sense that specific 'development objectives,' measured by a set of 'intermediate results,' are established to channel the disbursed assistance. The strategies for the two main recipients in Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, Kenya and Ethiopia, aim to "sustainably transform Kenya's governance and economy,"^[xlii] and "accelerate the transformation toward prosperity" in Ethiopia.^[xliii] While the CDCS states the transformative aims of US development assistance, USAID sees Africans not as mere beneficiaries, but as the "architects of their own development. Donors merely support their plans, they do not dictate these. The joint efforts, in fact, reap dividends for both Africa and the United States."^[xliv] According to former US President Obama, the United States would be offering "real economic partnerships that are a good deal for Africa, as they create jobs and capacity for Africans, [rather than] simply building countries' infrastructure with foreign labour or extracting Africa's natural resources."^[xlv] In this way, the US government justifies its own aid programs as a mutually beneficial partnership that also promotes the socio-economic well-being of African societies. At the same time, Obama undermines the legitimacy of Beijing's aid program by underscoring it unjustly prioritizes Chinese interests through the employment of its

own citizens in infrastructure projects and resource extraction activities in Africa.

Nonetheless, this transformative character of US development assistance has been repeatedly criticised by African heads of state over the past years and forms the key point of differentiation used in official Chinese political discourses. As Chinese President Xi Jinping argued at the Asian African Conference Commemoration in 2015, “the world’s richer countries have a responsibility to fulfil their commitments to developing nations without demanding political concessions.”^[xlv] Xi Jinping continued by arguing that the political preconditions attached by developed countries would hinder the building of a “more equal and balanced new global partnership for development.”^[xlvi] Thus, delegitimizing US ‘North-South’ aid and promoting Chinese ‘South-South’ aid, Xi Jinping implicitly suggests that the foreign aid strategies employed by the US, and other OECD countries, would directly contribute to maintaining the “gap between the South and the North.”^[xlvii] Contrary to the US assistance to the African continent, which falls under the so-called North-South relations, China explicitly stresses its position in the Global South, even though it recently overtook the United States as the leading economy in terms of Gross Domestic Product at purchasing power parity.^[xlviii] For instance, China was the leading contributor to the United Nations Fund for South-South Cooperation over the past decade, providing almost half of all contributions made to the Fund.^[i] Hosting the ‘Dialogue of Emerging Market and Developing Countries’ in late 2017, President Xi Jinping continued presenting China as an integral part of the ‘Global South,’ urging to “broaden South-South cooperation and to build a community of common development and shared future.”^[ii] China equally hosts the New Development Bank, established by the BRICS institution in 2014 with the aim to fund development projects across in emerging economies and developing countries. Chinese development assistance is hence portrayed as South-South relations that take the form of “mutual help between developing countries.”^[iii] Chinese development assistance bases itself on the “Eight Principles” compiled by Premier Zhou Enlai in 1964. These principles state that “aid must rely on the principle of equality and mutual benefit, that no conditions will be attached, and that self-reliance and independent development must be the overarching aim of the assistance.”^[iiii] In other words, for China, development aid should respect the political equality of nations and that aid recipient governments should be given the autonomy to use development assistance as it see fit.

At the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in 2015, President Xi Jinping announced a “New Era of China-Africa Win-Win Cooperation and Common Development,” which relies on five main pillars: political equality and mutual trust; win-win economic cooperation; mutually enriching cultural exchanges; mutual assistance in security; and solidarity and coordination in international affairs.^[iv] In the same speech, Xi Jinping announced China’s equivalent to the American CDCS, the “China-Africa comprehensive strategic and cooperative partnership.” He identified three key issues which hamper Africa’s development: inadequate infrastructure, lack of professional and skilled personnel, and funding shortage.^[v] For the period 2015 to 2018, Xi Jinping promised to implement a ten-point cooperation plan, which strives to overcome the identified issues: an industrialization plan, an agricultural modernization plan, an infrastructure plan, a financial plan, a green development plan, a trade and investment facilitation plan, a poverty reduction plan, a public health plan, a cultural and people-to-people plan, and a peace and security plan.^[vi] Such a discursive strategy from Beijing shows that is becoming more and more serious in matching the scope of US development aid in Africa, particularly by offering a comprehensive strategy that did not only focus on infrastructure development and resource extraction.

Thus, more recently, the scope of Chinese assistance also deals with geopolitics, economic cooperation, and specific resource acquisition.^[vii] Such political and economic motivations for providing development assistance render the nature of China’s behaviour similar to the United States motivations which, as previously indicated, regard assistance as “directly enhancing American—and global—security and prosperity.”^[viii] As

Western development assistance, most of Chinese assistance is tied, meaning that infrastructure projects are given to a Chinese contractor who uses Chinese materials in order to build the project.^[ix] Furthermore, despite China's focus on self-reliance, the estimated number of Chinese labourers on the Africa continent in 2014 ranged from 250,000 to one million.^[x] However, it should be noted that the main destination of Chinese labourers is not one of the top Chinese aid recipients, but Algeria,^[xi] the fourth largest African export market for China in 2016.^[xii] In legitimizing its strategy, however, Beijing discursively justifies its economic engagement "with Africa to suit the politics, ideology and history of each African country, something that the African elites regarded as giving them leverage and an ability to determine their own course of development."^[xiii] Notably, such a strategy differs from standardized US and EU foreign aid strategies that are often hinged upon principles of good governance, human rights, democracy promotion, and market-led economic development. By espousing well-customized discursive justifications supportive of a target African government, Beijing, in effect, tolerates the domestic political status quo, which, in turn, entrenches rather than unseats ruling elites. Yet, as Bräutigam found, Chinese development assistance is, in fact, not entirely free of conditions, as only states with diplomatic ties to China, and hence without ties to Taiwan, effectively have been receiving development assistance from China in the past decades.^[xiv] Indeed, China seeks intensive engagement with African countries primarily because of raw materials, new export markets, and energy resources.^[xv]

Despite the ideationally constructed difference between Western donors and China, development assistance seems to be closely linked to material incentives in a global power struggle. In order to maintain or to expand its spheres of influence, both the US and Chinese governments deem perceptions of aid legitimacy as a core task of their respective public diplomacy strategies. This is why the material power struggle is accompanied by a visible ideological competition aiming to construct the 'self' as relatively more attractive than the 'other's' competing foreign aid offer.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article demonstrates that the increased Chinese development assistance to Africa in the 21st century can be regarded within the context of a global power struggle. Considering China's rapidly growing economy, one of Beijing's key goals is to secure access to African resources by establishing benevolent relations with political leaders through unconditional development assistance. Even though the nature of Chinese assistance is not drastically different from American assistance in terms of political and economic motivations, Beijing's discursive justifications of and tactics in engaging with African governments are notably distinctive. Whereas Western donor countries present China's aid as "rogue," to the extent that Beijing systematically disregards issues of good governance and human rights, China, on the other hand, positions itself against Western aid conditionality portrayed as violations of common principles of sovereignty and non-interference. That is particularly the case as Beijing seeks to delegitimize Washington by portraying the attached explicit political conditionality in US aid packages as one of the direct causes of the remaining "North-South Gap." Such mutual delegitimization is part of a wider material struggle in world politics, because the aim is to be relatively more attractive to eligible recipients in order to increase one's sphere of political and economic influence.

The competition between the US and China as the preferred aid donor to African countries reinforces the widespread belief that the broader geostrategic and economic interests of the donor country underpin a donor country's foreign aid strategy. Yet, as the preliminary evidence from China and the US suggests, the

ideas, policy discourses, and justifications with regard to their respective aid programs notably differ in terms of substantive content. Whereas Washington DC invokes good governance, human rights, democracy, and socio-economic development as some of the quintessential legitimizing principles of its aid programs, Beijing tries to refute those claims as new ways of unjustly exercising Western influence upon less powerful countries. Furthermore, Beijing frames its humanitarian programs and aid interventions in the African continent as a transaction grounded on the political equality of states by not actively imposing explicit and elaborate political conditionalities upon the recipient government.^[xvi] In practice, such a discursive justification by Beijing gained some substantial political support from African governments because it positions China as not having a “non-imperialistic” and “non-colonialist” past — a characterization that appeals to a continent that has yet to fully recover from the trauma and suffering caused by Western colonial exploitation.^[xvii]

Notwithstanding the seemingly patronizing and altruistic justifications of Beijing and Washington for their engagement with African states underlies the rivalry between the US and China for hegemony in global governance and regional hegemony. This article shows that the projection of power by the US and China in Africa depends on both the intensity of political engagement through development assistance, as well as the discursive arguments that seek to justify those interventions. Thus, the material scope and extent of foreign aid as well as the persuasiveness of the donor country’s political justifications constitute the core determinants of an aid program’s over-all legitimacy. Yet, such an argument raises other important puzzles: How do recipient governments in Africa view these diverging discursive justifications on aid as deployed by China and the United States? How and in what ways do recipient governments diverge and converge with the publicly pronounced justifications of American and Chinese aid programs? Do these justifications facilitate the actual effectiveness of foreign aid programs, particularly in improving the over-all public welfare in African countries? If so, how and under which conditions do these justifications promote a more effective implementation of aid programs? Those are just some of the important puzzles that future policy and scholarly research on aid, global governance, and international development must seek to answer.

It is likely the case that the Chinese state does not currently seek to radically transform the current US-dominated world order. Perhaps the motivations of increasing Chinese aid interventions worldwide are more modest and non-threatening in ways that contradict what many pundits would like for us to believe. Amidst the expectation that China’s remarkable economic growth would likely not last for a long time, aid interventions facilitate the extraction of valuable natural resources and raw materials that are necessary in stimulating China’s domestic economy. Ultimately, the challenge for any ruling government of rising state power is to fully and sustainably consolidate its domestic authority; without full control of its internal affairs, any attempt in projecting power externally could be extremely challenging. In the case of China, the threat of domestic instability is serious, particularly when state agents violently repress any form of political dissent. This sense of domestic discontent over the Communist Party of China, especially in regard to its macroeconomic management, fuels the drive of Beijing to continuously look for new sources of wealth and business opportunities, particularly through achieving dominance in the international aid sector in Africa.

Notes

Top photograph of Xi Jinping at the 2015 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) Business Summit taken from GovernmentZA (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/governmentza/23282346800>) under Creative Commons license for reuse (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/2.0/>).

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