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

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

Frans-Paul van der Putten

Inset photo © Christopher Herwig (herwigphoto.com)
Dealing with political-economic diversity in the developing world

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Notes