

Chinese Cooperation: between Foreign Policy and Demands of Domestic Economy

Cooperación china: entre la política exterior y las exigencias de la economía nacional

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Abstract. China has become the leading partner in South-South cooperation. Through these efforts, it aims to enhance its global reputation and improve its international status. At the same time, the increasing demand for raw materials to satisfy domestic market needs has driven China to source from international markets, further fueling its cooperative initiatives. The concept of “win-win” planning, which seeks to generate mutual benefits, underscores the negotiation process and the pursuit of complementary advantages in resolving international conflicts. This article aims to evaluate Chinese cooperation from the perspectives of aid effectiveness, the resolution of domestic challenges, and international relations. The effectiveness of Chinese cooperation is limited by the partiality of its underlying motivations. While Chinese policy can impact the economic

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development of recipient countries, its emphasis on internal practical benefits tends to outweigh its stated international development goals.

Keywords: development cooperation; South-South cooperation; international relations; foreign policy; Chinese cooperation.

Resumen. China se ha convertido en el mayor actor de la cooperación Sur-Sur. A través de la cooperación, China busca mejorar su estatus internacional. Además, dada la necesidad de materias primas para satisfacer la creciente demanda del mercado interno chino, el abastecimiento desde el exterior también impulsa la cooperación. La estrategia *win-win* que busca lograr beneficios mutuos define el proceso de negociación y la búsqueda de ventajas complementarias en la resolución de conflictos sobre asuntos internacionales. El objetivo de este artículo es evaluar la cooperación china desde el punto de vista de la eficacia de la ayuda, la resolución de problemas internos y las relaciones internacionales. La eficacia de la cooperación china se ve obstaculizada debido a la parcialidad de sus motivaciones. Aunque su política puede tener un impacto en el desarrollo económico de los países beneficiarios, la consideración de los beneficios internos prácticos prevalece sobre los objetivos de desarrollo internacional.

Palabras clave: cooperación al desarrollo; Cooperación Sur-Sur; relaciones internacionales; política exterior; cooperación china.

Introduction

As its economy grows, China is increasingly promoting South-South cooperation as part of its commitment to international development. To explore Chinese cooperation policy in contemporary times, this study constructs a framework centered on the “motivation-relationship” mechanism and its practical applications. In terms of motivation, while Chinese cooperation aligns with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda, it is primarily driven by public political objectives, particularly the enhancement of China’s international status and economic growth.

The aspect of “relations” refers to the link between Chinese aid and its internal context (economic development level, national development strategy, domestic challenges, diplomatic shifts, etc.), and the interaction between Chinese behavior and the international environment (global development trends, international disputes, and relations with host

countries). This article offers a correlational rather than causal explanation of these dynamics, as the results reflect the effects rather than the intentions of Chinese aid. Notably, contemporary Chinese cooperation has allowed for increased participation in international affairs. The “win-win” approach seeks both self-interest and mutual gain, resulting in relative complementary advantages within the global system.

The aim of this article is to analyze China’s international cooperation taking into account both internal motivations and external impact, with particular attention to its effectiveness as a development tool, its role in addressing domestic economic challenges, and its function in redefining international relations from a South-South logic. The methodology follows a political economy approach based on the analysis of scholarly literature, official documents, and primary statistical data. This study contributes original insights into a contemporary and increasingly influential phenomenon in international relations, one that is shifting the balance of power within globalization.

Using a qualitative-descriptive methodology, the analysis draws on academic literature, official policy documents, and statistical sources. It includes a comprehensive review of scholarship on China’s economic development and policy frameworks at both national and international levels. Official statistics are employed to contextualize and critically assess trends, structural transformations, and the implications of China’s global economic engagement.

Overview of Chinese Cooperation

China recognizes the definition of development aid as outlined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), but Chinese cooperation exhibits unique characteristics. China provides preferential loans alongside export credits and foreign investments, which often makes it difficult to distinguish between the economic activities of institutions such as the China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank of China (Wang, 2020). In fact, the China Development Bank’s funding volume has surpassed that of the World Bank (Wang, 2020). Additionally, China frequently offers loans secured by raw materials, a practice referred to as “development financing” (Kaplan, 2016), which complicates efforts to classify such activities strictly as development cooperation (Hernández, 2018).

Despite publishing white papers on foreign aid in 2010, 2014, and 2021, China’s explanations of financial flows remain vague, leading to limited recognition of these documents as definitive sources on Chinese cooperation.

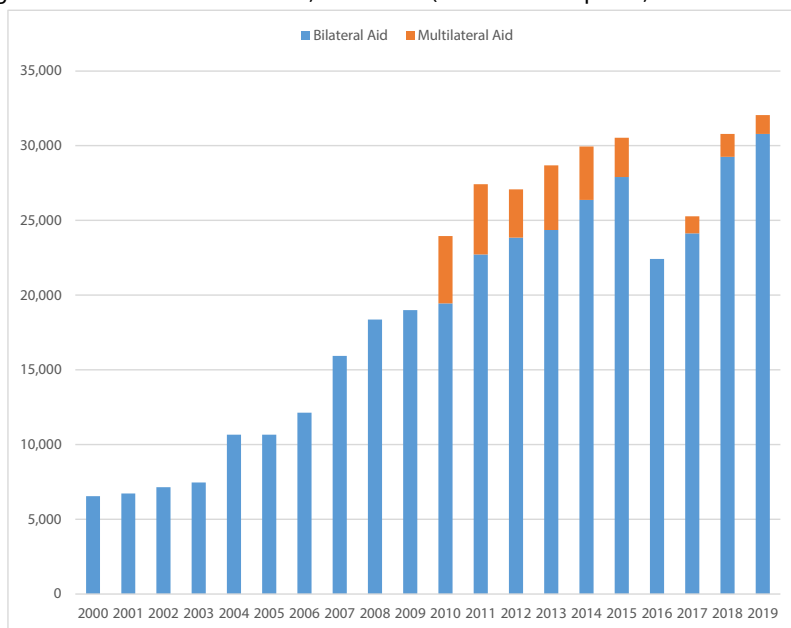
For the purposes of this analysis, data from AidData (OECD) and the China Fiscal Yearbook have been utilized to quantify China's development cooperation.

General picture

Chinese aid showed marked growth between 2000 and 2019, averaging just under \$18 billion annually. Following a period of diversification beginning in 2010, annual aid expenditures rose to approximately \$25 billion between 2010 and 2019 (Figure 1). A major institutional shift occurred in 2018 with the establishment of the China International Development Cooperation Agency, the first independent body dedicated to development aid.

Significant increases in Chinese aid occurred in 2009, in response to the global financial crisis, and again in 2013, following the Belt and Road Initiative's launch. By 2013, China's official financing contributions accounted for nearly 50% of the OECD total, compared to less than 5% in the early 2000s (AidData and Custer et al., 2021). Despite these increases, Chinese aid remains modest relative to traditional donors. In 2019, China allocated only 0.047% of its Gross National Product (GNP) to aid (Zhang, 2021).

Figure 1. Evolution of Chinese aid, 2000-2019 (constant 2019 prices, millions of dollars)

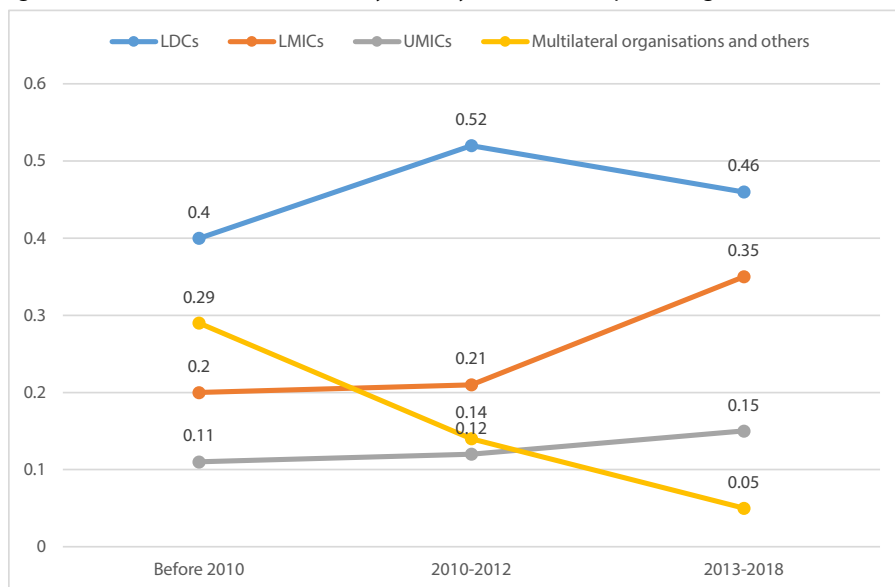


Source: Own elaboration based on National Bureau of Statistics of China (2022).

Geographic trends

Before 2009, China had limited experience and funding for development aid, and its efforts were largely exploratory. Between 2010 and 2012, aid was primarily directed toward the least developed countries (LDCs). In subsequent years, aid diversified to include lower-middle-income and upper-middle-income countries. Collectively, LDCs and low-income countries received two-thirds of China's aid (Figure 2).

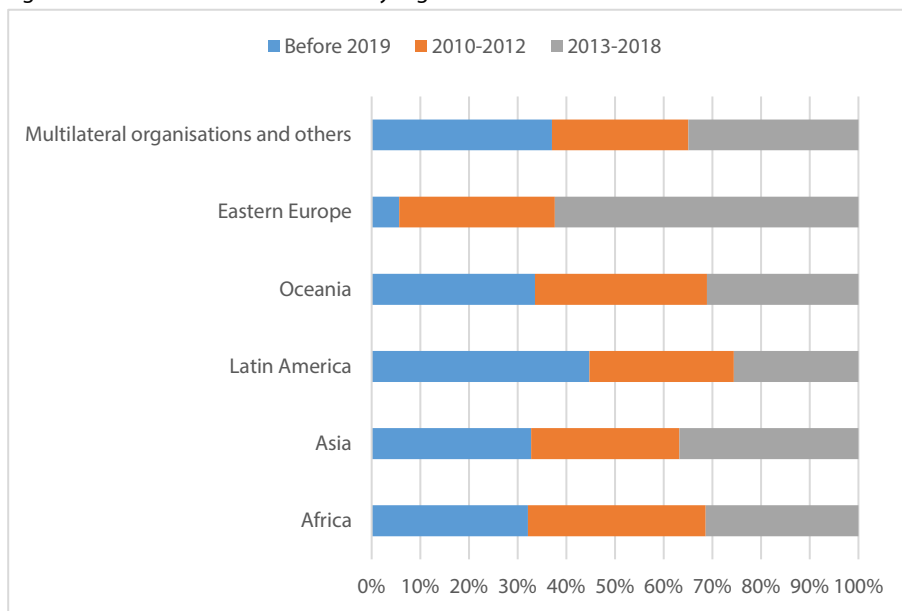
Figure 2. Distribution of Chinese aid by country income level (percentage)



Source: Own elaboration based on data from the white paper on cooperation (People's Republic of China, 2021). Note: LDCs: least developed countries; LMICs: lower-middle income countries; UMICs: upper-middle income countries.

Between 2013 and 2018, China provided aid to 122 countries and 20 regional organizations, including 30 in Asia, 53 in Africa, 9 in Oceania, 22 in Latin America, and 8 in Eastern Europe (People's Republic of China, 2021). Over time, aid to Africa and Latin America decreased, while aid to Asia and Eastern Europe increased (Figure 3).

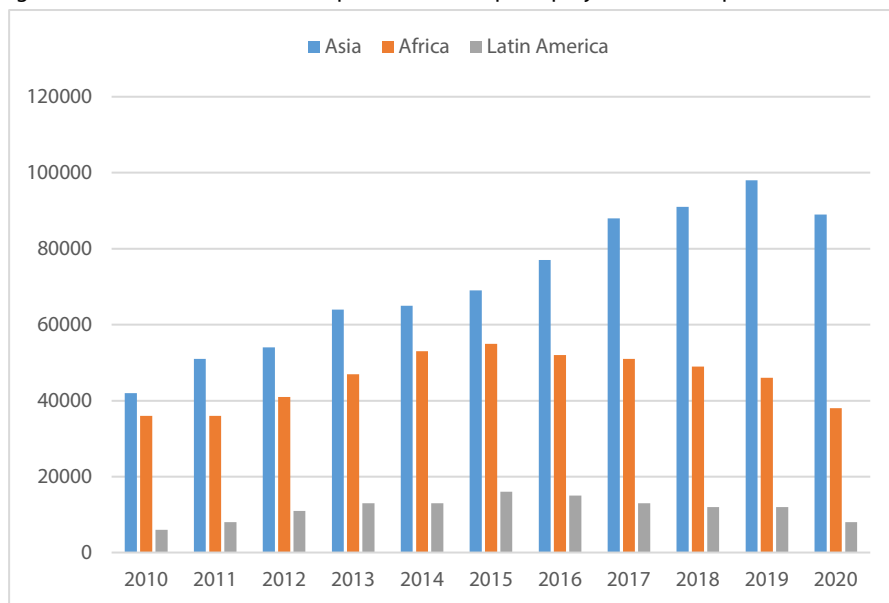
Figure 3. Distribution of Chinese aid by region



Source: Own elaboration based on white paper on cooperation (People's Republic of China, 2021).

China views industrialization as the primary pathway to economic development. Infrastructure projects, typically implemented via contracts, have become the dominant modality of Chinese cooperation. Contracted infrastructure projects accounted for 40% of China's total cooperation spending, with Asia receiving the majority. By 2020, the number of infrastructure projects in Asia had doubled compared to 2010 and far exceeded those in Africa. Chinese cooperation in Latin America, while growing, remains limited (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Evolution of Chinese cooperation in complete projects (current prices, millions \$)

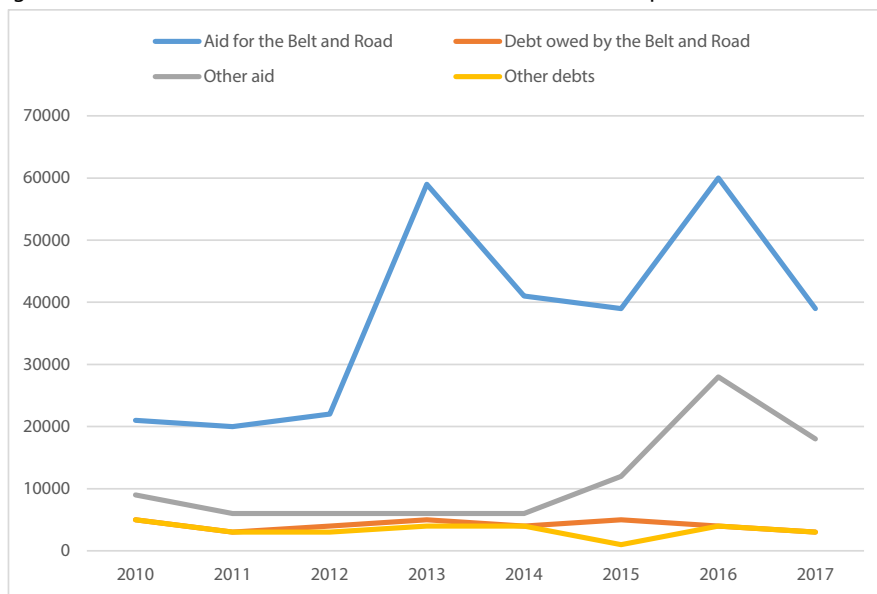


Source: Own elaboration based on data from the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2022).

Channels of Chinese cooperation

Chinese official financing often takes the form of loans at market interest rates, rather than grants or concessional loans typical of traditional donors (Horigoshi et al., 2022). Approximately two-thirds of Belt and Road financing falls under this category, labeled by the OECD as “other official flows”. Figure 5 illustrates Belt and Road-related debt and aid data from 2010 to 2017.

Figure 5. China's official financial flows, 2010-2017 (constant 2017 prices, millions of dollars)

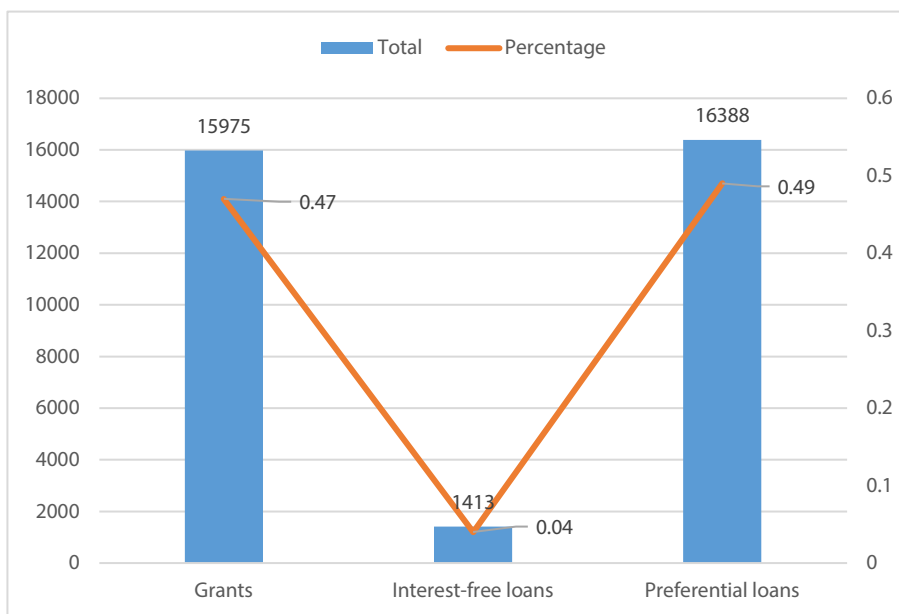


Source: Own elaboration based on AidData (Custer et al., 2021).

According to the third white paper on Chinese cooperation, the most active period of aid occurred between 2013 and 2018. During this time, aid increased to approximately \$40 billion, consisting of grants, interest-free loans, and preferential loans. Grants totaled nearly \$16 billion (47% of aid), allocated to social welfare projects, human resource development, technical assistance, material support, and humanitarian aid.

Interest-free loans amounted to around \$1 billion (4% of aid), used for public infrastructure and basic facilities. Preferential loans, totaling nearly \$17 billion (49% of aid), were directed toward larger infrastructure and technical service projects (People's Republic of China, 2021) (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Distribution of Chinese aid by aid modality, 2013-2018 (constant 2018 prices, millions of dollars and percentage)

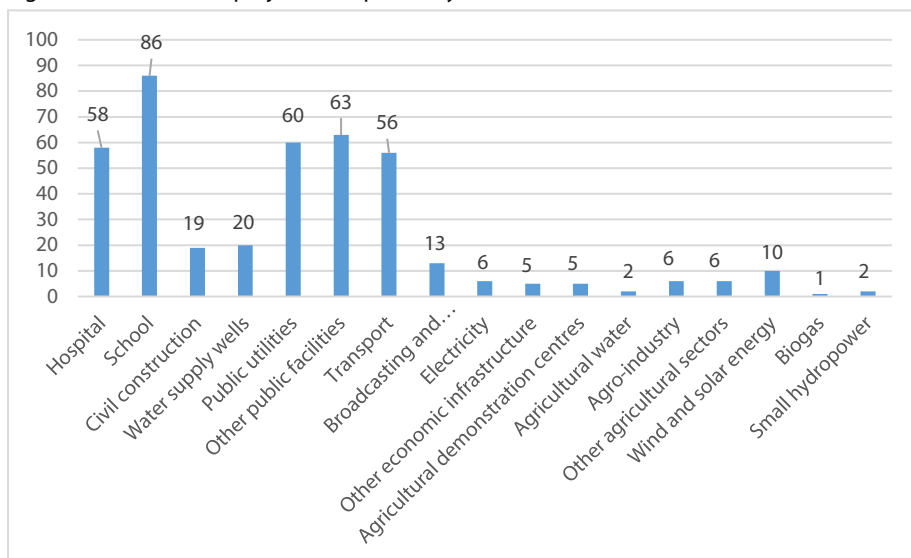


Source: Prepared by the authors based on data from the white paper on cooperation (People's Republic of China, 2021).

Aid Modalities and Sectoral Distribution

Between 2013 and 2018, China completed 423 comprehensive infrastructure projects, including public facilities, agricultural, and industrial initiatives (Figure 7). An emerging model is recipient-led construction, in which local governments manage bidding and project implementation with financial and technical support from China (People's Republic of China, 2021).

Figure 7. Construction projects completed by China, 2013-2018 (units)



Source: Prepared by the authors based on data from the white paper on cooperation (People's Republic of China, 2021).

The second major form of aid is the provision of general supplies. Between 2013 and 2018, China delivered 890 material aid shipments to 124 countries and regions, including machinery, testing equipment, transport vehicles, and medical supplies. Technical cooperation ranks third, with 414 projects in 96 countries, covering industrial operations, education, health, clean energy, and strategic planning. Educational cooperation has also gained prominence. Between 2013 and 2018, China conducted 7,000 training programs, attended by nearly 200,000 individuals (People's Republic of China, 2021).

In recent years, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and concerns over "debt trap diplomacy", China has reduced its loan issuance. To avoid attracting excessive scrutiny from traditional donors, it has instead focused on soft power expansion and humanitarian assistance. By the end of 2020, China had provided 4 billion units of protective clothing, 6 billion COVID-19 tests, 350 billion masks, and other medical supplies to 150 countries and 13 international organizations. It also dispatched 37 medical expert teams to 34 countries, a campaign dubbed "mask diplomacy" (Kowalski, 2021).

China is now exploring new models of development cooperation, emphasizing the integration of aid, investment, and trade. This evolving

approach prioritizes “effective development” over traditional notions of “effective aid” and signals a shift toward a more comprehensive and pragmatic strategy.

Motivations Behind Chinese Cooperation

The motivations guiding Chinese cooperation policy can be grouped into two primary categories: economic and political. These motivations are intricately linked to domestic market challenges. Chinese cooperation, while aligned with foreign policy goals, also serves to mitigate key vulnerabilities within China’s economic structure (Margueliche, 2019).

The concept of “win-win” is central to Chinese diplomacy, emphasizing mutual benefit, negotiation, and the pursuit of complementary interests in international affairs. This principle supports Beijing’s vision of shaping a regional and global order centered on China’s leadership (Luo, Hu, & Yan, 2020). Three key elements stand out in this strategic framework.

First, China acknowledges the heterogeneity of developing nations. Rather than reproducing dependency, Chinese cooperation emphasizes interdependence and complementary advantages. While self-interest drives cooperation, it does not necessarily translate into exploitative behavior (Ding & Kan, 2007).

Second, from an interactionist perspective, Chinese cooperation reflects a model of leadership rooted in technical competence and persuasive capacity rather than structural dominance. This characterizes China as an emerging power leveraging non-coercive means to influence development trajectories (Malacalza, 2014).

Third, a strong sense of pragmatism underpins China’s development strategy. Deng Xiaoping’s well-known phrase, “It doesn’t matter whether a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice”, encapsulates the nation’s utilitarian approach. Accordingly, countries are encouraged to pursue endogenous development through structural transformation, leveraging Chinese aid and capacity (Domínguez, 2019).

Economically, China is undergoing a phase of transformation similar to that of South Korea and Taiwan in the 1980s, and very different from the chaotic transition opted for by the countries of Eastern Europe (de Arriba, 2010). It seeks to relocate labor-intensive industries, modernize production, and resolve internal challenges, including natural resource scarcity and overcapacity in infrastructure production (Lin & Wang, 2017).

China possesses substantial capital and manufacturing expertise, which positions it to support structural transformation in lower-income countries. Unlike traditional donors, China does not interfere in domestic affairs or export ideological frameworks. Instead, interest and power dynamics drive its international behavior.

Chinese aid is also a strategic tool for garnering international support and showcasing its development model. The terminology of “partner” replaces “recipient” or “ally”, signaling a commitment to equality in the international system (Ren & Guo, 2016). Chinese cooperation eschews political conditionality, prioritizing diplomatic and economic relations with countries with which it shares pre-existing economic ties or formal agreements (Vadell et al., 2020).

Dilemmas of Chinese Cooperation

Chinese cooperation and the domestic context

Over the past four decades, China’s rapid economic growth has brought about a range of challenges, including resource depletion, environmental degradation, excessive energy consumption, and structural imbalances. In response, China has sought global engagement not only to address external pressures but also as a strategic solution to internal economic issues.

Sustained economic growth requires continuous improvements in labor productivity and living standards. While developed countries achieve this through technological innovation, developing countries—including China—can enhance productivity by adapting and upgrading mature technologies from advanced economies. China’s historical reliance on foreign direct investment has helped accumulate capital while supporting domestic growth and, more recently, development in other nations (Cai et al., 2018).

An abundant labor supply once kept wages low and fueled competitiveness in labor-intensive industries. This dynamic, however, is shifting due to demographic changes. Between 1982 and 2000, China benefited from a large working-age population and a relatively small elderly demographic. Today, declining birth rates and a shrinking youth population have increased labor costs and deterred foreign investment. In turn, China has begun exporting its development model to emerging economies like Vietnam and Ethiopia, encouraging them to become the next generation of “global factories”.

China's high savings rate—fueled by its large working-age population—enabled rapid capital accumulation. Yet, the domestic market cannot fully absorb this capital due to industrial restructuring and overcapacity in sectors such as coal, steel, shipbuilding, and telecommunications. Between 2010 and 2020, China's industrial capacity utilization averaged 77%, with a low of 73% in 2016 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2022). Many overcapacity sectors are dominated by state-owned enterprises, which are less likely to downsize, intensifying internal competition (Lai, 2021).

These domestic constraints have prompted China to modernize its external trade strategy. Its global engagement is not based on ideology but rather on a restructuring of capitalism in response to the overproduction crises of the 1970s (Breslin, 2013). By diversifying foreign markets, China strengthens its development model and secures access to critical natural resources, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The BRI is considered a third phase in China's reform and opening-up policy (Pérez, 2017). It calls for large-scale rethinking of global territorial governance (Margueliche, 2019). The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), with \$250 billion in capital and 84 member states—including many outside Asia—presents an alternative to Western financial institutions (Esteban & Trivi, 2019).

At its core, the BRI serves China's geostrategic interests: securing trade routes, bolstering regional alliances, and transforming economic strength into diplomatic influence (Luo, Hu, & Yan, 2020). Examples include China's \$50 billion investment pledge in Indonesia and major infrastructure financing in Pakistan and Kazakhstan. The BRI's five key pillars are policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people exchanges.

Energy security remains a top priority. In 2018, 44% of China's oil imports came from the Middle East and 19.7% from Africa. Turkmenistan supplied 51.4% of China's natural gas imports (Lai, 2021). China has developed four major energy corridors: the Central Asia–China Pipeline, East Siberia–China Pipeline, China–Myanmar Pipeline, and the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor. The latter links Xinjiang to the Pakistani port of Gwadar, reducing vulnerability to maritime chokepoints like the Strait of Malacca and strengthening China–Russia continental ties (Esteban & Trivi, 2019).

Chinese Cooperation and Foreign Policy

Chinese cooperation reflects a realist and strategic use of foreign aid. From this perspective, donor countries employ aid to secure political support, while recipient countries use it to bolster regime stability (Bueno de Mesquita & Smith, 2007). Aid is thus viewed not as altruism but as a tool for maximizing relative gains in international competition (Fan, 2008).

China's growing involvement in international affairs is a logical outcome of its economic ascent. Official rhetoric emphasizes reciprocity and mutual benefit, building trust and alignment with developing countries. This shared identity—particularly in the context of colonial histories—strengthens China's diplomatic influence. Cooperation fosters a favorable external environment for China's domestic development.

China leverages aid to gain support in multilateral forums, influence voting patterns, and secure diplomatic recognition over Taiwan. The acceptance of the "One China" principle remains a prerequisite for cooperation (Dreher & Fuchs, 2015). While China denies political conditions on trade and investment, its diplomacy often aligns economic engagement with strategic objectives (Esteban & Trivi, 2019).

China's influence has expanded through five key processes. First, the expansion of trade with developing countries, the acquisition of companies and investments in countries where China obtains energy and natural resources, the construction of the "internet of things" system, a digital interconnection of everyday objects with internet, and specifically, the improvement of logistics. In 2017, a Chinese consortium led by Vanke acquired, for \$12 billion, the company Global Logistic Properties Ltd. (GLP), Asia's largest modern logistics provider based in Singapore. In fact, LPG has been the main supplier of modern logistics facilities in China, Japan and Brazil; In total, the scope of the business covered more than 77 cities, and it has a logistics infrastructure of 40 billion dollars. Another striking example is the direct acquisition of international ports. The Greek port of Piraeus, considered the great gateway for Asian products to Europe, is one of the examples of the expansion of Chinese companies in the global port network (Barría, 2021).

Second, China's foreign direct investment (FDI) around the world, especially in developing countries. In 2020, China's foreign direct investment flow was close to \$153 billion, representing first place in the world for the first time (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2022). Direct investment is the method most used by large Chinese companies. Huawei, the largest

Chinese telecommunications company, began its internationalization at that time. And in 2001, Huawei made the decision to enter the Russian and Brazilian markets.

Thirdly, the main objective of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) is to support the construction of infrastructure to promote connectivity and integration in the Asian region. China has 26% of the vote in the bank, which directs and manages surplus capital from a logic focused on state planning and financial and economic power disputes within the international system. It is notable that, despite the US rejection, the AIIB has the participation of the United Kingdom, France, Germany and Italy, among others, breaking in a certain way the predominance of Western multilateral financial institutions (Caubet et al., 2019).

The internationalization of the yuan (renminbi or RMB), together with the increasing use of the yuan as a reserve currency of different central banks, could promote the internationalization of the yuan capital market, improve China's financial market environment, avoid internal risks and promote the constitution of the Petroyuan (Esteban & Trivi, 2019). In November 2015, the IMF recognized the growing use of the yuan in economic, financial and trade transactions. The yuan has been included in the special drawing rights (SDR) basket of currencies, effective since October 1, 2016 (IMF, 2016).

October 2015 saw the launch of the Cross-Border Interbank Payments System (CIPS) with 19 banks accepted into the new system. The CIPS system serves as a complement to SWIFT (Rotblat, 2017). SWIFT data shows that by the end of 2022, the RMB accounted for 3.91% of global trade finance, up 1.9% year-on-year (People's Bank of China, 2023). However, it is worth noting that Chinese aid is still calculated in dollars today, even in official Chinese documentation. For one thing, while China is trying to expand the yuan's influence quickly, it doesn't want to upset the United States as much.

Finally, there is economic progress with the support of the Chinese government through the planning of the "Made in China 2025" strategy. Certain advantages of this planning should be highlighted to understand the particular path of China's technological development. Firstly, the focus of the strategy is on the development of industries with high technological complexity, based on innovation and the training of their personnel at all levels (Molinero, 2015). According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2022), in 2020, the export of 95.54% of Chinese products corresponded to manufactured goods, where 58% corresponded

to machinery, and 31% to high technology, a percentage that represented the largest export of the world, with a market share of 23.7%. Likewise, China leads the artificial intelligence sector today. Second, China can offer profitable products at low prices with “sufficient” quality. Especially, in recent years, the quality of Chinese products has already improved, but the prices have remained low.

From a regional diplomacy standpoint, China’s cooperation with neighboring countries addresses internal security concerns, such as separatist movements and border conflicts. It has solidified ties with Russia and Central Asian nations through initiatives like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Maritime security in East and Southeast Asia is another strategic focus, with China playing a pivotal role in shaping the regional order (Li, 2010).

Africa remains a key recipient of Chinese aid, accounting for 44.65% between 2013 and 2018. While diplomacy in Africa is significant, economic activity there remains limited compared to Asia and Latin America. Some African leaders remain cautious of Chinese motives, citing concerns about neocolonialism and debt dependence (Haug & Kamwengo, 2022).

In Latin America, geographic and historical distance has hindered relations, but strategic and resource-based interests drive growing cooperation. Countries such as Panama, El Salvador, and Honduras have established ties with China, breaking with Taiwan. China has also launched a \$10 billion Cooperation Fund focused on energy, agriculture, infrastructure, manufacturing, and R&D, with plans to enable yuan-based transactions in the region.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study has examined Chinese cooperation within the framework of the “motivation-relationship” model. Compared to traditional aid paradigms, Chinese cooperation exhibits distinct characteristics. Politically, it emphasizes the absence of conditionalities and promotes horizontal, egalitarian partnerships. Economically, it prioritizes endogenous development and structural transformation, expanding the traditional concept of aid by combining it with trade and investment under the umbrella of “development cooperation”.

The “win-win” principle remains the cornerstone of Chinese cooperation. While China still identifies as a developing country, it is simultaneously seeking benefits and addressing internal challenges. These

benefits are not limited to economic interests—such as access to natural resources and energy—but also include political objectives like national security, global standing, and diplomatic support. Win-win cooperation, therefore, involves the exchange of these tangible and intangible benefits, contributing to China's strategic position within the international system.

A key motivation for Chinese cooperation is the need to secure natural resources for its domestic market. Although Chinese loans generally lack explicit political conditions, they often take the form of resource-backed loans to minimize credit risk. Thus, resource acquisition is embedded in the aid process.

The overarching goal of Chinese aid is to stimulate capital accumulation in recipient countries, thereby promoting economic growth. However, this emphasis often overlooks social stability and institutional development. Chinese cooperation focuses less on the traditional effectiveness of aid and more on promoting what it terms “effective growth.”

China's principle of non-interference aligns with its focus on economic outcomes rather than political or institutional reforms. From China's perspective, the primary goal for developing countries is to build material wealth and national prosperity. Social or environmental costs—such as inequality or ecological degradation—are secondary to economic growth.

Transparency remains a significant issue. The exact volume and distribution of Chinese aid are considered state secrets, motivated by both diplomatic strategy and domestic political concerns. The Chinese government aims to avoid public backlash over large-scale foreign assistance while millions of Chinese citizens still live in poverty (Zhang, 2020). For recipient countries, this opacity hinders the ability to evaluate outcomes, raising fears of neocolonialism and debt dependency, especially under the narrative of “debt trap diplomacy” (Carmody et al., 2022; El Shafei & Metawe, 2022; Taylor & Zajontz, 2020).

Despite these challenges, China's contributions to development cooperation deserve recognition. Its approach both challenges and complements traditional models, contributing to a multipolar framework of global aid. Nevertheless, future improvements could involve:

1. Absorbing Best Practices: Integrating effective aspects of traditional cooperation without compromising China's unique model and strategic objectives.

2. Enhancing Aid Effectiveness: Broadening the scope of evaluation beyond infrastructure delivery to include sustainability and developmental impact. As Bräutigam (2011) noted, only a fraction of Chinese funding meets OECD criteria for official development assistance (ODA).
3. Strengthening South-South Collaboration: Building coordination with other emerging donors to enhance the collective impact of South-South cooperation.
4. Improving Transparency: Providing more comprehensive and accessible data to enable better assessment of Chinese aid and foster mutual accountability.

The principal contribution of this article lies in its conceptualization of Chinese development cooperation as a pragmatic and strategic model that both contests and complements existing global norms. By situating Chinese aid within the broader political economy of global development, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of China's evolving role in the Global South.

Nevertheless, limitations persist. The opacity of Chinese aid and the absence of standardized reporting hinder empirical validation. Additionally, this analysis primarily focuses on macro-level trends. Future research should investigate project-level impacts and conduct comparative studies with traditional donors to identify synergies and effective practices. Above all, promoting transparency will be key to fostering constructive international dialogue and improving the effectiveness of global development cooperation.

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