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Towards a critical geopolitics of China's engagement with African development

Marcus Power (Durham University) & Giles Mohan (The Open University)¹

Abstract: China, in its quest for a closer strategic partnership with Africa, has increasingly dynamic economic, political and diplomatic activities on the continent. Chinese leaders and strategists believe that China's historical experience and vision of economic development resonates powerfully with African counterparts and that the long standing history of friendly political linkages and development co-operation offers a durable foundation for future partnership. In doing so, we see from the Chinese side and amongst some western commentators a form of exceptionalism and generalisation regarding both China and Africa. In this paper instead we seek to develop theoretical tools for examining China as a geopolitical and geoeconomic actor that is both different and similar to other industrial powers intervening in Africa. This is premised on a political economy approach that ties together material interests with a deconstruction of the discursive or 'extra-economic' ways by which Chinese capitalism internationalises. From there we use this framework to analyse contemporary Chinese engagement in Africa. We examine the changing historical position of Africa within Beijing's foreign policy strategy and China's vision of the evolving international political system, looking in particular at China's bilateral and state-centric approach to working with African 'partners'. Chinese practice is uncomfortable and unfamiliar with the notion of 'development' as an independent policy field of the kind that emerged among Western nations in the course of the 1950s and increasingly China has come to be viewed as a 'rogue creditor' and a threat to the international aid industry. Rather than highlighting one strand of Chinese relations with African states (such as aid or governance) we propose here that it is necessary to critically reflect on the wider *geopolitics of China-Africa relations* (past and present) in order to understand how China is opening up new 'choices' and altering the playing field for African development for the first time since the neo-liberal turn of the 1980s.

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Towards a critical geopolitics of China's engagement with African development

Introduction: China's 'soft power' and 'rogue aid'

"China's development, instead of hurting or threatening anyone, can only serve peace, stability and common prosperity in the world" (President Hu Jintao, 2005¹).

China's growth has required a concerted economic internationalisation and with it changing foreign policy discourses, that bring China closer binationally and multilaterally to other countries. As a result the orientation of China's vision of 'development' both nationally and internationally is shifting. Although still premised on long-standing claims of 'peaceful' and 'harmonious' cooperation part of China's recent internationalisation is the extension of a 'new', 'pragmatic' vision of development. This 'new' vision of interaction around development co-operation is growth-oriented and market-based leading some observers to characterise it as 'market extremism'², even a form of neo-liberalism, though one with 'Chinese characteristics'³ in recognition of the traces of Maoism and the continuing importance of the state⁴.

In its pursuit of this growth-oriented strategy, a number of African countries (particularly those with significant natural resource endowments) have come to occupy centre stage in Chinese foreign policy, as potential sources of raw materials to fuel China's growth. In this way China's foreign policy is understood by some to be shifting from a concern with 'ideology' to a preoccupation with 'business', using what Joseph Nye⁵ terms 'soft power' to cajole client states into accepting Chinese contracts (Nye himself has served as an advisor to the Chinese on how best to utilise this form of power⁶). For observers like Chris Alden and Ian Taylor⁷ soft power is part of China's 'oil diplomacy' in which notionally unconditional aid, low interest loans and technical co-operation agreements⁸ are used to cement bilateral deals over oil supply, engineering contracts, and trade agreements. As summarised by Tull⁹:

"Beijing uses the pillars of its foreign policy, notably unconditional respect for state sovereignty and its corollary, non-interference, in the pursuit of its interests, be they energy security, multipolarity or the "One China" principle. To achieve these goals, Beijing is prepared to defend autocratic regimes that commit human rights abuses and forestall democratic reforms for narrow ends of regime survival".

The rapid resurgence of China in recent years is thus beginning to radically alter “the global geopolitical ecology of investment, production, and trade”¹⁰. China’s greatly expanded scale of operations has generated massive demand for capital, goods, raw materials and energy that have pushed up commodity prices with important implications for the economies of many African countries. It is the effects on governance of China’s overseas aid and investment packages that have particularly vexed most commentators in the West. In some policy circles, mainly those inhabited by what Nye¹¹ terms the ‘China hawks’, China’s new aid offensive has been greeted with scepticism and concern, captured in the idea that China is some kind of ‘rogue creditor’ practising opportunistic lending¹² and proliferating problematic forms of ‘rogue aid’¹³. One of the biggest criticisms of Chinese aid is the lack of political conditionalities, which some argue will lead to deepened debt and governance crises in Africa¹⁴. Editor-in-Chief of *Foreign Policy* magazine Moisés Naím, for example, represents China as a “threat to healthy, sustainable development”¹⁵ arguing that the Chinese “are effectively pricing responsible and well meaning organizations out of the market in the very places they are needed most” whilst “underwriting a world that is more corrupt, chaotic and authoritarian”. Many observers and commentators have taken this focus on aid and conditionality further to argue that China is potentially a neo-colonial power¹⁶, where African resources are ‘plundered’ by Beijing and sent back in the form of Chinese goods thereby cementing the long standing uneven division of labour between Africa and the rest of the world.

Despite these negative and possibly justifiable warnings about a ‘new’ imperialism China’s emergence as a global development actor raises short-term political questions about alternative policy approaches in countries of the global South as well as longer-term ideological questions around the very meaning of development itself. Many African leaders have heralded the relevance of a Chinese ‘model’ of development even though Deng Xiaoping once told an African head of state that *there was no Chinese model to emulate*¹⁷. Others see this ‘model’ as an alternative “to the American model”¹⁸ or as “defying the conditionalities of the Bretton Woods institutions”¹⁹ even though Chinese lending does come with its own conditions. Joseph Stiglitz²⁰ even touts China as a ‘model’ for how developing nations should rise and escape the prescriptions of Anglo-American neo-liberalism. Further many commentators have been quick to note the ‘lessons’ that Africa can learn from this ‘model’²¹ and even to suggest that China can be Africa’s “economic role model”²². Yet Deng was right, there is no single, coherent ‘Chinese model’²³. Many observers seem to conflate the various possible and often overlapping meanings of this term in problematic and contradictory ways. It is thus often used simultaneously to refer to a Chinese model of development in China (which serves as an example for others to follow), a Chinese development model enacted in Africa to steer the continent’s development (in an analogous sense to the Washington Consensus) and as a global model of interaction around development cooperation. Thus the singularity and coherence of a Chinese ‘model’ has often been considerably overstated, despite the internal variation within China (between say rural and urban areas

and even between SEZs) and the growing difficulties the Chinese state is facing in managing the complex range of corporate agents now active overseas. We might also question the supposed 'Chinese' nature of this 'model' given the extent to which China has looked to and drawn from East Asian examples of state practice in pursuing 'development'. China's government officially denies the existence of a 'Beijing Consensus' but an official version of the Chinese path to development is known as 'Xiaokang', the creation of a moderately prosperous and harmonious socialist society²⁴. Deng reintroduced the term Xiaokang (which was initially used in early Chinese poetry) in 1979 as a goal of Chinese modernisation.

In this paper we want to explore the relationships between China's development, its foreign policy and Africa's political economy and more broadly assess whether current theories in IR, political geography and development studies can adequately address these evolving relationships. While we are by no means apologists for China we pursue an international political economy perspective informed by post-colonial theory which sees China's interests in Africa as not substantially different from those of other industrialised countries vying for the continent's resources, either now or in the past. The tendency to demonise and over-determine China's role by western critics perhaps reveals more about their fears and concerns about competition from China than it does about the shape of contemporary China-Africa relations. Our first question then is what theoretical tools are available in IR, political geography and development studies to begin the analysis of contemporary China-Africa relations? Within this we argue for a broad political economy perspective, which is not deterministic but instead regards the unrolling of 'neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics' as a political *process*. As such we need to focus on the mechanisms, networks and discourses through which it is disseminated. For IR this means deconstructing numerous discourses, particularly Chinese geopolitical discourses, with a view to understanding how they have come to inform policy and practice. It also requires us to understand the mechanisms linking foreign policy discourses and events on the ground. For this we propose a state-centred political economy informed by post-colonial theory that (amongst other things) examines how 'markets' are engendered and legitimated through seemingly non-market processes.

Our second focus is essentially empirical in terms of drawing upon these theoretical insights in order to analyse contemporary China-Africa relations. We ask how 'new' is China's aid offensive in Africa and to what extent does China re-work older discourses of geopolitics and development to legitimise its current engagement with Africa? Additionally we seek to assess how China's vision of development 'travels' and how its local manifestations differ through interaction with African institutions. This approach recognises the differences between African polities, the agency of African political actors, the flexibility of the apparently rigid 'Beijing Consensus', and the extent to which China's insistence on 'non-interference' really allows for locally relevant and 'nationally-owned' development policy.

IR, political geography and development: beyond reductionism

We want to begin by addressing our first question that if China's growth is changing its relationship with African states what theoretical tools are available to analyse contemporary China-Africa relations?²⁵ In this sub-section we examine how IR and development studies have comprehended African politics and development, arguing that they have tended to treat knowledge as culturally siloed rather than hybrid, and mistreated the state to implicitly re-centre western political norms. As a result we challenge the idea that knowledge about international relations and countries is so culturally determined that only concepts derived from scholars embedded in the context in question can adequately interrogate that context. Instead we see knowledge as labile so that rather than reify and/or exoticise theories 'with Chinese characteristics' or 'western rationality' we need a more hybrid and emergent view of how theories of international relations evolve. This opens up a space to analyse Chinese IR theories, albeit tentatively, and the ways they shape international engagements in general and with Africa in particular. From there we move to understanding the mechanisms for analysing how these normative policy concerns coming from China are made real in Africa and how we can explain differences between African states. Here we take a broadly structural approach²⁶ that relies on a Marxian political economy, which examines the interests of different fractions of international capital and their entwining with state interests. But rather than treat the unfolding of these interests under the current conjuncture of neoliberalism as somehow automatic we prefer the idea of neo-liberalisation as a political *process* that relies on a range of market and non-market discourses and practices to become embedded in particular contexts. In this way our framework ties together questions of structure, agency and discourse as part of a totality.

IR, Africa and the virtue of hybrid theories

The linkages between development discourses and theories of international relations are often implicit rather than explicit. However, both share something of a Eurocentrism and reductionism, which places Africa as the subject of history and modernity²⁷. In turn this forecloses a wide range of different African forms of political agency, agency which is actually completely necessary to any understanding of the dynamics of international relations. That said there have been a number of attempts in recent years at thinking past 'Western' IR which has increasingly been seen as "ethnocentric, masculinised, northern and top-down"²⁸ with many critics arguing that it has consistently ignored or misrepresented Africa in particular. International Relations remains configured, as it was in Hoffman's designation over thirty years ago, as "An American Social Science"²⁹. There have been some parallel debates about 'critical geopolitics' and its neglect of the periphery of the world system (particularly Africa) in focusing on European or North American geopolitical discourses³⁰. Writing a few years after the establishment of the journal *Political Geography*, Peter Perry claimed that: "Anglo-American political geography poses and pursues a limited and

impoverished version of the discipline, largely ignoring the political concerns of four fifths of humankind”³¹. Eleanore Kofman reiterated this in the mid-1990s, noting “the heavily Anglocentric, let alone Eurocentric, bias of political geography writing”³². In this, political geography is not alone; the same critique has periodically been levelled at ‘Anglo-American’ human geography more widely³³. In this Orientalist-inspired sense knowledge *about* the international functions to legitimise the structuring of international relations in which Africa is marginalised and managed.

Dunn³⁴ argues that western IR ignores Africa, because of its neorealist insistence on placing the state at the centre of explanations. Dunn goes on to argue that for Africa the state as conventionally understood is largely absent and so IR is incapable of comprehending the ‘real’ political dynamics of the continent. This is in contrast, he argues, to the clearly delimited and coherent states of Europe which makes IR relevant to them. Dunn argues that Africa ‘does generate meaningful politics’³⁵ and so we need ‘better’ IR, which problematises questions of sovereignty, power and the ‘nation’. While Brown is sympathetic to the broad project of a meaningful analysis of Africa in the world, he criticises Dunn and others for conflating IR with neorealism³⁶. Brown’s argument is that neorealism suffers from serious limitations that are evident even before one transplants it to Africa. In particular the normalisation of the European state as the benchmark for analysis creates certain teleological arguments in which Africa, and some other regions, can only be found wanting³⁷. The effect of arguing that Africa underlines the limits to theory and is so different that it requires an, as yet, unspecified ‘new’ theory only serves to marginalise Africa from core debates of IR. We wholeheartedly concur with Brown when he cites various examples of where IR has focused on global structures rather than states which has been fruitful for both IR and an analysis of Africa. Yet we cannot understand Africa in international relations without an analysis of the state which recognises its structural determinations as well as its local uniqueness, something we deal with below.

So, critiques of certain IR theories mirror those of development for an implicit and Eurocentric statism thereby constructing knowledge in hegemonic ways. We would however argue that there are other ways of approaching the development/international politics nexus and that China-Africa relations offer the opportunity for de-centring the West from accounts of global politics and looking more closely at the ‘entwining’ of knowledges (as many post-colonial theorists have urged). In developing the critique of the likes of Dunn, Bilgin³⁸ argues that these laudable attempts to insert the periphery into IR are based on a reversal of ‘Western’ theorising. Bilgin argues that such attempts should not limit their task to looking beyond the spatial confines of the ‘West’ in search for insight understood as ‘difference’, but also ask awkward questions about the ‘Westernness’ of ostensibly ‘Western’ approaches to world politics and the ‘non-Westernness’ of others³⁹. The same may also be said about the ‘Westernness’ of ostensibly ‘Western’ approaches to development and the ‘non-Westernness’ of

others. For there may be elements of 'non-Western' experiences and ideas built in to 'Western' ways of thinking about and practising development and world politics. The reverse may also be true. What we think of as 'non-Western' approaches to world politics or 'development', in other words, may be suffused with 'Western' concepts and theories (e.g. the importance of modernisation discourses to China's scientific or technocratic vision of 'development'). Bilgin argues that this requires becoming curious about the effects of the historical relationship between the 'West' and the 'non-West' in the emergence of ways of thinking and doing that are in Bhabha's words 'almost the same but not quite'⁴⁰. Rather than becoming fixated with China's or Africa's exceptionalism it is possible that a process of 'mimicry' may emerge, in other words, as a way of 'doing' world politics or development in a seemingly 'similar' yet unexpectedly 'different' way. In this hybridity and mimicry we can accommodate the pressing ontological and epistemological point that neither 'China' nor 'Africa' is homogenous and that outcomes will inevitably be complex and differentiated as opposed to singular and similar as our earlier discussion of the Chinese 'model' of development suggests.

Here then we have been trying to comprehend contemporary approaches to IR coming from China as a way of understanding how they influence and condition the country's multiple modes of engagement with Africa. An important point about theory and policy in China is that "[t]he significance of a scientific theory lies in its ability to guide human behaviour"⁴¹ so that there has been, and still are, strong links between the outputs of Chinese foreign policy research centres and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)⁴². In reviewing the state of Chinese IR Zhang identified three contrasting schools. One argues that 'Chinese scholars needed to "catch up" by "importing Western IR theories"⁴³. By contrast there is another seeking to re-work Marxism-Leninism in order to develop an IR 'with Chinese characteristics', what Leonard⁴⁴ refers to as the 'neocomms' (neo-communists). While potentially interesting this is still mired in what Zhang sees as an 'increasingly anachronistic'⁴⁵ Maoist orthodoxy based on Lenin's reading of imperialism tempered with world-systems theory, which he believes fails to produce any new insights. The third approach also seeks to capture the specificity of China's development trajectory and argues that most IR theory has been developed in particular geopolitical contexts which serve to extend the hegemony of the dominant powers. While seeking to capture what is unique about China this third body of theory should "participate in theoretical debate in the global IR community while addressing theoretical issues in terms of China's national experience"⁴⁶. Although not explicit and still in what Zhang terms a 'primary stage' this mutual engagement may lead to a more 'international' IR theory.

An example of the growing confidence of China's IR theorising is the question of *tianxia*, based on a nationalistic use of history⁴⁷. Drawing on two millennia of thinking, some public intellectuals see it as a normative ideal that could guide foreign policy. Meaning literally 'all under heaven' it has different inflections that

can mean 'we, the Chinese', all people, or a world institution. A key element is transformation, which is about transforming 'enemies' into 'friends', but can also be interpreted as a more thorough going cultural conversion to be more 'like us', namely enlightened Chinese, which smacks of earlier European colonial discourses. Although a piece of populist thinking, and in no way universally accepted, it shows a growing intellectual confidence among an increasingly nationalistic Chinese, keen to develop Chinese theory for a Chinese century. It is not our intention to analyse the logical consistency of *tianxia*, but to follow Callahan's argument that "Each imperial system that he (Zhao Tingyang, the leading exponent of *tianxia*) criticizes..... has had its own utopian ideal to inspire its governance regime" (756). This then urges us to critically examine the changing range of theoretical models informing Chinese foreign policy; something we do in the next main section.

China's integration into the liberal world order we would argue has produced hybrid results that require us to think carefully about 'non-Western' similarity/difference. Further, much of the critical literature on development has focused on the US as holding a dominant and centralising position in the international development business and has explored the continuation of imperial power relations though the contemporary pursuit of 'development'. Yet as Hardt and Negri⁴⁸ have argued, in today's world "imperial geopolitics has no centre and no outside", which opens up an analysis of China as a potential 'imperialist' power, although we would argue that such analysis must be rooted in actually existing effects and not read off *a priori* from a set of ideological and strategic prejudices. However, in valorising 'non-western' perspectives we are not advocating an uncritical relativism, which treats, for example, the proclamations of the Chinese government as any more legitimate than claims by rival governments vying for African resources. This necessarily has to be historicised in order to analyse continuities and identify traces of the past that influence (or are manipulated by) contemporary actors. This avoids *de novo* accounts that suggest what China is doing is, first, out of the blue in terms of Chinese foreign policy and, second, a significant departure from past practices of other external interests on the continent.

Political economy and an emergent Chinese neo-liberalism in Africa

While the first theoretical intervention is essentially deconstructive in making a case for examining the relationality and hybridity of international relations theory our second attempts to develop a framework for analysing how China-Africa interactions actually play out. This is vitally important since too many mainstream accounts of this interaction take a universalising stance arguing that 'China' acts uniformly across 'Africa' and that the impacts on economies, politics and environments are essentially the same⁴⁹. Here we set out briefly our political economy framework for analysing China-Africa relations.

We start from a structural analysis of the changing global economy and its implications for development. McMichael's⁵⁰ characterization of a move from

'developmentalism' to 'globalism' is instructive here, as is his observation that such moves have been a response to the crises of a previous regime. He argues that developmentalism, essentially a social-democratic welfarism, was a response to the crisis of 19th Century monetary control via the gold standard and the destabilising effects of the World Wars. This Keynesian developmentalism came during the period of formal decolonization and underpinned state-led, protectionist and redistributive development policy. Globalism, by contrast, is the ideology of neo-liberalism and is a counter-mobilisation to the constraints of social protectionism, which seeks to engender market rule through institutional coercion which has weakened the power of some states. Neo-liberal capitalism is a project of reinstating or cementing class privileges which works through what some have termed 'accumulation by dispossession'⁵¹. Far from being a temporary feature of capitalism, primitive accumulation is an incomplete and recurring phenomenon⁵², given new legitimacy under neo-liberalism in which displacement of people from their land and a violent proletarianisation are the norm for many in the developing world.

The idea of China being 'neoliberal' is often queried given the traditional understanding of 'neoliberalism' as entailing strict market features unimpeded by state planning which is seen to be irreconcilable with the reality of the Chinese experience. To what extent however is a discussion of neo-liberalism useful in analysing China's development trajectory and internationalisation strategy? Giovanni Arrighi⁵³, for example, argues that China has refused to follow neoliberal prescriptions, implementing reforms gradually rather than by 'shock therapy' and emphasising a national interest in stability. Rather than doctrinaire neoliberalism Chinese policies emerge from a 'pragmatic approach to problems of governance'⁵⁴. Arrighi thus almost idealises the 'Chinese model' as ecologically aware, labour-friendly, egalitarian and decentred; a model of accumulation *without* dispossession. China's hybridised "market society" is depicted here as offering a new development path that is attractive to other nations and as opening up the possibility of a 'new Bandung', one that "can do what the old one could not" and creating a "commonwealth of civilisations on an economic basis"⁵⁵. Arrighi's analysis implies that the Chinese development path provides a useful exemplar for the rest of the world and that the rise of China may therefore help to reduce global inequalities and to move toward a more sustainable and just form of political economy. Arrighi contends that contemporary China is pursuing a model of market society that is similar in many ways to the paternalistic commodifying "natural" path that Adam Smith saw in earlier centuries. Arrighi's contention that China has not yet developed full-blown capitalism is largely based on Samir Amin's observation that the rural peasantry has not yet been dispossessed of land and so full proletarianization has not emerged.

It could even be argued that Chinese economic policies are arguably neo-mercantilist in nature rather than being completely 'neo-liberal'. They are of course fundamentally capitalist and as such, the post-Mao Chinese leadership is

doing precisely what the West wants it to do yet is, on occasion, castigated if and when processes unleashed by this liberalisation play themselves out on the global stage and in areas formerly held to be within the West's spheres of influence (e.g. 'Africa'). David Harvey rightly emphasises that China is a 'strange case' as the outcome has been a particular kind of neoliberalism interdigitated with 'authoritarian centralized control'⁵⁶. Aihwa Ong⁵⁷ detects however that "Harvey has trouble fitting China into his "neoliberal template" proposing instead to understand neoliberalism as a technology for governing 'free subjects'. Nonetheless, following Fulong Wu⁵⁸ we would concur that "neoliberalization does capture some basic features of market re-orientation in China". The Chinese state remains officially critical of neoliberal ideology, even as it encourages the forces of neoliberalism, whilst the state also counters neoliberalism with nationalism. Our characterisation of China's economic vision as 'neoliberal' is necessarily tentative and provisional, however, and our research aims to understand further the applicability and appropriateness of this classification. In this process we can look to and seek to learn from the experiences of other 'post-socialist' states undergoing transformation (particularly the USSR).

For Harvey, the economic liberalisation in China started by Deng Xiaoping was initially intended as an attempt to empower China in relation to what was going on in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore as the Chinese sought to compete with those economies. Initially, Harvey argues, the Chinese did not want to develop an export-led economy, but what their reforms led to was the opening up of industrial capacity in many parts of China, resulting in China's ability to market commodities on the world stage, due to good technology, a reasonably educated and certainly very cheap labour force. The Chinese quickly found themselves moving into the global economy and in doing so they gained much more in terms of FDI, leading to greater interest in the neoliberalization process. Whether it was by accident or design, is not clear, but it certainly has had far-reaching consequences. The post-1978 structural transformations under Deng followed a time when China had been economically devastated by the cultural revolution of 1966-76 under Mao Zedong. Under Deng "the repudiation of the 'cultural revolution' was turned into an ideological and political instrument to justify and legitimate the following 30 years of neoliberal restructuring"⁵⁹. Deng believed that neoliberalization was compatible with China's political regime in which the state-party forms the political arena for civil society and for Chinese economic actors. Indeed it was, as the market had become a potential solution and a means to 'fix' and resolve the impasse in the accumulation of capital under state socialism. Neoliberalization could be repackaged as 'modernisation' allowing the state to legitimise itself in the process and to increase its presence as a result. In this formulation, authoritarian control isn't some strange oddity adding 'Chinese characteristics' to neoliberalism but is rather a reaction to the process of marketisation itself. The aim was to achieve economic liberalization that would contribute to the preservation of the power of the state, of the party and of the political regime of the state-party. Arguably this is also an objective that provides part of the common ground between China and some of its new African partners.

The form of primitive capitalism⁶⁰ that has emerged in China is not the latest form of Deng's 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' but it is one where state actors, often at the local level, remain central to the functioning of an economic system, the emergence of which:

"[O]wes more to the agglomeration of numerous initiatives to interpret and implement economic change to serve particular interests than it does to the plans and strategies of national level decision making elites"⁶¹

The Chinese government's narration of this historical transformation posits a continuous 'transitional' period that links past to present, socialism to capitalism. Wang Hui⁶² observes however that 'transitional' refers in part to a government-inspired historical 'myth' that China's transition from socialism is a natural and spontaneous historical development brought on through the introduction of market mechanisms. Wang argues that terms like 'free trade' and 'unregulated' are ideological constructs masking coercive government actions that favour particular groups and classes. This supposed ideological neutrality is also found in analyses of China's Africa policy, which is often presented as commercial, pragmatic and rational⁶³. The 'transitional' period in China may thus be more accurately described as a time of 'violent state intervention.' There can be no 'natural' transition from economic to political reform, because the process is driven by certain power-dynamics and social forces foreshadowing a new era of state-capitalism and neo-liberal economics in which both the means of production and political power will be controlled by a few. Economic liberalisation and continuing political repression have gone hand-in-hand in China: market-extremism, radical privatisation and economic corruption on the one hand, and strict control over politics and policy on the other. In these conditions, 'accumulation by dispossession' has ensued through the privatization of state assets and the expropriation of the commons—both of which suited business and state elites in China.

We therefore understand China's growing internationalism as part of this process of neo-liberalisation. Rather than neo-liberalism being an essentially fully-formed programme that travels out from its centres in Washington and London as Harvey⁶⁴ argues, it is more insightful to see neoliberalism as multiple and varied in the forms that it can take. Peck and Tickell⁶⁵ make the case for a process-based analysis of "neoliberalization", arguing that the transformative and adaptive capacity of this far-reaching political-economic project has been repeatedly underestimated. Amongst other things, this calls for a close reading of the historical and geographical (re)constitution of the process of neoliberalization and of the variable ways in which different "local neoliberalisms" are embedded within wider networks and structures of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism operates at multiple scales and more attention needs to be paid to the *different variants* of neoliberalism, to the *hybrid nature* of contemporary policies and programmes and to the *multiple and contradictory aspects* of neoliberal spaces, techniques and

subjects⁶⁶. We hope to analyse China as a contingent variant that is neither universal nor particular. There is a need to carefully specify the *discourses, processes and mechanisms of neoliberalization*, to understand its different institutional variants, and to examine how these are interconnected through new, translocal channels of policy formation⁶⁷. Neoliberalism has both a creative ('roll out') and a destructive ('roll back') moment⁶⁸ and any adequate treatment of the process of neoliberalization must explain how these moments are combined under different historical and geographical circumstances⁶⁹.

In countering the tendency to mis-represent the (African) state in IR and avoiding a determinism that simply treats (Chinese) neo-liberal involvement in Africa as some *deus ex machina* which robs African actors of any agency we focus on the state and its relations to capital. Here we are persuaded to a degree by Ferguson's⁷⁰ broad brush thesis that far from Africa being marginalised by globalisation it is selectively incorporated into it through enclaved investments of the type that major Chinese SOEs engage in. Like Harvey's accumulation by dispossession this is based on exclusion and alienation of peasant producers. These tend to be in the minerals sector and draw inspiration from oil extraction with its gated compounds protected by private security forces and limited linkages with the local economy. In contrast to a colonial and post-colonial developmentalist model that promoted 'thick' sociality through company towns these contemporary projects create much thinner social investments. Ferguson goes on to argue that allied to this mode of insertion into Africa is a bifurcated governance model in which the increasingly *unusable* formal state structures are 'hollowed out' fiscally and in terms of authority and personnel, while the *usable* enclaves are governed efficiently as private entities in a similar vein to pre-colonial mercantilist exploitation. For the marginalised, according to Ferguson, all that remains is a transnational humanitarian form of governance orchestrated by international NGOs and implemented by the more able, former state employees now lured by higher salaries.

Ferguson's analysis chimes with much of what we see in China's engagement with Africa, but we argue that the relationships between state and capital are more complex, especially given that Chinese capital is, at minimum, split between the large, state influenced TNCs and a myriad smaller, independent entrepreneurs. Whereas in the past Chinese firms and the state were coincidental, now there is some relative autonomy of Chinese firms from state agendas, although the ties between the CCP and the large Chinese multinationals remain quite strong. However, smaller private Chinese firms, which have proliferated in Africa, are independent of Chinese state agendas to a degree even though they are encouraged⁷¹. The outcomes of China's involvement in Africa will primarily be shaped by state-capital dynamics, particularly how Chinese capital and parts of the Chinese state intertwines with fractions of capital and political blocs within Africa. As Ferguson notes the internationalization of capital makes the relationships between capital and the state more complex, and breaks away from a rigid territorialisation of the political

and economic which assumes capital has a nationality⁷². We then have to examine different fractions of capital – some of which may be enclaved - and what role states play in enabling these to succeed or how capital itself exploits (unintended) differences in state policies. This is more complex than Ferguson's bifurcated model of un/usable Africa and it is a profoundly political process as different classes seek to transform the state in pursuit of their interests. This is also important as Chinese policy responds to local political conditions while the Chinese doctrine of respecting sovereignty and non-interference is implicitly based on an assumption that a state exists in the first place. While we saw earlier that Dunn⁷³ explains away IR *per se*, because of an assumed lack of adequate state-ness in Africa, we would argue that state forms exist but that they are different from the liberal ideal recognised by most political theory⁷⁴.

Histories of the present: China's geopolitics and the invention of history

In this section we want to examine China's current engagement with African states and assess how foreign policy discourses 'travel' or circulate and are made real in concrete situations. If China's vision of development co-operation requires a revitalized internationalism, which moves away from but builds upon past development trajectories, then we need to explore two key issues. First, it is necessary to examine the current situation through the lens of history in order to evaluate how 'new' this development approach really is and what mechanisms were put in place that condition the forms of engagement we see today. Secondly, we need to examine how this history functions as a discursive field through which current foreign policy is legitimized.

China's engagement with Africa has changed and expanded significantly in the last decade or so – and we will return to this in the next section - but it also builds on longer geopolitical traditions and histories of co-operation and interaction with the continent. While this history of China-Africa linkages is important for shaping contemporary development it is also used ideologically by China to legitimise its recent commercially centred activities. As recently as 2006 Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao said during a tour of Africa that for over 110 years "China was the victim of colonial aggression. The Chinese nation knows too well the suffering caused by colonial rule and the need to fight colonialism"⁷⁵. It is this sense of historical mutuality around shared experiences of colonialism that is used to defend China's current interventions in Africa against accusations of imperialism and to situate China discursively as part of both the 'developing' and 'developed' world. Beijing has also argued that both China and Africa are 'cradles of civilisation', that both face common challenges and even 'enemies' and that as a result they have common strategic interests and a shared perspective on major international issues. Further, the belief that the West's historical experiences in achieving 'development' are distant from African experiences and offer few transferable lessons has been popular both in China and in many parts of Africa.

The particular shape of current China-Africa relations can be traced back to the connections forged during the anti-colonial struggles for independence during the revolutionary period of Chinese foreign policy from 1950 to the early 1970s. At this time China's foreign policy was fiercely critical of the bi-polar Cold War world and was seeking to wrest the leadership of the non-aligned nations away from Moscow⁷⁶. Harding⁷⁷ identifies China's foreign policy as both conflictual and cooperative, with the lines blurring between the two. Within the more cooperative approaches that have tended to typify China's African relationships Harding identifies benefactors, clients and partners. The benefactors have been the Cold War superpowers at different times. The clients of Chinese policy in Africa have been various liberation movements, which it used to foster an alliance across the continent preaching nationalism as the guiding principle⁷⁸. There have been many partners in Chinese foreign policy, that have received less support in terms of concessional aid than these client states and who had an uneasy relationship with China during the Maoist period. According to Lyman⁷⁹, the early days of PRC diplomacy primarily involved attempts to counter the international recognition of Taiwan and to compete with Western and Russian influence in the continent. China's confrontation with the United States in the 1950s and 1960s and with the Soviet Union in the 1960s and 1970s were particularly important. Two key historical moments stand out here - the Asian-African Conference that met in Bandung⁸⁰, Indonesia in April 1955 and the establishment of the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation (AAPSO) which held its first conference in 1957. More broadly, the roots of this engagement are to be found in the wider climate of 'third worldism' and in the movement towards non-alignment.

Afro-Asian solidarity in particular, forged in the crucible of independence struggles, would go on to provide an important political foundation for the evolving China-Africa relationship. According to the post-conference analysis produced by the US administration's Office of Intelligence Research (OIR) in 1955⁸¹, Bandung had been a psychological milestone, advancing the prospect of both ad-hoc and formal Afro-Asian partnership and signalling the end of a "lingering sense of inferiority" that might combine to create a stronger and friendlier region even one "more ready to cooperate with the West". Given China's colonial history and struggle against poverty, the Chinese claimed that their unique understanding of Africa's economic dilemma lies at the root of Sino-African solidarity and could serve as a strong foundation for cordial relations⁸². Bandung thus became "a symbol of Afro-Asia as a viable political concept"⁸³ and China invoked the Bandung spirit to gain support for initiatives that China favoured. It does not appear that Africa was important to China at Bandung however and although it marked the beginning of significant Chinese initiatives in the continent there is little evidence that China foresaw this with clarity⁸⁴.

We can however trace the emergence of key guiding principles of China-Africa co-operation to the Bandung gathering. The "five principles" of *pancheela* (alternately *panchsheel* or *panchshila*), agreed upon by India's Jawaharlal Nehru

and China's Zhou Enlai at the conference were meant to serve as a model for intra-Asian relations. These were as follows: "respect for territorial integrity; nonaggression; non-interference in each other's internal affairs; equality and mutual benefit in relations; and peaceful coexistence"⁸⁵. In 1964, following a tour of ten African countries, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai confirmed Beijing's support for African struggles against imperialism (which he called 'the poor helping the poor') setting the stage for Africa to become an ideological battleground with both Washington and Moscow⁸⁶. When in Ghana and Mali Zhou Enlai announced eight guiding principles for Chinese aid to foreign countries that were a development of *Pancheela* including talk of equality, mutual benefit, non-interference and respect for sovereignty. Aid would not be "a kind of unilateral alms but [rather] something mutual"⁸⁷. The principles for aid and co-operation also reflected China's own experience as an aid recipient itself over the preceding sixty years where the Chinese had not appreciated their 'client' status⁸⁸ and were partly calculated to "show up the North"⁸⁹. According to Snow⁹⁰ Chinese assistance to Africa at this time was considered to be a "heroic endeavour", with the continent as the "object of a philanthropic crusade"⁹¹ and China seeking to discharge its "missionary duty of setting Africa free"⁹².

However, Peking's failures in Africa during the late 1960s may partly be attributed to the ignorance of PRC leaders and their failure to grasp the significance of regional antagonisms and cultural and historical differences between the various countries while trying to apply a general model of revolution to all African 'liberation movements'⁹³. During this time China tried to provide support to liberation movements in Angola, Mozambique and South Africa, for example, but "backed the wrong horse in all three cases"⁹⁴. Similarly Snow⁹⁵ argues that the Chinese were not especially interested in domestic developments in African countries let alone in actively propagating Communism there. China's relations with its 'third world partners' and 'poor friends' were "either thin or troubled through much of the Maoist period"⁹⁶ as it refused to join key organisations like the G77 or the Non-Aligned Movement.

China's emphasis on South-South co-operation has long been seen as a key element in its efforts to oppose unilateral global dominance and an important way of building a relationship that will support Beijing's diplomatic offensive against 'hegemonism'. For Taylor⁹⁷ the link connecting all Chinese foreign policy over the past 50 years is a desire to diminish and contain the influence of hegemonic powers and also to carve out a rightful place for China in the world, born from a sense that China has been 'muscled out' of international relations. Some authors⁹⁸ are sceptical about China's interest in Africa as a form of 'south-south cooperation'⁹⁹ while development in China itself remains immensely uneven and the domestic basis for Chinese prosperity is in fact politically volatile¹⁰⁰. So does China represent a new form of development 'partnership' extending across the South? In what follows we argue that China has always engaged strategically with Africa and used the continent to bolster its national and geopolitical interests, which marks it out as similar to other

superpowers¹⁰¹. Therefore, perhaps this is not a new form of South-South development co-operation, but rather something quite similar to what other countries have done (and do) with respect to Africa. Ross¹⁰² sees a consistency in these interests; namely “to make China stronger, more modern and more self-reliant”. This drive for modernity may have been unwavering, but the means for achieving it have changed drastically even if the older rhetoric of co-operative development is still being used to justify it.

The geopolitics of China’s Africa policy

While China’s engagement with Africa is premised upon this long-standing ‘solidarity’ it is but one way in which its development strategy is exported and embedded. As we have argued there are multiple ways in which development is governed and the mediation of China’s strategy through individual African states is the key to the development outcomes of this engagement. Hence, we want to shift focus to China’s recent involvement in Africa that emerged in the post-Cold War period and to examine Chinese discourses around aid and governance in particular. Then we examine how development is ‘delivered’ and how political discourses around respect of sovereignty are used to legitimise these interventions and briefly to flag how Chinese practices seem to be changing, largely as a result of its experiences in Sudan. We may be seeing a growing multilateralism by the Chinese and one where its non-interference dogma is breaking down.

Liberal Internationalism and China’s foreign policy

Over the past decade China’s stance on foreign relations has shifted. China’s transformation from a revolutionary power to a post-revolutionary state is reflected in the apparent shift in national priorities since the birth of the PRC in 1949 between the two major periods of PRC history: the era of ‘revolution’ under Mao Zedong (1949-76) and the era of ‘modernisation’ under Deng Xiaoping (since 1978)¹⁰³. According to Shimbun¹⁰⁴ Chinese foreign policy discourses are shifting as multilateralism is prioritised over concerns with multipolarity, which underpinned much of the Mao era:

“Multipolarity, anti-hegemonism and non-interference are the old concepts of a relatively weak and isolated China. The new concepts of a strong and globally engaged China--peaceful rise, win-win diplomacy, and harmonious world-- are more consistent with multilateralism, not multipolarity”¹⁰⁵.

Beijing’s advancement of the concept of multipolarity defined as the construction of more or less flexible alliances to contain every form of hegemony and to build a new and just international order, has often motivated increasing China’s engagement in Africa¹⁰⁶. In the second phase Leonard¹⁰⁷ sees a broad left-right schism within the PRC, with old guard communists being much more belligerent towards other international powers and seeing the need to enhance domestic military capability. The ‘new right’ are a small but influential group (although their

influence has waned since the mid-1990s) who want complete liberalisation and a market oriented foreign policy. The current leadership are variously described as 'populist'¹⁰⁸ and 'new left'¹⁰⁹, because they espouse a belief in markets but tempered by the need to reduce inequality. Within them is a liberal internationalist group that want engagement with the norms of the international community based on the idea of 'peaceful ascendance'.

Since late 2003, top-level Chinese officials have used the term 'peaceful ascendance' to describe an ideal growth plan for Chinese economic, political, and military expansion but the implications of this policy remain ambiguous. The populist concept of 'scientific development' currently guides the socio-economic ideology of the CCP, seen as the latest version of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' and an extension of the ideas of Mao and Deng, one that was ratified into the party's constitution at the 17th party congress in October 2007. It is dominated by egalitarian concepts such as the creation of a 'harmonious' and 'person-based' society, sustainable development, increased democracy and social welfare. Very much associated with Hu Jintao, it seeks to shift the focus of the official government agenda from 'economic growth' to 'social harmony'. What does 'pursuing development in a scientific way' mean? Could it be modernisation discourse dressed up as something different, something Chinese (with its belief in the 'law of development' and its focus on questions of efficiency, science, industrialisation, education and the technical)?

China's Africa policy

These general principles are reiterated in the more focused policies towards Africa a key driver of which has been demand for energy supplies and natural resources. By the mid-1990s this had become the mainstay of China's foreign policy. China began importing oil in 1993 and what has followed is a deepening reliance and dependency on imported oil and gas so that China has increasingly been looking at ways of obtaining supplies and securing transport routes. This need to increase and diversify sources of oil is clearly not unique to China¹¹⁰ and has seen a renewed interest in Africa as a source of oil and other strategic minerals such as copper and cobalt¹¹¹.

The China-Africa summit of November 2006 was by far the biggest diplomatic event that China had ever hosted. In addition to a package of debt cancellation and technical cooperation they launched a US\$5 billion China-Africa Development Fund to encourage Chinese companies to invest in Africa, and the Chinese also published the equivalent of a white paper entitled *China's Africa Strategy* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2006¹¹²). The policy is premised on respect for sovereignty and 'non-interference' in national political processes, which marks it out as different from western approaches that inevitably come with conditions. Indeed, non-interference has been claimed to be a long-standing principle of China's engagement with Africa (ever since the principles of co-operation laid out by Zhou Enlai in the 1960s) but has this ever been more than just rhetoric used to conceal/camouflage deeper interests? Western donors

increasingly promote development 'partnerships' and the local 'ownership' of development agendas, articulating an equalising rhetoric that attempts to disavow and displace European paternalism¹¹³ and remove the emphasis on external accountability for policy and its outcomes. It is not yet clear whether Chinese discourses around south-south co-operation and partnership are different to this but there is clearly a much longer history of thinking about co-operation across the South within China (although Socialism also had its own forms of trusteeship).

Clearly China's growing economic strength means that it is unlikely to have a partnership of equals with its new African friends but we need to know much more about how China understands 'co-operation' and more about the oft-invoked 'win-win' claims made for this. That said, China's involvement in Africa does permit the 'revival of triangulation'¹¹⁴, which means African states can pursue relations with more than one external state (epitomised by Angola's turn to China as its negotiations with the IMF faltered in 2003) and play donors and investors off against one another. Lower than expected oil revenues in 2009 however have changed this situation in Angola as government officials began meeting with World Bank and IMF representatives in September to agree a support package¹¹⁵. Half-year trade statistics show that year-on-year from June, China-Angola trade fell 57% to US\$5.8 billion one of the biggest drops in bilateral trade¹¹⁶.

Angola's experience is emblematic of the changes consequent upon the global financial crisis. China's economy has been hit hard with redundancies in the export sector, reversals of rural-urban migration, and, crucially, reduced prices and demand for primary commodities of the type that Africa specialises in¹¹⁷. However, in addition to a domestic stimulus package which should help restore demand, China has promised to honour its pledges to projects in Africa¹¹⁸ and recent announcements in the West African oil sector¹¹⁹ suggests that the Chinese are still willing and able to invest heavily in African resource extraction. Moreover the China-Africa Development Fund, the central plank of the Africa Policy, has funded its first phase of projects including a power plant in Ghana and a glass factory in Ethiopia, and recently opened its first representative office in Johannesburg¹²⁰. Late 2009 is also when the 4th FOCAC inter-ministerial meeting will take place in Egypt and although details are sketchy at the time of writing¹²¹, 2009 is the year when the *Africa Policy* promised tangible results so we would expect the meeting to be a review of progress towards the pledges of 2006. However, transparency with targets is often lacking (see below) in Chinese policy and (like their western counterparts) pledges remain just that¹²².

The softening of non-interference

Chinese discourses of partnership also relate to its role in multilateral organizations, to its contestation of hegemony and to its desire to become a major centre of influence in a multipolar world¹²³. Along with an additional tool of Chinese foreign policy, the provision of preferential trade access to African

'partners', these discourses and initiatives construct China as a viable alternative to the West whilst simultaneously signalling China's role as a generous global power¹²⁴. As part of its liberal internationalism and its recent ascension to the WTO, China recognises it needs to court votes to protect and promote its interests¹²⁵. Respect for sovereignty and non-interference represent two key phrases that have been repeated in China's rhetoric surrounding its aid disbursements to Africa. This rhetoric encourages the impression that China is not imposing its political views, ideals or principles onto recipient countries¹²⁶. According to Liu Guijin (the Chinese government's special representative to Africa in 2006):

"China has no intention to undermine Africa's democracy. China is working hard to build a socialist democracy and promote human rights and good governance at home...China is a responsible major country in the world. I doubt there is any tiny political gain China can get by doing such things against the historical trend and the common wish of the people"¹²⁷.

Speaking in Khartoum in February 2008, Liu Guijin went on to say:

"We [China] have never, and will never in the future, attach any kind of political conditions to these aid and development projects, because we think that providing assistance is just for the benefit of the people, it is not for political purposes, not for showing off to the outside world"¹²⁸.

This forms the core of its non-interference policy and the perception that China is now 'non-ideological' and pragmatic, since its concerns are for securing resources rather than transforming hearts and minds. At the same time there is a discourse of mutual interdependence, which fits with China's foreign policy doctrine of peaceful ascendance. At the core is an acknowledgement that "[a]lthough Africa might need China, China definitely needs Africa more for her development process"¹²⁹. This reveals the essentially commercial and transparent nature of China's engagement with Africa. It is less about a managed process of 'catching up' with more developed nations, but an even-handed recognition that Africa's resources are vital for China's growth and that this is a 'win-win' situation for both parties. This commercialism over aid strategy infuses much policy, but it remains to be seen if the dividends from this growth reach the poorer sections of African societies¹³⁰.

We would argue that non-interference has always been a flexible practice, depending on the circumstances, and also that such a principle necessarily cannot be permanent. Where deals are signed with unpopular dictatorial regimes that could later be revised by a new government, it becomes necessary for the Chinese to protect such regimes. Karumbidza¹³¹ is probably correct then when he says that "the Chinese are themselves well aware" that their non-interference stance is untenable in Africa. Given that the economic relationship matters to China, its government has a vested interest in long-term stability, and its current

rhetoric suggests an understanding that this is best procured by “harmony” and the careful balancing of interests, not by force. Non-interference is a principle that is certainly breaking down as shown by China’s recent involvement in Sudan and by the emerging strategy of ‘proactive non-interference’ that has been used in negotiations for a post-Mugabe regime in Zimbabwe. The fact that China is doing so goes against some of the ‘rogue aid’ discourses since China is now acting more ‘responsibly’ in seeking to resolve internal governance issues.

Sudan is a case in point for how China’s stance has changed¹³². China’s stance on human rights was framed in its anti-imperialist rhetoric, which has two elements. One is historical, which argues that Western powers are hypocritical given the colonial abuses. As Li Anshan argues:

“This is indeed ironic, coming from western countries talking about abuse of human rights, when they have committed relentless human right abuses during their colonial periods.... It is almost shameful for these countries to accuse China of human rights abuses, when they have committed much more atrocious acts in the past”¹³³.

The second rebuttal is related in that any conditionality around human rights is seen by the Chinese as necessarily an abuse of human rights. It is this defence of sovereignty that has characterised China’s Sudanese engagement. Over the past 10 years China’s ‘blind-eye’ support for various Khartoum governments in return for uninterrupted running of the oil industry by CNPC¹³⁴ has had massive political impacts. Sudan’s oil rich regions generate considerable revenue, but there have been negligible improvements in service delivery for affected civilian populations. Moreover China has supplied arms to Sudan and helped develop northern Sudan’s arms manufacturing industry. China’s diplomacy on Darfur became more public from 2006 to the point where it cannot be said to be not ‘interfering’. Beijing has however underestimated the political risk posed by Darfur to its interests in Sudan, as well as its standing in Africa and on the international stage. The appointment of a new special ambassador in May 2007 was part of China’s efforts to bolster its image and contribute to solutions. For example, more aid has been given to Darfur. Such moves also enabled China to promote its own interests through more vocal diplomacy and participation in multilateral forums and initiatives on Darfur. Yet China’s more proactive diplomacy was accompanied by continuity in defending the sovereignty of Sudan and arguing against further sanctions, as well as deepening economic links. Thus for this ‘pariah state’¹³⁵ the impact of oil has been to further concentrate wealth rather than achieve broader development, and this seems likely to worsen even if, as a result of diplomacy, it may lose some of its ‘pariah’ status. The Sudan case is pivotal for not only showing how China is changing, but also for the ways that western donors are seeking to co-operate with China in finding solutions to African development.

Hence, there are questions about the delivery of Chinese 'aid' and possibilities of development cooperation between donors. The view that China is not imposing its political views, ideals or principles onto recipient countries is further cemented by the complexity of disassociating Chinese aid and investment and the lack of transparency in China's overseas aid allocation and disbursement. There is clearly no official definition of 'aid' in China and some considerable ambiguity about what constitutes 'aid' (MOFCOM is currently trying to define this)¹³⁶. The realities which are selected for critique are the lack of transparency on how Chinese aid is allocated, its amount and level, and effectiveness. Compounding the perception of China as a 'rogue creditor' is the lack of details about the level and terms of its own aid to other countries—so data and information in that regard are sketchy¹³⁷. The volume of Chinese aid is often regarded as a state secret¹³⁸ and data on this is not collected in the same way as it is by western aid donors. According to Lancaster¹³⁹, the Chinese justify this secrecy to avoid criticism and competition from major donor countries, and domestic criticism of providing aid to foreign countries instead of eradicating poverty domestically. China is not a member of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, which reports on members' international aid¹⁴⁰. Not enough is yet known for example, about the new round of major Chinese-led infrastructure projects in Sudan, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Angola, Tanzania, Zambia and Gabon¹⁴¹. It seems entirely possible that while it may seem appropriate for Westerners to pick out the education and health sectors as obvious categories to be treated as 'aid', China's own preference has been to think of its relations with individual countries in a much more holistic way¹⁴². Chinese practice is unfamiliar (or at least uncomfortable) with the notion of 'development' policy as an independent policy field of the kind that emerged among the Western nations in the course of the 1950s. China has thus generally not been offering integrated development projects for Africa similar to the World Bank and IMF's Poverty Reduction Strategy Credits (PRSCs). Instead, it frequently offers a series of infrastructural and one-off development projects formulated bilaterally. Moreover, meta-narratives about aid, or references to the establishment of Xiaokang societies elsewhere in the world, do not appear to exist¹⁴³.

Aid is also often tied up with other forms of assistance and economic co-operation and neither is it given by a single Ministry (the Ministry of Commerce provides most bilateral aid through its Department of Foreign Aid but it also comes from the Ministries of Health and Education whilst the Ministry of Finance provides multilateral aid). Additionally, aid and development assistance do not just come from central government sources but also from provincial governments and urban administrations (e.g. through twinning arrangements).

In concrete terms the blurring of aid, investment and development is realised through the mechanisms for funding projects. Sautman and Hairong¹⁴⁴ contend that in contrast to western aid, which increasingly goes directly to national budgets as 'sectoral support', Chinese aid is usually assigned to designated

projects (usually infrastructure related) and is therefore harder to siphon off. The Chinese also usually part pay for their oil and other resources in infrastructure which means there is less free-floating cash for unscrupulous diversion. There is limited evidence however that the move to direct budget support and Sector-Wide Approaches by western donors is any better than the bilateral, project based approach of the Chinese. One argument for project-led development approaches is that they are bounded and one can more easily see if they are not completed, whereas the other approaches potentially put money into a rather opaque pot where it can be siphoned off at every stage of implementation. Budget and sectoral support may increase 'ownership' by recipient governments but it might also be seen as introducing western donors more deeply into the heart of government¹⁴⁵. There has thus been a blurring of 'outside' and 'inside' in this era of 'post-conditionality'¹⁴⁶ as the institutions and mechanisms of governance become increasingly inseparable from the international mechanisms of governance with which they are engaged. In some ways it could be argued that China (with its emphasis on non-interference) has not sought to blur inside and outside in quite the same way as western donors and by its insistence on bilateral relations has actually done something rather different.

The routes for aid and investment are the privileged Chinese corporations selected as part of the Chinese Government's 'Go Out' Policy of 2002¹⁴⁷. These 'national champions' form the brunt of China's internationalisation strategy, but as more companies internationalise it becomes harder for the Chinese state to maintain a coherent strategic and regulatory hold over them. As China further liberalizes, private Chinese businesses become less and less easy to control in China itself, let alone in Africa. This is a major conundrum for the Chinese government wishing, as it does, to safeguard Beijing's image abroad as a 'responsible power' and it is not restricted to Sino-African relations. China's corporate engagement with Africa has thus been exaggerated whilst the 'China Inc. model' is far less efficient and monolithic than is often assumed¹⁴⁸. There is also the increasing presence of smaller, provincially backed companies operating overseas. Schuller & Turner¹⁴⁹ argue that Chinese companies are seen by the State as part of its "geopolitical positioning" in Africa since SOE's contribute to an overall programme of foreign economic policy yet many of the companies concerned do not see their role in Africa as part of some wider geopolitical practice and there are multiple points of disjuncture between the activities of some SOEs and this wider foreign policy. Thus as China's Africa strategy comes to rely on a growing number of bureaucratic principles and corporate agents, contradictions will increase. Beijing is relying on an increasingly complex set of government oversight agencies to accomplish its Africa policy but this is ever harder to manage (including the State Council, Chinese embassies, FOCAC, the Ministries of finance, commerce, foreign affairs, chambers of commerce, state owned companies and a variety of commercial and 'development' banks). McGregor¹⁵⁰ reports, for example, that a range of diplomatic scholars in Beijing have recently noted how the SOE's have often 'hijacked' China's diplomatic initiatives in Africa (especially in Sudan), pursuing profit at the expense of

broader national interests. These oversight agencies do not enjoy direct lines of authority over Chinese corporations overseas:

“As it deepens, the Chinese government will more likely find itself hamstrung by...an increasing set of tensions and contradictions between the interests and aims of government principals—the bureaucracies based in Beijing tasked with advancing China’s overall national interests—and the aims and interests of ostensible agents—the companies and businesspersons operating on the ground in Africa”¹⁵¹.

Moreover there is a related issue of future indebtedness since debt write-offs and access to export credit loans increases African countries’ creditworthiness and may allow private debt to be built up by African states. In both cases Chinese involvement could further ‘hem in’ African countries in a way that they were hemmed in by western creditors in the 1970s-1990s. China has clearly upset the dominant aid regime but donors cannot be too critical for fear of upsetting China so they instead call for and promote ‘dialogue’ and partnership. The UK’s Department for International Development (DFID) are very active in this and rather than pledge much aid to Chinese development they are more concerned with Millennium Development Goal 8 – building a global partnership for development. Here the assumption is that China can be ‘socialised’ into the norms of the international aid business/community. Such critics contend that China’s engagement with Africa should still be guided by Western values and should conform to established patterns of Western involvement on the continent¹⁵², but rather than outright criticism they prefer a ‘dialogic’ approach¹⁵³. China, for example, is a signatory of the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (evidently from a recipient perspective), which seeks increased harmonisation and alignment between donors and between donors and recipients. Despite this commitment however China’s Africa Policy remains focused on bilateral aid. A not dissimilar issue around the politics of aid concerns China’s relations with the African Union and NEPAD¹⁵⁴, both of which China actively supports and are ‘test-beds’ for its changing stance on multilateral politics. Whatever the efficacy of NEPAD, it posits a multilateralist approach to solving Africa’s development problems. While the Chinese state-backed investors are relatively lax about transparency, accountability and sustainability of investments, NEPAD has been developing the African Peer Review Mechanism in an effort to encourage African countries to set standards and put in place procedures for vetting and monitoring investments. Again, there are potential tensions and it seems likely that in the rush to attract and maintain Chinese investments, African countries may be tempted into a race for the bottom in terms of labour and environmental standards.

Conclusion: ‘critical geopolitics’, geoeconomics and China-Africa relations

The rapid economic growth registered by ‘rising powers’ like China, Brazil and India in recent years and the growing evidence of cooperation around a broad

spectrum of issues among states of the global South have revived the hope (or spectre) of a new 'Bandung'—just over a half-century after leaders of 29 African and Asian states met in that Indonesian hill resort town to 'inject the voice of reason in world affairs,' as President Sukarno put it. For commentators like Arrighi, China holds up the possibility of a 'new Bandung' and a 'commonwealth of civilisations on an economic basis'. The notion that China may be an exemplar of contemporary egalitarianism in relations with the periphery would seem to be contradicted however by the evidence currently emerging from Africa. Further, there *is* evidence of rising social unrest in China, despite this being held up as a model of accumulation *without* dispossession. The more convincing power of Arrighi's argument lies however in his conception of geopolitics as the endless process by which political cultures and institutional complexes are constructed and in the way he clearly links international events (like the rise of China) to their economic context in a world system characterised by global flows and relations. In a similar vein Smith and Cowen¹⁵⁵ have argued that there has been a recent recasting of traditional geopolitical logics and practices in the context of (amongst other things) globalisation and that these may better be captured today by a "geoeconomic" conception of space, power and security, which sees geopolitical forms 'recalibrated by market logics'. Thus it could be argued that geoeconomics is crucial to any interpretation of contemporary China-Africa engagement and to our understanding of the spatial reconfiguration of contemporary political geographies that results from this engagement.

From the case of China in Africa we call for an intensification of the dialogue between critical geopolitics and critical development theory. Geopolitics and development theory are conventionally kept apart by a well established social scientific division of labour which assumes that the domain of the (geo)political is discrete and separable from the supposedly economic and technical domain of development¹⁵⁶. Picking up on our earlier discussion of development and IR it is impossible to understand the contemporary making of development theory and practice *without* reference to geopolitics and the geopolitical imagination of non-western societies. As Slater argues: "power and knowledge ... cannot be adequately grasped if abstracted from the gravity of imperial encounters and the geopolitical history of West/non-West relations"¹⁵⁷. This is not to say that development is little more than the continuation of politics by another means since we cannot dismiss aid as simply part of some past and therefore "outdated sideshow in the repertoire of geopolitics"¹⁵⁸. Yet all conceptualisations of development contain and express a geopolitical imagination which condition and enframe its meanings and relations¹⁵⁹. China's contemporary vision of development does not envisage a domain completely separate from foreign policy concerns and actively mobilises historical discourses of geopolitics (respect for sovereignty, non-interference in political affairs, anti-hegemonism) and the language of commonality and mutuality (solidarity, friendship, anti-imperialism) in order to justify and legitimate its contemporary Africa policy.

Rather than separating out the (geo)political from the economic and technical aspects of development theories and practices we have critically explored *the geopolitics of China's relations with African development* in a more open and inclusive way rather than to speak only of 'aid' or 'development assistance' in isolation. This required unravelling the complexity of China's aid disbursement and disentangling the blurring of aid, trade and overseas investment (which themselves have complex routes to Africa). Davies *et al*¹⁶⁰ make a distinction between 'aid' and development assistance, but it is not always as easy as they suggest to differentiate between the two¹⁶¹. 'Aid' was historically used as an important geopolitical tool for the Chinese in the contest with Taiwan (also an aid giver) and the USSR (where the Chinese aimed to shame the Kremlin by stepping up their charity and economic aid and by providing fewer arms). 'Aid' thus became an important way of exposing the limitations of China's opponents, both Western and Soviet. A critical geopolitics must therefore examine how China's historical imagination of geopolitics has enframed the meanings attached to 'development' and the relations forged with African 'partners' as a result. This historical imagination of geopolitics remains crucial since it forms a discursive field through which current foreign policy is legitimised. Further engagement with Chinese (and African) approaches to IR is an important first step in this regard.

Whilst Chinese 'aid' is used to further geopolitical claims it has been different from western approaches. A continuing point of distinction is the bilateral disbursement of aid, the absence of grand, moralising meta-narratives and the emphasis on south-south 'co-operation'. China's strategy is "one of humanitarian and development aid plus influence without interference, in contrast to the West's coercive approach of sanctions plus military intervention"¹⁶². A critical geopolitics of China-Africa relations must acknowledge the Orientalisms at work in western characterisations of China as an exception and acknowledge that there may be aspects of China's vision of development that are 'almost the same' as those of western donors 'but not quite'. One point of similarity is China's desire to align with aspects of the Western economic-growth paradigm based on science and knowledge.

China has seemed hesitant however about challenging the contemporary world order (or the widening income and wealth inequalities within its borders) and thus to a certain extent a process of 'mimicry' is at work in China's ('neoliberalized') vision of successful economic development which may be producing seemingly 'similar' yet unexpectedly 'different' outcomes. Further, China is not the only show in town and Chinese engagement with Africa needs to be understood in the context of the wider contemporary 'scramble for Africa' of which it is a part. This includes the efforts of the EU, of the US Africa Command (AFRICOM), the India-Africa Forum, the Turkey-Africa Summit and the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD)¹⁶³. Allied to this is the need to disaggregate 'China' and 'Africa' since neither represents a coherent and uniform set of motivations and opportunities. The supposed 'Beijing consensus' that many commentators have often (prematurely) proclaimed has proven to be remarkably

flexible and malleable in the way it has been adapted to different political contexts in Africa. In order to understand why it is necessary to foreground questions of political economy and in particular state-capital dynamics in exploring how Chinese capital and parts of the Chinese state intertwine with fractions of capital and political formations within Africa. We also need to know much more about the range of impacts China is having on forms of African governance, the role China takes in situations of conflict and about the relations China has with local, regional and global institutions. A critical geopolitics must also engage with the media discourses on China's engagement with Africa which draw on a range of Orientalist assumptions that essentialise China and oversimplify its motivations whilst remaining deeply uncritical of western interactions with the continent. This requires a 'post-colonial' analysis of the constructed imaginaries of 'China' and 'Africa', and the geopolitical images and representations of Chinese and African ideologies, foreign policies and cultures that circulate and sediment in popular culture. Allied to this is a concern for the dynamics of 'class' and 'race' in particular African countries.

Finally, a critical geopolitics of China's engagement with African development involves a nuanced understanding of China's search for new sources of energy and raw materials. Whilst China's presence in Africa is frequently described as an imperialist 'scramble', a 'mad dash', a resource 'grab' even a 'rape'¹⁶⁴ the image of a defenceless African populace passively submitting to the will of external powers is depressingly all too familiar. How is China's 'soft power' and oil diplomacy mediated by African agency and more generally what are the specific discourses, processes and mechanisms that are involved in the rolling out and reception of 'neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics'? Ultimately, it is up to African leaders to manage their relations with China for the benefit of their own economies and citizens. It is not China's responsibility to 'look out' for African self-interest. China's abandonment of ideology in favour of a focus on economic growth arguably affords Africa a greater degree of space in its connection with China but only if this manoeuvrability is used wisely by Africa's elites. In some countries this should not be a problem as adept and proficient governments are more than able to manage the relationship to mutual benefit. In others however there is a concern that predatory elites at the apex of neopatrimonial regimes and not especially bothered by the impulse to promote development will make a mess of the chance to make the most of a renewed Chinese interest in Africa.

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