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## Human Rights and US-China Rivalry in Development Cooperation

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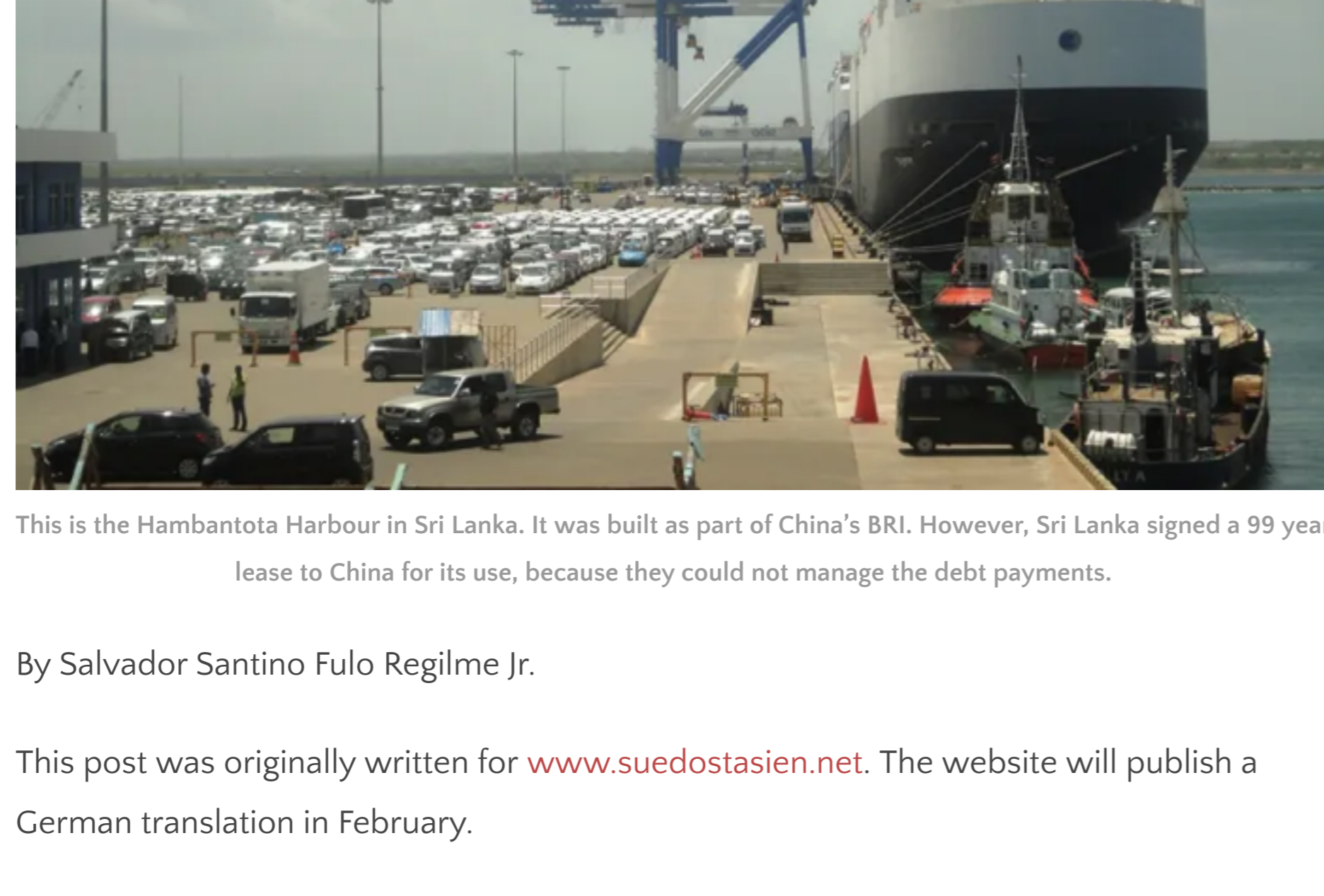
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## Human Rights and US-China Rivalry in Development Cooperation



This is the Hambantota Harbour in Sri Lanka. It was built as part of China's BRI. However, Sri Lanka signed a 99 year lease to China for its use, because they could not manage the debt payments.

By Salvador Santino Fulo Regilme Jr.

This post was originally written for [www.suedostasien.net](http://www.suedostasien.net). The website will publish a German translation in February.

### Human Rights and US-China Rivalry in Development Cooperation

How did post-Cold War US foreign aid shape the advancement of human rights in Southeast Asia, and what specific mechanisms were employed to achieve this impact? In light of the escalating US-China rivalry, what are the key distinctions in the foreign aid strategies and official finance activities of Beijing and Washington DC?

In my recently published book *Aid Imperium: United States Foreign Policy and Human Rights in Post-Cold War Southeast Asia*, I uncover the powerful and often unseen ways in which foreign aid, coupled with the influence of public diplomacy and discourses, shape the actions of recipient states, determining the extent and severity of domestic repression and ultimately impacting the human rights abuses inflicted by the state.

In my book *Aid Imperium*, I offer three key propositions that shed light on the complex relationship between foreign aid and human rights in post-Cold War Southeast Asia. First, I argue that when donor and recipient preferences align on a wide range of topics and policy issues, foreign aid is more likely to be allocated towards the promotion of democracy and human rights as well as socio-economic development, especially when the aid recipient government enjoys strong domestic legitimacy. Second, I demonstrate that foreign aid can also be used to support domestic repression against many forms of political opposition (including unarmed opposition) when both the donor and recipient governments converge on a militaristic policy agenda, and the recipient government's domestic legitimacy is weak. Third, I illustrate how state-perpetrated human rights abuses are likely to persist, regardless of the policy preferences of the donor and recipient states, particularly when a culture of impunity is entrenched in the judiciary and in police and military institutions. Together, these three propositions form the foundation of my interest convergence theory of foreign aid and human rights, which offers a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which foreign aid can both support and undermine human rights in post-Cold War Southeast Asia.

My interest convergence theory challenges traditional views of foreign aid by emphasizing the mutual dependence between ideas and material aspects of international development. Instead of assuming that recipient states lack agency and influence in shaping foreign aid programs, my theory highlights the role of shared policy preferences and normative ideas in determining how foreign aid impacts human rights. I argue that foreign aid is not inherently good or bad for recipient countries; rather, it is the converging interests of donor and recipient states, along with the recipient government's domestic legitimacy, that primarily shape the objectives and implementation of foreign aid and domestic policies. These factors, in turn, have a significant impact on the prevalence of state-perpetuated human rights abuses.

Thus, my interest convergence theory provides a nuanced understanding of the relationship between foreign aid and human rights, challenging conventional theories and highlighting the critical role of ideas and shared policy preferences in shaping the impact of foreign aid on recipient countries.

To demonstrate those theoretical propositions, I examine the impact of US foreign aid on human rights outcomes in Southeast Asia over several time periods, from the early 1990s to 2016. By examining the Philippines and Thailand in particular, I explore the relationship between foreign aid and physical integrity rights, both within individual countries over time and between them. I find that during the post-9/11 era, counterterror aid provided by the US government resulted in the tolerance of violent repression by the governments of the Philippines and Thailand. In contrast, during the immediate post-Cold War period, increased foreign aid from the US government with the goal of promoting democracy and human rights led to a redirecting of resources away from militarism.

The empirical evidence shows that during the Arroyo administration in the Philippines (2001-2010) and the Thaksin administration in Thailand (2001-2006), human rights crises occurred in the context of increased security measures following the 9/11 terrorist attacks and a surge in counterterror aid from the US. The Bush administration's provision of this aid was accompanied by tolerance of violent repression against political opposition deemed a threat to the unstable regimes of Thaksin and Arroyo.

In contrast, the 1990s, following the end of the Cold War, saw a rise in the demand for constitutional human rights and democratic governance. As a result, the US government under President Clinton repurposed and increased foreign aid to Thailand and the Philippines with the goal of promoting democracy, human rights, trade, and socio-economic development. This shift in US foreign aid towards supporting human rights aligned with the desires of both recipient governments and their citizens. In contrast to the post-9/11 era, which focused on security, the 1990s showed how a focus on human rights can redirect foreign aid and domestic resources away from militarization.

As China becomes a major competitor to the United States in global development politics, what can we learn from the history of US foreign aid in Southeast Asia during the post-Cold War era in understanding the current rivalry between the US and China? In this time of [global transformation](#), the primary goal for the Chinese Communist Party, including President Xi Jinping, is to maintain the current regime and its political system. To a large extent, the success of the regime depends on the government's ability to achieve strong economic growth and provide public goods, while also suppressing domestic and foreign political opposition. Given China's large population and other domestic political priorities, achieving this economic growth requires careful management of China's foreign policies and diplomatic strategies.

China's ambition to [become a global power](#) is closely tied to its ability to effectively challenge US military dominance in the Indo-Pacific region. This is a difficult task, and as a result, China has undertaken the illegal construction of [artificial islands and infrastructure](#) in the contested South China Sea, through which 60% of global trade passes. By establishing a presence in this disputed territory, China aims to extend its naval and military control beyond its traditional sphere of influence, in an effort to gain more economic leverage in a highly competitive global economy.

China's [foreign aid record](#) in Southeast Asia is uncertain and vastly different from the [comprehensive aid programs](#) of the United States. In recent times, the US has been [perceived as a more dependable aid](#) donor than China, particularly during the pandemic, due to its provision of healthcare equipment and COVID-19 vaccines. Washington's successful vaccine diplomacy is seen as an attempt to counteract China's efforts to position itself as a better development partner for Southeast Asian countries. It is likely that Southeast Asian nations will continue to maintain a balancing act in this power struggle by relying on the US for long-term security guarantees such as alliances, military cooperation, and strategic partnerships while also looking to [China for economic investments, infrastructure support, and trade deals](#).

The foreign aid strategies of the US and China have some [distinct characteristics](#). Both nations have used their foreign aid, public diplomacy, and official finance activities to further their geostrategic and economic interests, which is not unexpected as donor countries often use these resources to influence the actions of recipient governments in ways that are mutually beneficial. As they have risen as great powers, both the US and China have started foreign aid and finance programs with the goal of expanding their markets and creating new sources of wealth through stronger bilateral relations with recipient states. Additionally, while the US has been more transparent about the scope and goals of its aid and official finance programs, China has yet to publish a clear classification and scope of its official foreign aid and finance schemes in a way that is comparable to other donor countries in the global North.

There are significant distinctions between China and the US when it comes to their justification for foreign aid. The US cites democratic governance and human rights as quintessential principles for global development, while China justifies its official finance activities through the framework of South-South cooperation, selfless generosity, and a state-focused development approach. Therefore, neither China nor the US should be considered as benevolent powers in the global development sector, as perceived power struggles and antagonistic identity differences among rival states play a crucial role.


### About the Author

Salvador Santino Fulo Regilme Jr. (PhD, 2015, Freie Universität Berlin) is a Philippine-born Dutch scholar of International Relations with a tenured position based at the International Studies and History section of the Institute of History, Humanities Faculty of Leiden University, the Netherlands. He is the author of *Aid Imperium: United States Foreign Policy and Human Rights in Post-Cold War Southeast Asia* (The University of Michigan Press, 2021), sole editor of the forthcoming volume *The United States and China in the Era of Global Transformations: Geographies of Rivalry* (Bristol University Press, 2023), principal co-editor of *Human Rights at Risk: International Institutions, American Power, and the Future of Dignity* (Rutgers University Press, 2022), *American Hegemony and the Rise of Emerging Powers* (Routledge, 2017), and the author of numerous articles in leading social sciences and humanities journals.

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