

European development policy towards sub-Saharan Africa: Challenges of the growing Chinese presence

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Abstract

Keywords: European Union, development policy, normative power, Africa, People's Republic of China

This article examines the impact of the growing Chinese presence in Africa on the EU's international role and more particularly on European development policy towards sub-Saharan Africa. The Chinese Africa policy is based on fundamentally different principles than the European model with regard to sovereignty and aid conditionality, offering an alternative to the dominant European approach. In this article we will argue that, although the European development model towards sub-Saharan Africa has never been entirely in line with its proclaimed principles, the "China factor" contributes to an adaptation of this European policy towards a more pragmatic and less normative strategy. Yet, this does not imply a complete overhaul of the European normative discourse which is still the most important source of legitimacy of the European development policy. It does however highlight the importance of an open and honest dialogue between the EU and sub-Saharan Africa, in particular on the merits of the European model for the development of the region and its countries.

Mots-clé : *Union européenne, politique de développement, puissance normative, Afrique, République populaire de Chine*

Cet article examine l'impact grandissant de la présence chinoise en Afrique sur le rôle international de l'UE, en particulier sur la politique européenne de développement en Afrique sub-saharienne. La politique africaine de la Chine se fonde sur des caractéristiques qui diffèrent fondamentalement du modèle européen, tant en matière de souveraineté et qu'en ce qui concerne la conditionnalité de l'aide. Elle offre ainsi une alternative à l'approche européenne dominante. Bien que le modèle européen de développement à l'égard de la région sub-saharienne n'ait jamais réellement coïncidé avec ses principes, nous avançons dans cet article que le "facteur chinois" contribue à l'adaptation de cette politique européenne à une approche plus pragmatique et à une stratégie moins normative. Néanmoins, ceci ne signifie pas la remise en question complète du discours normatif européen, qui reste la source majeure de légitimité de la politique européenne de développement. Cependant, cela souligne l'importance d'un dialogue ouvert et

honnête entre l'UE et l'Afrique sub-saharienne, en particulier sur les mérites que le modèle européen peut avoir pour le développement de la région et de ses pays.

Introduction

Today, more than ever, Europe faces a fundamental question: can it still consider Africa as its own “backyard”? Europe has a longstanding commitment to Africa’s development, partly because of the former colonial ties between some member states and African countries. This “privileged” relationship with Africa has had to adapt to changing international and European circumstances. Today, the African continent is becoming a coveted partner for many “new” actors such as India or China, which inevitably challenges the European Union’s (EU) role as the main trading partner and donor on the continent. This also triggers questions regarding the future of the EU’s position in the world and more particularly its development policy. In this context, the growing presence of China brings the greatest challenge. At the summit meeting of the China-Africa Cooperation Forum (FOCAC) in November 2009, the Chinese Prime Minister announced that China will grant 10 billion dollars to Africa in concessional loans over the next three years. This clearly demonstrates China’s overall ambitions to considerably strengthen its ties with the African continent, thus becoming an attractive partner for many African countries.

The aim of this article is to look at the challenges raised by the growing Chinese presence to the EU development policy in sub-Saharan Africa. Most notably, this presence has led to calls for restructuring the current EU aid policy. Since 2000 indeed, the European development policy has undergone a significant reform process (Carbone 2007: 35). The Chinese Africa policy is characterised by very distinctive objectives compared to the European development approach, giving the impression of a competition between European and Chinese models in Africa. This article will however demonstrate that the different nature of the Chinese approach to Africa should not be seen by the EU as a threat, but as an opportunity. It pushes the EU to address some key issues related to the normative dimension of its policy.

Before we begin our analysis of these challenges, several key assumptions need to be elucidated. First, it is good to remind the key elements of both European and Chinese attitudes towards Africa. Although we can conceive the EU and China as actors in the field of development, it appears that the concept of “actor” cannot refer here to the existence of unitary players. Given that the European development policy is a shared competence, it reflects a mix of policies decided at both Member State and European levels. Hence, this article will only focus on the European development policy as it is conducted by the Commission (Taylor and Williams 2004: 155). Similarly, the Chinese policy in Africa refers to a multitude of actors, ranging from individual Chinese entrepreneurs to state-owned companies and the government of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). However, this does not prevent us from distinguishing several common

characteristics of the Chinese presence in Africa (Marchal 2008: 236, Taylor 2009) and highlighting the holistic nature of the Chinese approach. Furthermore, a major difference between the European and the Chinese policies towards Africa is their geographical scope. While the PRC makes no regional division in its relations with African countries, the EU has three distinctive policies towards Africa: the European Neighbourhood Policy for Northern African countries, a Strategic Partnership for South-Africa and the Cotonou Agreement for sub-Saharan African countries (Keukeleire and MacNaughtan 2008: 288-289). Discussing the European perspective, our focus will be on the latter.

This article will not focus on how the different countries in sub-Saharan Africa respond to the European and Chinese presence. This is not to say that African perspectives and attitudes towards these foreign powers are not important, but the issue has been kept deliberately outside the scope of this article as it deserves an analysis of its own.

This paper is structured as follows: First, we analyse the role of the EU as a development actor in sub-Saharan Africa. Using the terminology of Ian Manners (2002), we examine to what extent the European development policy corresponds to the concept of “Normative Power Europe”. In a second step, we provide a brief overview of the Chinese policy in Africa to help conceptualise its implications for the European development approach.

1. European development policy in sub-Saharan Africa and its normative dimension

Scholars commonly describe the EU as an entity in its own right, having moved beyond traditional state structures to a “hybrid supranational form of governance” (Manners 2002: 240). Ian Manners has argued that because of its history, hybrid polity and unique constitutional configuration, the “EU has a normatively different basis for its relations with the world” (Ibid: 241). Coined by the concept of Normative Power Europe (NPE), the EU is characterised by the ability to promote beyond its borders its own core normative principles, ranging from human rights, democracy and good governance to sustainable development and regional cooperation (Ibid: 242). The EU’s foreign policy plays a key role in this respect. In this article we understand by foreign policy an “area of politics which is directed at the external environment with the objective of influencing that environment and the behaviour of other actors within it, in order to pursue interests, values and goals” (Keukeleire and MacNaughtan 2008: 19). According to this broad definition of foreign policy, European development aid can be understood as a key component of the EU’s normative aspiration towards developing countries (Manners 2008: 24f). The EU’s eagerness to promote specific norms in its relations with developing countries is most prominently expressed in the 2005 European Con-

sensus on Development, the first common European framework in the area of development policy.

For historical reasons, sub-Saharan Africa has always occupied a special position in the European development policy and identified as a key region for European efforts to promote a value oriented policy (Olsen 1998: 345, European Commission 2005). To underline the particular importance of sub-Saharan Africa in the European development structure, experts commonly refer to the EU's "dual-track approach to development" (Keukeleire and MacNaughtan 2008: 213), making the distinction between the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) states and the rest. The cooperation between the EU and the ACP states is based on a number of distinctive agreements, institutions and instruments. The 2000 Cotonou Agreement is the current contractual basis of cooperation. A wide range of development policy instruments have been developed in order to uphold democratic and human rights principles in its relations with sub-Saharan Africa.

When referring to the normative orientation of European development policy, one has to stress the importance of political aid conditionality. This entails the linking of aid to the fulfilment of various political conditions, relating to human rights, democracy and good governance. To this regard, "negative" conditionality involves the suspension of aid if the recipient country violates the conditions. In the Cotonou Agreement, human rights, democracy and the rule of law are marked as "essential elements", which implies that their violation can lead to the suspension of development aid (Keukeleire and MacNaughtan 2008: 291, Holland 2004: 286). This "negative" conditionality also refers to the EU's sanction policy. The EU can impose sanctions in two ways: it can implement sanctions decided by the UN Security Council or impose autonomous sanctions. These sanctions generally entail measures such as arms embargos, the freezing of funds or travel bans for officials. The EU also has "positive" incentives at its disposal to encourage the promotion of certain norms.

Despite these formal principles, Experts have raised serious doubts about the NPE concept as an explanatory basis for European foreign policy in general and for development policy in particular (Hyde-Price 2006, Youngs 2004, Sjørnsen 2006). The actual commitments of the EU in sub-Saharan Africa to promote the stated values and principles have been strongly criticised (Olsen 1998: 345, more generally Santiso 2003: 16). It has been argued that within a post-Cold war context characterised by a renewed, more ideological rhetoric on aid, and although the EU has followed this general trend in the redefinition of aid strategies (Santiso 2003: 19), "there was a lack of 'serious' European commitment to promote the declared ideals of the first years of the so-called new international system" (Olsen 1998: 367). This is often referred to as the so-called "rhetoric-behaviour gap" (Wood 2009: 128).

The EU sanctions policy is a good illustration of this contradiction. Despite strong rhetorics, EU sanctions have generally been imposed in a rather mild and unequal way. In practice, the EU has only sanctioned very few of the countries which violated the agreed norms, and it remains unclear as to how the EU selected these countries

(Brummer 2009, Wood 2009). Furthermore, numerous exemptions to sanctions were applied, bringing in inconsistency in terms of policy enforcement. To illustrate this, Robert Mugabe was invited by the French President, Jacques Chirac, to attend the 2003 France-Africa Summit despite sanctions imposed by the EU on the government of Zimbabwe, including a travel ban for President Mugabe. More recently, the EU agreed to temporarily lift the travel ban to allow the Zimbabwean president to participate in the EU-Africa summit in December 2007 and, in so doing, accommodated pressures of the African Union, which threatened to boycott the summit (Brummer 2009: 201).

It has been pointed out that, too often, the EU's normative rhetoric serves only its own strategic interests. Development policy specialists refer to this as a problem of inconsistency of European development policy, where specific foreign policy objectives in the area of security (Youngs 2004), energy (Wood 2009) or trade (Storey 2006) trump development policy considerations. A particularly striking example for this is the increasing "securitisation" of European development policy, in particular in sub-Saharan Africa. As expressed in the European Security Strategy, the security concerns of the EU also include non-traditional security threats such as illegal migration (Olsen 1998: 364). Although the European development policy and the security policy have traditionally been kept apart (Woods 2005: 405), some experts point out that European development aid, in an attempt of policy coherence, has sought to fulfil short-term security objectives at the expense of normative principles like human rights and democracy.

The ability of the EU to present itself as a normative power in Africa is further undermined by a lack of internal coherence. As already pointed out, Community aid policy is complementary to that of the Member States. It is therefore not surprising that the European Union and the Member States face many difficulties in coordinating their development policies both at the overall strategic level as well as on the ground (Alden and Smith 2005: 5). It should be underlined, that although European development policy is not immune to Member States' influence, the power of Member States in this regard is not equally distributed. Former colonial powers continue to have unmatched influence within the European development aid system (Olsen 1998: 347, Zanger 2000: 308). There are several cases demonstrating the reluctance in the implementation of the EU principles and ideals, due to special relations and interests of a Member State in a specific African country (Olsen 1998: 363). More importantly, African leaders themselves have been questioning the EU's normative stand with regard to the policy of conditionality, claiming that it cannot be a substitute for domestic ownership. The President of Rwanda, Paul Kagamé, stressed that "actions will only bear fruit when Africa substitutes external conditionality – that is, doing what the donors tell us to do – with internal policy clarity – that is, knowing ourselves what we need to do and articulating this vision clearly to our development partners" (Michel 2007). Furthermore, it has also been argued that political conditionality of aid leads to an asymmetrical power relationship between the donor and the recipient.

To sum up, not only are the normative principles described above key features of the EU's involvement in sub-Saharan Africa, but they also constitute core elements of the EU's international identity. Yet, it seems that in many cases the normative discourse has been modified by elements of *realpolitik* and by strategic considerations. The normative characteristic of the EU's policy has hence come under pressure both from internal and external factors. As we will show in the following section of this article, the Chinese presence in Africa has become an additional element urging European policy makers to adapt the normative discourse of their development policy.

2. Challenging the EU - China's approach to Africa

From a historical perspective, Chinese presence in Africa is not new. During the Cold War, the PRC already tried to export her socialist model to the African continent in an attempt to rival Soviet expansionism (Thompson 2004: 154). Indeed, for three decades (from 1949 until Deng Xiaoping's arrival to power in 1978) the PRC under the guidance of Mao Zedong has profiled itself as the leader of the Third World, the *primus inter pares* (Marchal 2008: 236) supporting national liberation movements on the continent. The strong Sino-African ties that were then established were primarily based on ideological motives rather than on economic considerations (Geeraerts and Holslag 2006: 228). Whilst during the 1980s Beijing focused mainly on its internal economic reform, the 1990s brought along a renewal in interest in the African continent. There are different reasons for this, the most important one being the strong Western condemnation of the Tiananmen Square events of June 1989 which left Beijing isolated by the great powers and looking for alternative support (Tull 2006: 460-461). These far-reaching historical relations between China and Africa add legitimacy and credibility to current relations (Bräutigam 2008: 32).

In general terms, it is possible to distinguish two main drivers behind the current Chinese return to Africa. Economically, the African continent serves the fast-growing Chinese demands for natural resources necessary to fuel China's economic growth. Contrary to other regions, Africa's oil and mineral deposits remained until recently largely unexploited (Alden 2005: 148). In the eyes of Beijing, Africa also represents a huge export market for Chinese goods, as well as it offers major investment possibilities. Since 2000, Sino-African trade has increased dramatically leading Beijing to set-up a special Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and a joint Chamber of Commerce (Tull 2006: 464).

In parallel to the increasing number of Chinese trade missions to African countries, the frequency of visits of high-ranking Chinese officials followed the same trend (Geeraerts and Holslag 2006: 222-223), demonstrating that Beijing does not only follow economic objectives, but also find political interest in the African continent. A landmark in the process of China becoming a diplomatic actor in Africa was the adoption in 2006 of China's African Policy Paper (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2006) just one

year after the EU embraced its first Africa Strategy (European Commission 2005). This policy paper reflects the importance of Sino-Africa diplomatic relations as a means to give China its 'rightful' place in the international arena (Taylor and Williams 2004: 83) and as a way to gain African votes in international organisations when discussing the future of Taipei.

An important feature of Chinese policy in Africa is aid. There is a lack of information provided by the Chinese government on aid delivered to African countries and estimates by experts on the amount of Chinese aid to Africa vary greatly (Lancaster 2007: 3, Bräutigam 2008: 9). This can partly be explained by China's particular understanding of development cooperation, i.e. the motivations behind Chinese aid being closely linked to economic and strategic considerations. Although China has provided assistance to African countries in the past, it is considered as a 'new donor' because it has traditionally been seen as a recipient of aid by the international community (Altenburg and Weikert 2007). Contrary to traditional donors like the EU, China is not a member of an international donor architecture, such as the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) or the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Chinese leaders do not fail to stress China's particular position as being both a recipient and donor of aid, which constitute a useful pattern of resemblance when dealing with African nations. Through this discourse of "South-South cooperation" resulting in a supposed "win-win cooperation", China presents itself as an attractive alternative to the asymmetrical donor-recipient model of the EU. Beijing wants to distinguish itself from European development policy by praising its approach for being more pragmatic, efficient and speedy (Bräutigam 2008: 22). Indeed, Chinese aid focuses in particular on technical assistance projects aimed at building infrastructures, a sector which has been rather neglected in European aid programmes in Africa in recent years (Grimm et al. 2009: 20).

This has sparked the debate on whether China "can be considered a normative power in Africa, in the same way the EU attempts to be" (Barton 2009: 12). Chinese leaders attach particular importance to a pragmatic policy and, contrary to the EU, refrain from advancing any discourse on normative principles. Nevertheless, Chinese policy is *de facto* promoting a unique development model in Africa inspired by its own experience. The "Beijing consensus" has become the commonly used notion introduced by Joshua Cooper Ramo (2004) to express the existence of an alternative Chinese development model based on economic growth without political conditions attached. This approach has not failed to attract the attention of many African leaders.

Two key elements of this supposed Chinese model can indeed be highlighted. On the one hand, Chinese aid policy in Africa is characterised by a "no strings attached" principle. Chinese leaders do not believe in conditionality and sanctions as a foreign policy tool. This could be explained by the fact that much of Chinese aid policy in Africa is inspired by its own experience, marked by the American embargo imposed after the creation of the PRC. On the other hand, Chinese foreign policy is guided by the Five Prin-

ciples of Peaceful Coexistence¹ presented by Zhou Enlai in 1954, among which a particular importance is attributed to the respect of sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs. By contrast, the EU through the European Security Strategy favours the concept of “effective multilateralism”, calling for the development of well-functioning international institutions and an international order based on shared norms. China and the EU have therefore different interpretations of the notion of state sovereignty. These differences have become evident at several occasions in the UN, where China, supported by African states, challenged the European position (Gowan and Brantner 2008: 2). For example, as a member of the UN Security Council, Beijing has regularly opposed sanctions on Sudan and Zimbabwe, arguing that this would constitute interference in internal affairs.

Nevertheless this should not lead us to the conclusion that “China is (...) a normative actor, in Africa, in the same way that the EU is” (Barton 2009). Chinese leaders have repeatedly rejected claims that they export a specific development model to Africa. Actually key feature of the Chinese presence in Africa is that it is not following a predefined strategy but, on the contrary, that it is constantly adapting its policy. Like the EU value-oriented strategy, the Chinese pragmatic discourse is not free of contradictions and is more and more subject to pressure. Recently, Beijing has been facing increasing security, social and environmental concerns over its policy in Africa. These include attacks on Chinese oil facilities by rebels in various African countries. As a result, Chinese leaders realise the need to take into account broader political, social and security constraints specific to each African country in order to protect China’s economic interests in Africa. Moreover, Beijing is faced with a number of situations that it cannot handle alone, and hence becomes increasingly conscious of the importance of cooperation with other actors. This process of adaptation of Chinese foreign policy is referred to as a “quiet revolution”, specifically in the light of China’s position on non-interference (Small 2007). The most prominent example is the Chinese support for an UN-AU peacekeeping mission to solve the conflict in Darfur.

3. What’s next for European aid?

What do these patterns of evolution mean for the European presence in sub-Saharan Africa and more precisely for its development policy? Most evidently, the increasing international importance of China has a test value for the EU’s international influence, in particular in sub-Saharan Africa (Marchal 2008: 245). The EU realises that in order to

¹ These five principles are: mutual respect for sovereignty and sovereign integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit and peaceful coexistence.

compete with China and remain a relevant actor in Africa, it needs to adapt its development approach and turn it into a more pragmatic and partnership-based strategy.

In particular, the Chinese “no strings attached” policy increasingly challenges the European development policy, presenting an alternative source of financing and political support to African countries that do not comply with heavy principles. European policy makers seem to start adopting a more pragmatic approach as a response to this dilemma. Philippe Maystadt, president of the European Investment Bank, stated that the EU needs to think about the degree of conditionality it wants to apply, in order to avoid “excessive” conditionality. He expressed fears that unless the conditions are set at a realistic level, African states might turn to other sources of financing without such strings attached to it (Parker and Beattie 2006). It is however important to stress that even prior to the growing Chinese presence in Africa, EU policy of “negative” conditionality was increasingly abandoned due to its often half-hearted implementation by Member States. Instead, the EU puts now more effort in “positive” conditionality by rewarding the good performers. A first attempt of strengthening incentive mechanisms is the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), which is a rather flexible instrument to grant aid to groups or individuals within civil society, intergovernmental organisations defending democracy and human rights, without agreement from theoretical government.

The success of the Chinese African policy has also initiated a more fundamental discussion on the European development policy. Indeed, as a consequence of the PRC’s growing international role, the EU faces the question of the universality of its norms and values. The NPE concept has been accused of being Eurocentric, hiding a new form of cultural imperialism of a “civilising” power which is projecting its own understanding of norms onto the rest of the world (Bicchi 2006). African leaders regularly complain that EU normative policy is characterised by an unequal relationship between the European “donor” and the African “recipient”, leaving no other choice to the latter than to adhere to European norms. As a result, African leaders increasingly see Beijing as a promising alternative to the European presence (Hackenesch 2009: 2). The Chinese rhetoric of “win-win cooperation” is welcomed by many African leaders and it compels the EU to adapt its discourse this new reality. Hence recent European policy statements on cooperation with countries of sub-Saharan Africa have increasingly referred to the concept of “strategic partnership”.

The most prominent example of the European willingness to move on this issue is the recent initiative of establishing a “trilateral EU, Africa and China cooperation” (European Commission 2008). While at the beginning European politicians and media were harshly critical of China’s African policy (Tull 2008), dismissing its “unethical” approach, they have now adopted a less negative tone and undertaken cooperative efforts (Berger and Wissenbach 2007). One could argue that recent adaptations in both European and Chinese policies in Africa might lead to closer cooperation on some issues: the EU moves away from a normative discourse towards a more pragmatic ap-

proach, and Chinese leaders realise that they cannot ignore broader political and social circumstances, and that international rules might help to protect their economic interests.

Conclusion

Is the EU really losing influence in Africa because of China? In this article, we have argued that China's growing presence in Africa does not necessarily imply a marginalisation of the EU, but rather represents an opportunity to review its current approach to development cooperation in sub-Saharan Africa. China's increasing involvement reflects a changing environment to which the EU needs to adapt its development policy if it wishes to maintain its strong presence on the African continent. The EU has still to develop a fast, coherent, and effective implementation of its aid. The "EU has realised that its normative approach in Africa is not fallible" (Barton 2009: 16) and is moving towards a more pragmatic and less conditional development policy in sub-Saharan Africa. However, it should also be stressed that the European model holds great potential. Indeed, the promotion of human rights, good governance and democracy are prerequisites for the development of Africa. China's close relations with some of the more autocratic African states are indicative of its pursuit of short term economic interests. In the end, it is up to the Africans to decide on their own development and to choose what they consider best from both the European and Chinese models. For the EU, it is therefore important to establish an open dialogue and a real partnership with African leaders and with civil society in order to show the benefits of the European model.

The EU now stands at a crossroad: in order to maintain its current role in Africa, an in-depth revision of its policy is necessary, taking into account both internal and external factors. The coming months and years are crucial in this respect. 2010 will not only see the appointment of a new Commission, it will also bring about the revision of the Cotonou Agreement. In addition, the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty and the newly appointed High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy offer a unique opportunity for the EU to review its policy towards sub-Saharan Africa.

There is evidence that both actors influence each other in Africa (Hackenesch 2009: 56) and that the Chinese presence contributes to current changes in the European development policy. One should however remain cautious about a supposed causality between the Chinese presence and the mutation of European policy. It is likely that the EU will continue to hold a normative discourse, as it represents the main basis of legitimacy of the European development policy. Despite the prospect of both actors converging on some points, the European and the Chinese development approaches towards sub-Saharan Africa will continue to differ (Hackenesch 2009: 55). Yet, this should not discourage triadic cooperation between the EU, China and Africa, which creates synergies that are beneficial to the development of Africa. More pressingly, the

need for a coherent and effective European development policy has to be addressed, especially if the EU wishes to remain a credible international player.

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