

Pull-out supplement

theFocus

China's relations with countries in the developing world – beyond its immediate neighbours – constitute a relatively new and rapidly evolving phenomenon. As an area of research, China's approach to developing countries is still in an early phase. This does not mean that little has yet been published on this topic. Chinese relations with Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Pacific islands have attracted quite a lot of media and scholarly attention – already during the Cold War, but especially thereafter.¹ This applies in particular to Africa.²

Africa and the Chinese way

Despite the widespread attention, it remains difficult to identify the long-term elements that characterise the relationship between China and the developing world. An important reason for this is that China is still trying to find its way as a global power. Its identity and role in the international system remain far from settled. Moreover, the developing world is a highly diverse and extensive part of the international system and many developing countries are themselves changing fast. What makes the relationship even more complicated is that China itself is both a global power and a part of the developing world.

Frans-Paul van der Putten



Dealing with political-economic diversity in the developing world



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THE TOPIC OF THIS FOCUS SECTION is China's approach to the developing world in the case of Africa. What are the basic characteristics of this approach? Answering this requires identifying elements that are present in China's relations with all or most African countries, that have a long-term relevance, and that relate to China's status as a global power. But perhaps most crucially, it requires showing whether and how the Chinese approach is different from that of other influential actors. This is important because the widespread interest for China-Africa relations derives primarily from two issues. The first is the question of China's impact on development in Africa. While this issue may be approached in bilateral terms, there is a tendency to compare China's development impact with that of other non-African actors. The second is how China's involvement affects relations between African countries and the West – both Western states and the Western-dominated 'donor community'.³ This issue relates to the notion of a power shift, with China (followed by other non-Western countries) joining or perhaps even superseding Europe and the United States as influential actors in Africa.

The Chinese government commonly states that it "respects African countries' independent choice of the road of development".⁴ In other words, Beijing will not try to influence the political and economic systems in African countries. This is a reassurance to African governments that China will respect their countries' sovereignty, but also an implicit reference to the African policies of Western governments. The latter are aimed at promoting political and economic liberal values in African countries. Thus China attempts to distinguish itself from the West by emphasising its respect for the diversity in political and economic systems throughout Africa. This point is made explicitly in an editorial comment in the online version of the state-controlled newspaper *People's Daily*: "Following its traditional culture and foreign policy principles, China has never imposed its ideology on others [...]. By contrast, Western countries have been trying to impose their ideologies and values on African countries, which can be regarded as a form of ideological hegemony. [...] The influence of a rising China [...] has caused some African countries not to blindly follow the 'imperial edicts' from the West anymore."⁵

Western governments do not disagree that a major distinction between their African policies and those of China involves the promoting of values, but rather they argue that it is wrong of China to disregard liberal values, which they regard as universal. In June 2011, during her visit to Zambia, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was asked to comment on the fact that 'other players' – seemingly a reference to China, among others – engage in aid and trade with African countries without imposing conditions relating to good governance. Clinton replied: "We don't want to see a new colonialism in Africa. We want, when people come to Africa and make investments, we want them to do well, but we also want them to do good. We don't want them to undermine good governance. We don't want them to basically deal with just the top elites and, frankly, too often pay for their concessions or their opportunities to invest." Moreover, according to Clinton, China's 'top-down command economy' is not a suitable role model for Africa. Like the US, the European Union links conditions relating to democracy, human rights and rule of law to its provision of aid to African states.⁶

Both China and the West point at the promoting of values as an essential difference between them. While the West encourages African countries to adopt liberal values, China proclaims that it respects the diversity of systems in developing countries. The notion of diversity is closely related to some frequently discussed elements in Chinese foreign policy regarding the developing world, such as the principle of non-interference and the 'no strings attached' approach. However, these two elements differ in some regards from the concept of diversity. Interventions are not necessarily aimed at promoting liberal values abroad. Also, conditionality relating to Chinese aid and economic relations can involve issues that have no direct connection with the nature of political and economic systems in Africa. This is the case with regard to adhering to the one-China principle and supporting China in matters relating to the status of Xinjiang and Tibet, conditions that Beijing in fact does impose on its African partners.

To explore whether and how support – or at least tolerance – for a diversity of political and economic systems plays a role in China's relations with African countries, scholars from diverse backgrounds were invited to present their views on this topic in this issue of *The Newsletter*. While their contributions often emphasise different aspects and their assessments do not agree on everything, several noteworthy insights emerge from the essays on the following pages.

The contributors note that China's approach to Africa is indeed different from the West's. Most point at the West's self-imposed civilising mission and China's lack thereof as a key distinction between the two actors. Thus, unlike the West, China is not fundamentally inclined to change the political and economic systems in African countries. This attitude towards diversity is rooted in China's historical experience, which suggests that the country has been able to achieve significant security and economic goals because it chose the political-economic system that is most suited to its particular situation. China's current system is the product of indigenous processes, not of outside intervention. The Chinese understanding of what is good for developing countries thus differs from the Western view. Not only is China's African policy not based on ideology, but – as Zhang Qingmin and Song Wei point out – it also limits the effects of Western attempts to promote liberal values. According to Mamoudou Gazibo and Olivier Mbabia, this is one of the elements that make China attractive to many Africans.

However, this does not necessarily preclude the possibility that China might attempt to influence domestic political and economic conditions in African countries for non-ideological reasons. This may perhaps occur sooner in the economic than in the political sphere. In her contribution, Sanne van der Lugt mentions that Chinese actors in Africa tend to promote a favourable investment climate. While this benefits Chinese business interests, prioritising investment promotion over other policies may not be the best possible approach for the host country in each particular instance. Stephen Ellis notes that for China to protect its business interests in Africa, it may feel compelled to give increasing support to multilateral bodies and their use of interventionist policies. This relates primarily to economic organisations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. But in crisis situations, when Chinese investments and citizens are endangered, the same might apply also to regional security organisations or the United Nations Security Council.

So while China's diversity policy seems to be very significant with regard to relations between African and Western countries, it is not entirely clear how firm this concept is integrated in China's longer-term approach to Africa. In fact, the contribution by William A. Callahan suggests that the relevance of diversity in China's foreign policy discourse is decreasing. According to Callahan, in the long-term China's ideal international system seems to be a Sino-centric world order in which unity rather than diversity is the main value. At some point in the future, policies aimed at harmonising and pacifying other peoples could thus come to play a major role in China's approach to Africa, instead of those aimed at maintaining diversity.

Finally, Chih-yu Shih also points at limitations in the role of diversity in Sino-African relations. His essay suggests that China's leaders are failing to address Chinese racism towards Africans in the cultural sphere. Consequently China's state-level foreign policy, which respects African political and economic preferences, lacks a firm foundation of respect for Africans at the individual level.

China's declared support for political and economic diversity in international relations should not be discarded as mere propaganda, but closer inspection is needed to understand how exactly the notion of diversity is relevant for China's relations with Africa and other parts of the developing world.

Four issues remain to be addressed through more structural research. First, what precisely does diversity mean in the context of China's history and foreign policy discourse? Second, what is China's actual behaviour with regard to political and economic diversity in developing countries? Third, in what sense is China's approach to diversity different from that of other actors? And fourth, how does this approach affect Africa and the international order? China's emerging leadership role in contemporary international relations is an exciting and rapidly developing field of study, and much remains to be discovered in this area.

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Notes

- 1 Joshua Eisenman, Eric Heginbotham, Derek Mitchell (eds.) 2007. *China and the Developing World: Beijing's strategy for the twenty-first century*. New York: M.E. Sharpe; Lowell Dittmer and George T. Yu (eds.) 2010. *China, the Developing World and the New Global Dynamic*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.
- 2 Two influential books on China-Africa relations are Chris Alden. 2007. *China in Africa*. London: Zed Books; and Deborah Brautigam. 2009. *The Dragon's Gift: The real story of China in Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 3 On China and EU-Africa relations: Jonathan Holslag. 2011. 'China's Evolving Behaviour in Africa and the Options of Cooperation with Europe', *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 4:3-16.
- 4 'China's African Policy', Chinese government white paper, Beijing, January 2006, available on: <http://tinyurl.com/7594f8m>.
- 5 'China Africa Relations: Far cry from Western colonialism', *People's Daily Online*, 7 Sept. 2011, available on: <http://tinyurl.com/6rylqlw>.
- 6 Anna Katharina Stahl. 2011. 'Contrasting Rhetoric and Converging Security Interests of the European Union and China in Africa', *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 4:147-173.

Below: Zheng He (1371–1433) was a Hui-Chinese mariner, explorer, diplomat and fleet admiral, who commanded voyages to Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, East Africa, and the Horn of Africa. Photo courtesy flickr.com

