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Bader, J.; Hackenesch, C.

Publication date

2019

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Annals of Comparative Democratization

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Bader, J., & Hackenesch, C. (2019). China: Same, same, but different? *Annals of Comparative Democratization*, 17(2), 8-11.

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CHINA: SAME, SAME, BUT DIFFERENT?

Julia Bader, University of Amsterdam

Christine Hackenesch, German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)



Parallel trends

In recent years, democratic recession and stalling democratization has been decried in many parts of the world, and even in consolidated democracies. Freedom House has identified a gradual and uninterrupted decline in global freedom between 2005 and 2017. Other studies identify a trend of autocratization, including in the more democratic parts of the world. The very same period has seen a significant shift of power from the United States and its Western allies to one single authoritarian rising power: China. According to one estimation, China has moved up the ranking of development donors from position 16 (in 2001) to being the 6th largest donor in 2012 and 2013. Among African citizens, China is the second most attractive development model, right behind the United States.¹

China's rise, and its aid in particular, has been criticized for bolstering authoritarianism or undermining efforts of democratization in developing countries. Coming without political conditionality, Chinese aid, (infrastructure) investments, trade and other forms of economic interaction, it has been argued, supports the rule of corrupt leaders and undermines Western efforts to instigate democratic reforms.² In addition, China is

1) Freedom House, *Democracy in Crisis: Freedom in the World 2018* (2018), https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FH_FITW_Report_2018_Final_SinglePage.pdf; Anna Lührmann et al., 'State of the world 2017: Autocratization and exclusion?', *Democratization* 25:8 (2018):1321-1340; Naohiro Kitano & Yukinori Harada, 'Estimating China's Foreign Aid 2001-2013'. *Journal of International Development* 28:7 (2016): 1050-1074; Mogopodi Lekorwe et al., 'China's growing presence in Africa wins largely positive popular reviews', *Afrobarometer Dispatch*, 122. <http://afrobarometer.org/publications/ad122-chinas-growing-presence-africa-wins-largely-positive-popular-reviews>.

2) Ian Taylor, 'China and Political Governance in Africa', *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (Oxford University Press, January 25, 2019), <http://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093>

perceived as an alternative development model that competes with the Western model of combining liberal democracy with a market economy. High economic growth and success in poverty reduction in China since the late 1970s lends credibility to an authoritarian development path.

In this contribution, we argue that previous research has produced little systematic and consolidated findings about how China affects political regimes in the global South. The evidence we have is very mixed and would not lead us to conclude that China's rise had a significant effect on the global negative trend in political freedom and democratic rule until now. To the extent that, until recently, China did not have the ambition to influence political regimes elsewhere, it is not too surprising that we do not see strong evidence of China's political influence. However, since President Xi Jinping has come to power, China's foreign policy has witnessed a fundamental shift. President Xi has not only re-centralised political power within the party and reinforced the role of party actors and agencies in foreign policy. During the 19th party congress in October 2017 he has also announced a strategic change in foreign policy objectives and China's willingness to share the experiences of its own political model with countries from the global South and beyond. In April 2018 Xi changed the constitution to abolished the term limit. Even if China has had little impact on political regimes elsewhere in the past, we therefore argue that a new research agenda is needed to assess China's rise in the 'new era'.

Does China's economic statecraft bolster authoritarianism?

A great deal of work has centred on the effect of Chinese aid rather than Chinese

acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-897.

economic interaction more generally. As development aid has emerged as a separate area of development finance among OECD countries, many studies have attempted to identify the 'aid' in China's economic exchanges to compare it with OECD DAC donors' assistance. One factor that has made it very difficult to evaluate and compare the effects of Chinese development assistance relates to the fact that there still is a great deal of intransparency around the provision of Chinese financial flows due to the Chinese government's unwillingness to provide information on its aid allocation.³

The release of AidData or the figures on Chinese aid and loans in Africa published by Deborah Brautigam and colleagues has much enhanced our understanding about China's aid allocation and its effects. Contrary to what is often believed, Chinese aid is not channelled over-proportionally to authoritarian regimes. However, upon delivery, Chinese aid has been found to be more prone of political capture. In terms of its effects on features directly linking to democratic practices in recipient countries, studies based on AidData come to mixed conclusions. On the one hand, implementation of Chinese aid projects seems to be associated with higher corruption at the local level, but does not seem to undermine the legitimacy citizens credit to the state. Similar to World Bank development funds, Chinese aid and loans have also not increased the likelihood of local conflict in Africa and it does not lead to more protest. But they are associated with higher levels of government repression,

3) Brautigam, Deborah, 'Aid 'with Chinese characteristics': Chinese foreign aid and development finance meet the OECD-DAC aid regime,' *Journal of International Development* 23 (2011): 752-64; Sven Grimm et al., Transparency of Chinese aid. an analysis of the published information on Chinese external financial flows (South Africa: Stellenbosch, 2011); Naohiro Kitano & Yukinori Harada, 'Estimating China's Foreign Aid 2001-2013'. *Journal of International Development* 28:7 (2016): 1050-1074.

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reductions in democratic norms and more fear among citizens to hold the government accountable.⁴

Yet, Chinese leaders see aid as only one of a range of related and complementary tools of economic statecraft next to trade, and investments for achieving various (mutually beneficial or win-win) policy outcomes. It is fair to say that regime transition elsewhere, or even minor interference into the domestic politics in other countries was generally no Chinese foreign policy objective since the end of the Chinese cultural revolution. Until President Xi's 2017 policy shift, China was highly reluctant to side with specific leaders or openly favour specific regime types. China's non-interference policy rhetorically highlighted the sovereignty principle and rejected any domestic interference – even though it had been interpreted more flexibly with China's rapidly growing economic interdependence with countries from the global South.⁵ At the same time, the non-interference policy obviously endorses the regime in place and it has therefore rightly been argued that, whether intended or not, it will be most beneficial to incumbents, particularly where they enjoy few institutional constraints.

Two implications follow. First, in terms of the

4) China Africa Research Initiative, *Chinese loans to African governments 2000-2017 (Excel Data)*, <http://www.sais-cari.org/data-chinese-loans-and-aid-to-africa>; Axel Dreher & Andreas Fuchs, 'Rogue aid? An empirical analysis of China's aid allocation,' *Canadian Journal of Economics/Revue canadienne d'économique* 48 (2015): 988-1023; Dreher, Axel et al. 'Aid on demand: African leaders and the geography of china's foreign assistance,' *Centro Studi Luca d'Agliano Development Studies Working Paper No. 400* (2016). <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2900351>; Kai Gehring, Lennart Kaplan, and Melvin H. L. Wong, 'Aid and Conflict at the Sub-National Level: Evidence from World Bank and Chinese Development Projects in Africa,' *AidData Working Paper 70* (2019), <https://www.aiddata.org/publications/aid-and-conflict-at-the-sub-national-level-evidence-from-world-bank-and-chinese-development-projects-in-africa>.

5) Harry Verhoeven, 'Is Beijing's Non-Interference Policy History? How Africa is Changing China,' *The Washington Quarterly* 37:2 (2014): 55-70.

independent variable, it seems appropriate to assess the behaviour and impact of a rising China in more holistic terms, investigating the various aspects of China's rise such as trade, aid, arms transfers, or diplomatic means, and their combination – as far as data availability allows for that. Existing research doing so, usually finds that China behaves by no means more authoritarian than the US, particularly when compared on other aspects than aid. For example, in comparison to China, the US transfers relatively more arms to autocracies or countries in civil war. China is also not prioritizing non-democratic countries as a destination for its trade or direct investments, even though its direct investments in the global South are concentrated on resource rich countries with poor institutions.⁶

Our own research corroborated the above findings in terms of the effects of linkages to China. We found no effects of Chinese arms trade, diplomacy or economic cooperation on leadership survival in partner countries. Likewise, we showed that the human rights implications of oil exports are not worse for countries exporting to China than to the US. In contrast, due to the long-term trends, exporters to the US perform worse in terms of human rights while more recent oil export dependence on China appears to be less decisive for human rights protection in exporting countries.⁷

Second, China's effects – as most external influences – are contingent on the existing

6) Indra De Soysa & Paul Midford, 'Enter the dragon! An empirical analysis of Chinese versus US arms transfers to autocrats and violators of human rights, 1989–2006,' *International Studies Quarterly* 56:4 (2012): 843-56; Ivar Kolstad & Arne Wiig, 'What determines Chinese outward FDI?' *Journal of World Business* 47:1 (2010), 26–34.

7) Julia Bader, 'China, autocratic patron? An empirical investigation of China as a factor in autocratic survival,' *International Studies Quarterly* 59:1 (2015): 23-33; Julia Bader & Ursula Daxecker, 'A Chinese resource curse? The human rights effects of oil export dependence on China versus the United States,' *Journal of Peace Research* 52:6 (2015): 774–790.

political structures in the counterparts. For example, we do find that export dependence on China prolongs leadership survival for autocratic leaders, but not so for democratic ones. Moreover, a regime's type of authoritarianism seems to matter in terms of the ability to translate external linkages into regime durability, that is, some regimes benefit more from their linkages to China than others. Indeed, in the past, overall economic cooperation – not to be conflated with aid per se – from China was associated with regime durability in party-based regimes, while – quite surprisingly – being associated with regime change in other types of authoritarian regimes.⁸ We attribute this effect to the incentives that party-based regimes have to invest in output legitimacy to maintain a broader societal support, even though China's destabilizing effects need more exploration.

Given that party-based regimes constitute the most common type of authoritarian regimes, China's renewed efforts to influence political elites abroad and to share lessons of its authoritarian political model may fall on fertile ground. In any event, as argued below, the external relations of the Chinese Communist Party to other parties around the globe offer an interesting field of research at the cross-roads of international relations and comparative politics.

Is China a source of autocratic norms?

One particular fear of Western donors is that China will undermine the normative foundations of democracy, human rights, and good governance as aspirational ends in itself. We know from content analysis of Chinese statements at the UN, for example, that China is increasingly contesting existing human rights norms. Questioning the merit of democratic governance, and elections in particular, is also one of the themes found

8) Julia Bader, 'Propping up dictators? Economic cooperation from China and its impact on authoritarian persistence in party and non-party regimes,' *European Journal of Political Research* 54:4 (2015): 655-72.

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in Chinese television programmes aired in Africa that have expanded in recent years. Chinese state institutions influence foreign media through various channels with a view to preventing critical reporting on China and thereby contributing to reductions in press freedom. The mushrooming of China's Confucius Institutes throughout the globe has triggered a debate about its implications for the academic freedom in host institutions.⁹

Thus far, we have little evidence that China has succeeded in impacting on public opinion in developing countries. Democratic rule continues to have a strong support by citizens in the global South. According to Afrobarometer, support for democracy among African citizens has been continuously high in the past few years with more than two-thirds of Africans saying that democracy is the best form of government. Results from the Latinobarometer show that between 2005 and 2010 dissatisfaction with democracy has been on the rise; yet, this dissatisfaction has been interpreted as a positive sign and indicator of political modernization.¹⁰

9) Katrin Kinzelbach, 'Will China's rise lead to a new normative order? An analysis of China's statements on human rights at the United Nations (2000–2010),' *Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights* 30:3 (2012): 299–332; Xiaoling Zhang, 'How ready is China for a China-style world order? China's state media discourse under construction', *Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies* 34:3 (2013): 79–101; Sarah Cook, 'The Long Shadow of Chinese Censorship: How the Communist Party's Media Restrictions Affect News Outlets Around the World.' (Washington: Center for International Media Assistance, 2013), http://www.cima.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/CIMA-China_Sarah%20Cook.pdf; Douglas Farah & Andy Mosher, 'Winds from the east.' (Washington DC: Center for International Media Assistance, 2010); See for instance: AAUP, *On Partnerships with Foreign Governments: The Case of Confucius Institutes*, Report (2014), <https://www.aaup.org/report/confucius-institutes>.

10) Robert Mattes, 'Democracy in Africa: Demand, supply, and the 'dissatisfied democrat'', *Afrobarometer Policy Paper* 54 (2019); Brian J.L. Berry & Osvaldo S. Tello Rodríguez, 'Dissatisfaction with Democracy: Evidence from the Latinobarómetro 2005,' *Journal of Politics in Latin America* 2:3 (2010): 129–142.

Yet, we know close to nothing whether or how citizens' views on democracy are affected by China's increasing presence. The closest we get, are studies that investigate whether China is able to generate soft power, that is whether it can shape peoples' perception of China or of China's role in recipient countries. These do not reveal consistent findings, though some of these studies show that trade relations tend to negatively affect opinions on China, while Chinese aid and FDI tend to correlate with more positive attitudes towards China. In addition, perceptions of China as a donor and economic partner are much dependent on individual-level factors.¹¹

China's attempts to reach out to elites, as opposed to the broader public, has recently been set in the spotlight. In this field, however, our knowledge mostly stems from OECD countries where China has stepped up its efforts to nudge China-friendly positions thereby undermining democratic institutions and processes. Rather than focussing mainly on the Chinese government, the recent discussion about China's 'sharp power' points to the importance of agencies and actors within the Chinese Communist Party that are increasingly active in foreign policy and in shaping China's global rise.¹²

11) Marek Hanusch, 'African perspectives on China–Africa: Modelling popular perceptions and their economic and political determinants,' *Oxford Development Studies* 40:4 (2012): 492–516; Floor Keuleers, 'Explaining external perceptions: The EU and China in African public opinion,' *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 53:4 (2015): 803–21; Simon Shen & Ian Taylor, 'Ugandan youths' perceptions of relations with China,' *Asian Perspective* 36:4 (2012): 693–724; Vera Z. Eichenhauer et al., 'The Effects of Trade, Aid, and Investment on China's Image in Developing Countries,' *AidData Working Paper* 54 (2018), <https://www.aiddata.org/publications/the-effects-of-trade-aid-and-investment-on-chinas-image-in-developing-countries>.

12) Christopher Walker & Sarah Cook, 'The dark side of China aid,' *New York Times*, 25 March 2010; Thorsten Benner et al., 'Authoritarian advance. Responding to China's growing Political Influence in

One important, but little-understood actor among Chinese party agencies is the International Department of the Chinese Communist Party. With an intense travel diplomacy, the it maintains a widely stretched network to political elites across the globe. This engagement is not new; but since Xi Jinping took office, the Chinese Communist Party has bolstered its efforts to reach out to other parties. Building on a newly developed dataset that allows us to systematically analyse the patterns and discourse in the International Department's global outreach, we find that party relations not only serve as an additional channel to advance China's foreign policy interests. Since President Xi has come to power, party relations also emerged as a key instrument to promote China's vision for reforming the global order. Moreover, China increasingly uses the party channel as a vehicle of authoritarian learning by sharing experiences of its economic modernization and authoritarian one-party regime.¹³

Does China's engagement undermine Western democracy support?

China's engagement has caused concern in the European Union and in the United States because policy-makers and observers suspect that China's presence makes it more difficult for Western actors to support democracy and human rights in countries of the global South. China has been criticised for providing 'rogue aid' without strings attached and therefore undermining Western efforts at supporting democracy abroad. World Bank loans, indeed, come

Europe' Global Public Policy Institute and MERICS: Berlin, 2018); Anne-Marie Brady, 'China in Xi's "New Era": New Zealand and the CCP's 'Magic Weapons.' *Journal of Democracy* 29:2 (2018):68–75.

13) Christine Hackenesch & Julia Bader, 'The struggle for minds and influence: Understanding the Chinese Communist Party's global outreach,' under review (2019 manuscript). For our dataset we systematically exploit publicly available information on meetings of the CCP-ID with its foreign partners.

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with considerably fewer conditions when countries have the alternative to turn to China for lending. The positive effect of development aid on political reforms in sub-Saharan Africa also appears to have reduced since China has started to provide significant financial resources to African countries. Anecdotal evidence from country cases points to instances where China has stepped up its financial support in situations when Western donors have used aid as leverage to pressure African governments for political reforms. The positive effect of political conditionality might therefore have been contingent on the period after the end of the Cold War until the mid-2000s, when Africa countries did not have alternative cooperation partners.¹⁴

On the other hand, however, our own comparative analysis of the domestic politics in African authoritarian regimes and governments' incentives to engage with the EU and China suggests that China's engagement with African countries had a limited effect on the EU's efforts to promote democracy, human rights, and good governance between 2000 and 2015.¹⁵ While the EU's success in supporting democracy and human rights has indeed been limited, the EU's limited influence could not be attributed to the presence of China. Instead, the EU has not been very strategic in using its good governance

instruments and failed to sufficiently take into account the domestic political dynamics in African countries to promote democratic reforms. These mixed findings point to a key challenge within the debate on the effectiveness of democracy support, where researchers (and policy makers) often have too high of an expectation of what external influence can achieve.

Looking ahead

That China's rise has not been found to have strong and systematic effects on political regimes elsewhere thus far is not surprising, given that until recently China did not seek to share lessons of its own political model. Given the recent change in Xi Jinping's strategy, there are several avenues for future research. First, there is a knowledge gap on how China's engagement affects political regimes in Asia and Latin America, because research on China's aid has largely focussed on Africa and needs to be put in a comparative perspective. However, whether in Africa or elsewhere, research should take into consideration the combined efforts of Chinese economic, political and increasingly military activities instead of focusing on Chinese aid only when assessing the political impact of China's global rise.

Second, we need to investigate more directly whether and how China affects liberal ideas and norms in developing countries. Finally, as China's impact is contingent on domestic factors, regime types, and likely even on individual persons and their biographies, we need to understand better how elites cooperate and how this interacts with Chinese economic activities. China's external linkages are particularly appealing to leaders in party-based regimes, the most common form of authoritarian regime type, so party-to-party relations seem to be a particularly interesting field of research.

14) Moises Naím, 'Rogue aid', *Foreign Policy* 159 (2009): 95-6, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/10/15/rogue-aid/>; Stefan Halper. *The Beijing consensus* (New York: Basic Books, 2010); Diego Hernandez, 'Are "New" donors challenging world bank conditionality?', *Discussion Paper Series no. 601* (2015); Xiajun Li, 'Does conditionality still work? China's development assistance and democracy in Africa', *Chinese Political Science Review* 2:2 (2017): 201-220; Hackenesch, Christine (2019) Aid, political conditionality and other international efforts to support democracy in Africa, in: *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.

15) Christine Hackenesch, *The EU and China in African authoritarian regimes. Domestic Politics and Governance Reforms*, (Bonn: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).