



The ‘Great Game’ Redux? China and Development Heterodoxy in a Multi-polar World 2013–2023

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Abstract

In the 10 years between late 2013 and late 2023, China’s approach to international development evolved at pace and, by 2023, China asserted a leading role in the framing and delivery of international cooperation to support transformational change in the Global South. This article explains the basis for, and unpacks, China’s assertion, and the contribution it makes to evolving development heterodoxy. Adopting a constructivist approach and focusing on a conceptual trinity of institutions, infrastructure and influence, it explores the following: (1) new multilateral institutions and the expanded BRICS alliance; (2) The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); and (3) China’s Global Community of Shared Future (GCSF) & Global Development Initiative (GDI) policies. China, with allies, it concludes, is engaged in a ‘great game’ in which it simultaneously cooperates and competes with Western interests that have traditionally dominated the development enterprise, fuelling development heterodoxy, and reframing development discourse to the benefit, primarily, of countries in the global South.

Keywords China · Xi Jinping · Policy Evolution · Belt & Road Initiative · BRICS+ · Global Development Initiative

Résumé

Au cours de la décennie allant de la fin 2013 à la fin 2023, l’approche de la Chine en matière de développement international a connu une évolution rapide et, en 2023, la Chine s’est affirmée comme un acteur de premier plan dans la définition et la mise en œuvre de la coopération internationale visant à soutenir des transformations majeures dans le Sud global. Cet article expose les fondements de cette affirmation de la Chine, en analyse les ressorts et la contribution à l’évolution de l’hétérodoxie du développement. Adoptant une approche constructiviste et s’appuyant sur une trinité conceptuelle—institutions, infrastructures et influence—il examine: (1) les nouvelles institutions multilatérales et l’élargissement de l’alliance des BRICS; (2) l’Initiative

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« Belt and Road» (BRI); et (3) les politiques de la Communauté Mondiale de Destin Partagé (GCSF) et de l'Initiative pour le Développement Mondial (GDI) de la Chine. La Chine, avec ses alliés, conclut-il, est engagée dans un « grand jeu» où elle coopère tout en entrant en concurrence avec les intérêts occidentaux qui ont traditionnellement dominé le secteur du développement, alimentant ainsi l'hétérodoxie du développement et recadrant le discours sur le développement au bénéfice, principalement, des pays du Sud global.

Resumen

En los diez años transcurridos entre finales de 2013 y finales de 2023, el enfoque de China hacia el desarrollo internacional evolucionó rápidamente y, para 2023, China asumió un papel de liderazgo en la definición y ejecución de la cooperación internacional para apoyar transformaciones profundas en el Sur Global. Este artículo explica los fundamentos de la afirmación de China y analiza la contribución que realiza a la evolución de la heterodoxia del desarrollo. Adoptando un enfoque constructivista y centrándose en una tríada conceptual de instituciones, infraestructura e influencia, explora: (1) las nuevas instituciones multilaterales y la ampliación de la alianza BRICS; (2) la Iniciativa “Belt and Road” (BRI); y (3) las políticas de la Comunidad Global de Futuro Compartido (GCSF) y la Iniciativa para el Desarrollo Global (GDI) de China. China, junto con sus aliados, concluye el artículo, participa en un ‘gran juego’ en el que coopera y compite simultáneamente con los intereses occidentales que tradicionalmente han dominado la agenda del desarrollo, impulsando la heterodoxia en el desarrollo y reformulando el discurso sobre el desarrollo en beneficio, principalmente, de los países del Sur Global.

Introduction

Between 1981 and 2010, the Western-dominated international development enterprise was characterised by two distinct, predominantly macroeconomic, orthodoxies: the Washington Consensus of 1981–1999,¹ and the Post-Washington Consensus of 1999–2010.² At the heart of both was the combined might of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, allied to that of leading Western powers; the United States, Japan, Germany, Britain, and France. Together, these five countries wielded significant voting power within each institution, with the influence of other board members circumscribed, even after voting reforms following the global recession of 2007–2009 which diluted the voting power of the Big Five.³ The power of the Big Five was magnified through membership of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (DAC-OECD), the Group of 7 (G-7) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Effective control of the World Bank, IMF, DAC-OECD, G-7 and WTO in the absence of substantive countervailing force was pivotal to the maintenance of Western-enforced

¹ See Williamson (1993) or Serra and Stiglitz (Eds) (2008).

² See Stiglitz (2004) or (2008).

³ See Wade (2011).



development orthodoxy up to 2008, after which it began to come under sustained pressure.

The Washington Consensus represented the high-point of economic neo-liberalism in the context of international development and involved a Bank and Fund-coordinated process of concessional finance to governments in the global South, largely to address balance of payments deficits. At heart, it enforced a mandatory process of state contraction and retreat, delivered especially through spending cuts and market liberalisation. The end of the Cold War from 1989, and the apparent tilt back to a unipolar world which it heralded, bolstered the Washington Consensus, but the Asian financial crisis of 1997, and the simultaneous difficulties faced by debt-laden economies in Latin America, triggered its demise (Gore 2000, p. 799). The Post-Washington Consensus which replaced it curbed some of the excesses of the Washington Consensus as perceived by critics,⁴ and offered renewed support for social spending and discretionary capital controls while promoting poverty-reducing economic growth. The consequences of the 'Great Recession' of 2007–2009, the global collapse of output, investment and consumption triggered by failures in Western financial markets (Christiano et al. 2015), however, shattered the Post-Washington Consensus in three main respects. First, the G-7 gave way to the larger G-20 group from 2008 in the political stewardship of the global economy, as countries such as China, India, Brazil and South Africa helped augment the funds of the IMF and to bail out Western countries such as Greece, Ireland and Hungary (Birdsall & Fukuyama 2011, p. 52). Second, and from 2010, the World Bank and IMF began to operate more independently of each other following the termination of their joint Poverty Reduction Strategy Initiative, focusing on separate funding instruments. And third, the European Union emerged as a rival to the Bank and Fund, soon becoming the world's largest development aid (official development assistance) donor.⁵ Each served to weaken the coherence of the traditional Western development enterprise and created space for the emergence of development heterodoxy.

China and Development Heterodoxy: The Research Frame

Research Context

Amid this process of fragmentation and fracturing, the rise of China was the principal factor in the rise of development heterodoxy, as countries in the global South eschewed economic neo-liberalism, and turned eastwards, influenced initially by China's impressive economic growth and, later, by its resilience during the 'Great Recession' (Williamson 2012). In an influential 2004 paper, for instance, Ramo argued that a distinct 'Beijing Consensus' had emerged to challenge the Washington Consensus (Ramo 2004) and by 2012, Williamson argued, the Beijing Consensus

⁴ See, for instance, Cornia et al. (Eds) (1987).

⁵ European Commission, https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/international-economic-relations/international-development-aid_en, accessed August 2024.



was in the ascendant,⁶ due primarily to the beacon of hope that the Chinese economy represented to other emerging economies (Williamson 2012, p. 4). This ‘Beijing Consensus’ was also facilitated, in significant part, by a ‘silent revolution in development assistance’ in which China and other ‘emerging donors’, according to Woods, increasingly diverged from established Western donors, focusing on trade arrangements and commercial investments, rather than the traditional (grant-based) aid, with positive effects:

[T]here is now some evidence that countries with intensified aid and trade links with China are enjoying higher growth rates, better terms of trade, increased export volumes and higher public revenues’ (Woods 2008, p. 1208).

This ‘silent revolution’ accelerated dramatically following the global recession of 2007–2009, amid the distinct ‘Rise of the South’ (UNDP 2013). Established donors initially welcomed the increasing assertiveness of ‘emerging donors’, recognising that Western governments could no longer bear sole responsibility for financing development in the Global South nor for its political coordination (Birdsall & Fukuyama 2011, p. 53). Concerns, however, grew from 2018, as Western countries grew wary of China’s new assertiveness and launched a series of competing initiatives, including the €300 bn. EU Global Gateway Initiative (2021–2027)⁷ and the \$600 bn. G-7 Partnership for Global Investment and Infrastructure (2022–2027).⁸

In retrospect, 2013 represented an important critical juncture in the rise of development heterodoxy. In November 2012, Xi Jinping replaced Hu Jintao as paramount leader of the Peoples Republic of China, and he quickly transformed key aspects of Chinese foreign policy from 2013, including international development policy. All aid-providing countries, to varying degrees, treat international development policy as a component of their foreign policy, and under Xi, China’s international development policy has been heavily subordinated to its foreign policy. The aims of Xi’s foreign policy are largely threefold: achieving ‘national rejuvenation’; creating ‘a favourable external environment for China’s development’; and ‘increas[ing] China’s economic power and composite strength’.⁹ These three aims represent the constitutive principles of China’s international development policy under Xi. Boiling this policy down to a singular aim, Xi Jinping therefore seeks to harness it to make China more ‘powerful’ and its component parts are all directed to this central aim. In the ten years between late 2013 and late 2023, in consequence, the contours of the international development enterprise were radically transformed by Chinese foreign and international development policy. China under Xi, and in coalition with allies, established a plethora of new institutions, mechanisms and partnerships and advanced new normative frameworks, challenging development orthodoxy rooted in the liberal, rules-based, international order established at the end of World War II.

⁶ Although he disagreed with Ramo on the basis of that Consensus, suggesting debate as to its meaning and significance.

⁷ See the EU Global Gateway website, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/global-gateway_en (accessed April 2024).

⁸ See Wintour (2022).

⁹ Xi Jinping, speech to the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, 18 October 2017.



Research Approach

There is a significant and expanding literature on China's evolving international development policy, focusing on discreet elements or components, including the Belt and Road Initiative (e.g. Ferchen 2021; Custer et al 2024; Calabrese et al 2024); Chinese development finance (e.g. Hameiri & Jones 2018, 2024; Horn et al. 2021, 2023); or the activities of China's policy banks (e.g. Dreher et al. 2022; Xia and Chen 2023; Chen 2020, 2024). The aim of this article, however, is to explore China's international development policy in more holistic and macropolitical terms than captured in literature to date, and to explore its increasingly ambitious scope over the ten years between 2013 and 2023 in terms of the key institutional or organisational initiatives, speech acts and discursive claims of the Chinese government. It examines the policy commitments and political claims of the government and empirical evidence of policy outputs and impacts where these are clearly manifest.

There are also emerging literatures on policy convergence and on state capitalism, suggesting that Western and Chinese development policies are evolving in a convergent manner, for instance, in a collective focus on development finance, private sector investment and infrastructure provision (e.g. Mawdsley and Taggart 2022) or that Chinese policy is best understood in the wider context of state capitalism in the global South (e.g. Alami et al. 2021) but, in contrast, the sections below argue that Chinese international development policy is best understood in terms of an evolving and assertive Chinese exceptionalism and of geopolitical challenge to Western leadership of the liberal, rules-based international order, fuelling development orthodoxy, one that will primarily benefit countries in the global South. The article follows Callahan (2016), in eschewing offensive realism and liberal institutionalism as analytical approaches, in favour of constructivism, viewing the rise of China and its contribution to development heterodoxy in largely positive terms, especially for countries in the global South long frustrated with the disproportionate power of Western nations over their development trajectories. It explores Chinese policy between 2013 and 2023 through the trifold conceptual lens of *institutions*, *infrastructure* and *influence*, focusing on a range of documentary sources, including treaties, agreements and declarations to which China is a party, speeches by Chinese leaders, official Chinese press releases, and Chinese white papers, drawing on content analysis as a methodological approach.¹⁰ In so doing, it draws on the insight that Chinese top-level policy documents are often vague in formulation, leaving room for interpretation amid fragmentation, decentralisation and internationalisation within the domestic policy-making environment, especially that concerned with international development (Hameiri and Jones 2018, pp. 579–581).

The article seeks answers to two research questions: (1) How did China's international development policy evolve between 2013 and 2023? and (2) How can that evolving policy be best understood in practical and conceptual terms? It argues that China's contribution to international development is: (1) more multi-faceted than typically presented and continuing to evolve at pace; (2) driving development heterodoxy and a distinct challenge to traditional Western orthodoxy, to the benefit of

¹⁰ Analysis draws on the English language version of these documents.



developing countries; and (3) framed by a complex ‘great game’ in which China simultaneously cooperates and competes with the traditionally Western-dominated development enterprise, in pursuit of its central goal of becoming more powerful (更强大). To this end, the sections below explore: (1) new multilateral institutions & the expanded BRICS alliance; (2) The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); and (3) China’s Global Community of Shared Future (GCSF) & Global Development Initiative (GDI) policies. In political terms, the analysis here explores the interface between Chinese foreign and international development policy, while, in econometric terms, it hews closer to the concept of [Other] Official Flows (OOF/OF),¹¹ rather than Official Development Assistance (ODA),¹² since China eschews the traditional Western focus on ODA,¹³ and OFs constitute the bulk of China’s development financing.¹⁴ In conclusion, it argues that the concept of competitive cooperation (or the ‘great game’) offers a useful means of conceptualising China’s evolving international development policy and its contribution to increasing development heterodoxy.

China’s International Development Policy to 2013

China has provided foreign assistance to other countries since 1960 when Mao Tse-tung established the Foreign Economic Liaison Bureau, and in 1963, the government set out ‘guiding principles’ underpinning its novel ‘foreign aid’ policy.¹⁵ By 1973, two years after the Peoples Republic of China joined the United Nations, taking over the permanent UN Security Council seat previously occupied by the Republic of China (Taiwan), Chinese overseas aid had reached an incredible 6.92% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Chang and Halliday 2005, p. 400).¹⁶ After Mao’s death in 1976, his successors rolled back aid commitments to focus on the domestic economy. The results were astonishing: Over the quarter-century from the early 1980s, China experienced the most remarkable record of poverty–reducing economic growth in history. ‘China...’, according to Williamson,

reduced poverty from 84% in 1981 to 16% in 2005, a decline in the absolute number of the poor of 627 million. Growth in China has been staggering: real GDP has increased at an annual average rate of 9.7% over the last 30 years, even faster than occurred in other East Asian countries such as Japan and South Korea. This rapid growth, the fall of poverty and China’s remarkably quick recovery from the Great Recession are the fundamental reasons [why

¹¹ See [https://www.oecd.org/en/data/indicators/other-official-flows-oof.html#:~:text=Other%20official%20flows%20\(OOF\)%20are,development%20assistance%20\(ODA\)%20criteria](https://www.oecd.org/en/data/indicators/other-official-flows-oof.html#:~:text=Other%20official%20flows%20(OOF)%20are,development%20assistance%20(ODA)%20criteria), accessed September 2024.

¹² See <https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/policy-issues/official-development-assistance-oda.html>, accessed September 2024.

¹³ China does not report its ODA according to the OECD definition (Hoeffler and Streck 2022, pp. 3, 7).

¹⁴ ODA accounted for 21% of Chinese development financing between 2000 and 2014, with most of the rest provided as OOF (Dreher et al 2021, p. 139).

¹⁵ ‘Eight Principles for Economic Aid and Technical Assistance’ (1963) (Renwick 2015, p. 109).

¹⁶ On Chinese aid policy under Mao, see Kim (1979) and Law (1984).



other countries are] impressed with the development record of China (Williamson 2012, p. 4).

From 2000, however, focus on the domestic economy was balanced by renewed commitment to international development under Jiang Zemin's new 'Going Out' [into the world] foreign policy thrust.¹⁷ In 2000, for instance, China established the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (中非合作論壇) and a new China International Search and Rescue Team (CISART, 中國國際搜救隊), and launched the BeiDou global Navigation Satellite System (NSS)(北斗全球衛星導航系統), with three initial satellites, an initiative of significant developmental significance since it offered better digital and mobile connectivity to countries in the Global South, enhancing opportunities for economic and social development. Other initiatives were more reactive. In 2006, for instance, China successfully campaigned to get a Chinese national, Margaret Chan, elected to head the World Health Organisation (WHO), after it had been 'humiliated' by the WHO's response to a SARS outbreak in China in late 2002 (Calvert and Arbuthnott 2021).

The December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami proved another critical event, with China providing over \$100 m in humanitarian aid, its largest response to date to a natural disaster overseas.¹⁸ The Chinese government, however, was shocked by both the scale of the disaster,¹⁹ and the response of DAC-OECD members and western publics,²⁰ with Australian, British and American warships intervening, exposing the limits of Chinese power in its own backyard and at a time when it was asserting territorial claims in the area (Koga 2022, pp. 58–63). In 2009, in partial response, and at Chinese initiative, Brazil, Russia, India and China established the BRIC alliance (金磚四國) to promote solidarity among leading Global South powers (with South Africa joining in 2010, leading to the modified acronym, BRICS (金磚國家)).²¹ By the middle of the 2000s, China had also become an important provider of development finance to other developing countries, including 'loans, credits, and debt-write offs, with special trade arrangements and commercial investments' (Woods 2008, p. 1205). Western states fought hard to maintain their vision of a unipolar world, and to contain China, limiting the voting power of BRICS states in the Bank and Fund, for instance, and continuing to exclude BRICS nationals from the top jobs in each. The antipathy, however, worked both ways, with China refusing to join the OECD and its DAC, due in part to the latter's tough rules, including the reporting of ODA (Yunnan 2024).²²

¹⁷ The 'Going Out' (外出) strategy was announced by Jiang in 1998 at the Second Plenary Session of the Fifteenth Central Committee (1997–2002) in the wake of the Asian financial crisis.

¹⁸ See http://www.china.org.cn/english/features/tsunami_relief/116623.htm, accessed August 2024.

¹⁹ One of the deadliest natural disasters in contemporary history, it killed approximately 275,000 people in fourteen countries in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea, mostly in Indonesia, Thailand and Sri Lanka (TEC 2005).

²⁰ Over \$14bn in total was raised for tsunami relief to affected countries (Flint and Goyder 2006, p. 7).

²¹ The acronym 'BRIC' derived from a research paper by the British economist Jim O'Neill which argued for a greater role for all four countries in the institutions of global governance (O'Neill 2001).

²² China, however, has been an OECD 'Key Partner' since 2007, alongside others BRICS members Brazil, India and South Africa. Even if China wished to join, it would face opposition from other members.



Chinese Development Policy 2013–2023: Institutions

Long frustrated by China's relative marginalisation, Xi Jinping moved quickly and decisively to establish a slew of new Chinese-centric multilateral institutions. At the Fifth BRICS Summit in March 2013, member-states, led by China, committed to establishing the New Development Bank (NDB, 新開發銀行) and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA, 緊急儲備安排),²³ while seven months later, on a state visit to Indonesia, Xi announced another, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB, 亞洲基礎建設投資銀行). By mid-2015, plans to establish all three were formalised in treaty or agreement form,²⁴ and by 2016, both the NDB and AIIB had commenced operations while the operational modalities of the CRA were confirmed. The establishment of all three represented a deliberate Chinese strategy of duplicating existing multilateral institutions perceived by China as Western-dominated and resistant to reform, and of increasing the collective strength and bargaining power of leading nations in the Global South, especially China. The NDB and CRA, for instance, serve as both rivals and complements to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, respectively,²⁵ while the AIIB duplicates functions of both the World Bank and Asian Development Bank. Similarly, while the Bank and Fund are based in Washington DC, reflecting the central US role in their establishment and on-going activities, the NDB and AIIB are based in China (the AIIB in Beijing, the NDB in Shanghai), reflecting the centrality of both to China's foreign and international development policy. The AIIB is the most successful of the three initiatives, and the world's second largest multilateral development institution, behind the World Bank (Zhao 2023, p. 249), and by 2024, had 96 full members and 13 prospective members, with US\$54.15bn. committed to date to 280 projects.²⁶ By 2024, the New Development Bank had eight members, with US\$34.8bn committed to 96 projects,²⁷ while the CRA, a mechanism for monetary cooperation among BRICS members, had over US\$100bn. in working capital to support them in times of monetary crisis.²⁸ To date, the AIIB, NDB and CRA have helped China and its allies to pool resources, to share risks and to cooperate with other countries that are members of the AIIB or NDB or which receive concessional finance from them.²⁹

²³ In the eThekweni Declaration and Action Plan. The establishment of the NDB was noted as a 'possibility' in the Delhi Declaration (Fourth BRICS Summit, New Delhi, March 2012), but there was no mention of the CRA in it. Plans for both crystallised quickly after Xi Jinping's accession to power.

²⁴ 'Treaty for the Establishment of a BRICS Contingent Reserve Arrangement' (July 2014); 'Agreement on the New Development Bank' (July 2014); and 'AIIB: Memorandum of Understanding' (October 2024) and 'Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank: Articles of Agreement' (May 2015).

²⁵ The NDB provides project-based development financing on concessional terms while the CRA provides for a collective BRICS response where one or more members face a monetary crisis.

²⁶ AIIB website, FAQs section, <https://www.aiib.org/en/general/faq/index.html>, accessed September 2024.

²⁷ NDB website, projects section, <https://www.ndb.int/projects/>, accessed September 2024.

²⁸ As provided for in Article 2 of the Treaty Establishing the BRICS Contingent Reserve Agreement, July 2014.

²⁹ Membership of the CRA is currently limited to the five BRICS countries.



This projection of soft power is enhanced by the BRICS alliance, used by its members to challenge Western development orthodoxy and the concept of a unipolar world. The key elements of this challenge were evident before Xi Jinping's ascent to power in 2012. At the Third BRICS Summit in April 2011, for instance, members called for reform of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (as well as the UN Security Council) and drew an implicit distinction between economic globalisation and (political) multipolarity.³⁰ At the Fourth, in March 2012, members went further, calling for 'Strengthened representation of emerging and developing countries in the institutions of global governance', making more detailed requests for reform of both the Bank and Fund, including a new 'open and merit-based' process to select the head of each.³¹

BRICS became central to Xi Jinping's ambitions, but like the NDB, CRA and AIIB, was merely a component part. In a speech in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, on 7 September 2013, he announced a radical new initiative, the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB, 絲路經濟帶), designed to link China to the nations of Central Asia through policy coordination, improved road connectivity, trade facilitation, and enhanced monetary cooperation.³² This SREB became the basis of the 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR (or 1B1R) (一帶一路) initiative, and, later, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, 一帶一路倡議) (explored further in section "[Chinese Development Policy 2013–2023: Institutions](#)", below). Four years later, in 2018, Xi strengthened China's role as a bilateral donor, establishing a new China International Development Cooperation Agency (中國國際發展合作署) (known within China as the National Agency for International Development Cooperation (國家國際開發與署),³³ reporting directly to the State Council, and replacing the less influential Department of Foreign Aid of the Ministry of Commerce (商務部援外司).

As these initiatives suggest, China's international development policy was growing more assertive and the BRICS alliance became a vehicle to demonstrate this, the 2013 and 2014 summits representing a watershed as BRICS members became more critical of the Western-dominated development enterprise.³⁴ In addition to the NDB and CRA, new subsidiary mechanisms and coordinating groups were established, including a BRICS Statistical Service,³⁵ and regularised meetings of BRICS Finance Ministers, Central Bank Governors, National Security Advisors and functional cabinet members (including Trade, Agriculture, Health, Education, and Science & Technology). In a speech to the UN General Assembly (UNGA) on 28 September 2015, Xi Jinping signalled the direction of travel here, asserting China's role as a leading global power in the context of 'a multipolar world' and its commitment

³⁰ Sanya Declaration and Action Plan, Third BRICS Summit, April 2011.

³¹ Delhi Declaration and Action Plan, Fourth BRICS Summit, March 2012.

³² 'President Xi Jinping Delivers Important Speech and Proposes to Build a Silk Economic Belt with Central Asian Republics', Astana, Kazakhstan, 7 September 2013, <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/p/1849.html>, accessed September 2024.

³³ See <http://en.cidca.gov.cn/>, accessed September 2024.

³⁴ The Declaration and Action Plan from the Fifth BRICS Summit (2014), for instance, critically appraises the main international organisations tasked with promoting international development.

³⁵ Since responsible for the annual BRICS Joint Statistical Publication.



to ‘global development’, while challenging ‘the outdated mindset’ of ‘unilateralism’.³⁶ BRICS was central to these aims, and China devoted significant diplomatic resources to attracting new members,³⁷ often in the face of opposition from other members, especially India (Cotterill et al 2023). In 2023, these efforts came to fruition at the Fifteenth BRICS Summit in South Africa, where, following negotiations with each, leaders invited six nations to join the alliance: Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (Kynge 2023). Expansion was intended to provide a more effective counterweight to the Western-dominated G-7 and bolster the influence of the expanded BRICS within the G-20, with the anticipated eleven-member group accounting for 47% of the world’s population, 37% of its GDP (measured in purchasing power parity terms) and most of the world’s oil and gas reserves (Ibid). A new nine-member BRICS alliance was launched on 1 January 2024 (after Argentina pulled out and Saudi Arabia delayed a decision), its new members seeking greater investment and trade opportunities, greater diplomatic heft in international fora and a greater pooling of risk in a context of global economic and political instability.

Chinese Development Policy 2013–2023: Infrastructure

Xi Jinping’s Astana speech in 2013 represented a landmark in the evolution of development heterodoxy and China’s commitment to infrastructure has become an important element of its approach to international development. Described as a ‘flagship...global infrastructure initiative’ and ‘the biggest multilateral development project ever undertaken by a single country’ (Leahy et al 2023), the BRI seeks to build the physical infrastructure that connects China to the countries of the Eurasian land mass and beyond through road, rail and maritime connections, and to lock China into global networks that support its continued economic growth, enhance its security and help develop its aspirations to be the world’s leading superpower. The scheme announced in Xi’s Astana speech focused on land-based infrastructural connectivity between China and Central Asia, but it quickly grew in ambition from 2013. By 2023, according to the Chinese government, it had become a framework ‘comprising six corridors, six routes and multiple countries and ports, a multitiered and multidimensional infrastructure network’ (SCIO-PRC 2023b, p. 15) (See Fig. 1 below).³⁸

³⁶ United Nations, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2015/09/510192>, accessed September 2024.

³⁷ To facilitate their membership, for instance, China negotiated a remarkable diplomatic rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran (Hille 2023).

³⁸ The six corridors are: (1) the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (EC); (2) New Eurasian Land Bridge; (3) China-Indochina Peninsula EC; (4) China-Mongolia-Russia EC; (5) China-Central Asia-West Asia EC; and (6) Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar EC; while the six routes are: (1) the Silk Road Maritime network; (2) Air Silk Road; (3) China–Europe Railway Express; (4) China–Europe Land-Sea Express; (5) the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor; and (6) Lianyungang-Khorgos New Eurasian Land-Sea Expressway. The BRI also includes ‘multiple countries and ports’ away from the Eurasian landmass in Africa, Latin America and the Pacific Ocean.



The scheme involves enormous sums of money, with an estimated \$1 trillion invested in 3000 projects between 2013 and 2023 (Leahy et al 2023). While coy about the costs, the Chinese government has been more forthcoming about the BRI's benefits, including enhanced trade and investment, its putative *raison d'être*:

From 2013 to 2022, the cumulative value of imports and exports between China and BRI partner countries reached US\$19.1 trillion, with an average growth rate of 6.4 percent. The cumulative investment between China and partner countries reached US\$380 billion, including US\$240 billion from China (SCIO-PRC 2023b, p. 20).

But as well as a driver of trade, the BRI is also, according to the Chinese government, an explicit challenge to development orthodoxy: 'The BRI is a Chinese solution to global development issues', it argues, in a context where 'Certain countries have practised unilateralism, protectionism and hegemonism' and where 'It is no longer acceptable that only a few countries dominate world economic development, control economic rules and enjoy development fruits' (Ibid: 4–5). In *realpolitik* terms, the BRI has also enabled China to become the world's leading provider of infrastructure finance: According to Fukuyama et al., 'Chinese infrastructure finance has gone from about 25% of total spending by international development institutions in 2002 to nearly 75% in 2016', meeting a vital demand for finance in a context where Western institutions are unable to meet it 'on a timely and cost-effective basis' (Fukuyama et al 2020, p. 244). As a result of infrastructure spending on this scale, China has become the single largest provider of official (bilateral) development financing during the course of the twenty-first century (Table 1, below), providing it with a tangible and significant source of soft power.

Inevitably, China's enhanced role and spending have led to controversy, with critics outside China accusing it of debt-trap diplomacy,³⁹ of promoting 'tied aid',⁴⁰ of onerous political conditionality,⁴¹ and of fostering 'new colonialism',⁴² while critics within China have accused it of misallocating scarce resources.⁴³ Similarly, China's BRI promotes push-back from other countries, including ostensible allies seeking to constrain China's larger ambitions. While Indonesia, for instance, accepted BRI funding to build a \$7.3bn. high-speed rail-link between Jakarta and Bandung (officially opened in 2023), BRICS member India has rejected Chinese funding for its first high-speed rail-link, currently under construction between Mumbai and Ahmedabad, opting instead for Japanese funding. Despite these setbacks, however,

³⁹ Whereby reckless lending by Chinese state banks leads to unsustainable debts in partner countries which are then forced to make political concessions (Kynge 2018).

⁴⁰ Whereby partner countries are required to use Chinese contractors and suppliers (See, for instance, Dreher et al. 2021, p. 140).

⁴¹ Especially that recipients of Chinese support must support the 'One China' policy and not support Taiwan's independence claim (Hoeffler and Streck 2022).

⁴² Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed, for instance, accused the Chinese of 'new colonialism' in 2018, and later cancelled BRI contracts worth \$23bn which had previously been suspended (Mitchell 2018).

⁴³ Tsinghua Professor Xu Zhangrun, for instance, has criticised the 'empty grand gestures and wasteful international largesse' of the BRI (Ibid).





Fig. 1 The belt and road initiative. Source: Kyngé 2018

China is using its mammoth infrastructure spending to leverage political capital, especially through the BRI Forum for International Cooperation (「一帶一路」國際合作論), a new Chinese-led alliance of BRI partners,⁴⁴ established in 2017 and designed to forge BRI-related cooperation agreements, elicit funding pledges and to coordinate macroeconomic policy. To date, the Forum has met in Beijing in 2017, 2019, and 2023,⁴⁵ with the third its largest to date, despite falling Chinese BRI investment and a consequential focus on smaller, higher-quality, investments (Hawkins 2023).

Chinese Development Policy 2013–2023: Influence

A third important component in China's evolving approach to international development is *influence*, the building of China's diplomatic clout and political muscle within important global development fora such as the United Nations and over systemic global initiatives such as the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.⁴⁶ It also includes the strategic placement of Chinese officials in important international organisations and the nurturing of scholars who can articulate plausible development narratives that challenge traditional orthodoxies. The key component of this strategy under Xi has been the promotion of novel foreign policy narratives, with China's commitment to international development to the fore. In a speech to the UNGA on 28 September 2015, Xi launched a new foreign policy initiative,

⁴⁴ See <http://www.beltandroadforum.org/english/> accessed September 2024.

⁴⁵ See <https://www.beltandroadsummit.com/conference/bnr/en>, accessed September 2024.

⁴⁶ See <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>, accessed September 2024.



Table 1 Development partner official financing (OF) (2000–2021)

Country	OF (US\$ bn.)	No of Projects
China	1,436.56	17,957
United States	674.08	695,813
France	223.23	208,900
United Kingdom	219.66	147,861
Russia	4.87	356

Source Data extracted from Custer et al. (2024, p. 7)

the 'Community of Shared Future for Mankind' (CSFM, 人類命運共同體), with 'global development' one of its core objectives. 'China', he said,

will continue to contribute to global development. We will continue to pursue common development and the win-win strategy of opening up. We are ready to share our development experience and opportunities with other countries and welcome them to board China's express train of development (Xi 2015).

China, Xi made clear, sought a greater role in the formulation and implementation of international development programmes such as the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and asked UN members to support 'a new vision' of partnership that rejected 'unilateralism' and replaced it with 'multilateralism' (Ibid).⁴⁷ China, he implied, would provide this 'new vision', a message reinforced in BRICS summits, BRI Forums, and other international fora in which China exerted influence.

The CFMSM was complemented by a white paper on China's 'international development cooperation' published in January 2021. China, it argued, was committed to 'South-South' cooperation, in contrast to the traditional 'North-South' dynamic of the western-led development enterprise, although based on a mix of approaches, including humanitarian aid, technical support, debt relief, and commitment to poverty reduction, food security, social safety nets, health care, education provision and gender equality, a policy mix traditionally associated with the latter (SCIO-PRC 2021). It was also distinct in placing the BRI at its core,⁴⁸ and in its focus on 'tripartite cooperation' between China, 'developed countries' and 'international organisations'.⁴⁹ 'China', it argued,

has accumulated a lot of experience in the process of its own development, while developed countries and international organisations have an edge in capital and technology. China is ready to explore cooperation approaches with other parties that will complement the strengths of each other and achieve greater synergy so as to bring the maximum benefits to recipient countries.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Here, Xi seems to object to the effective veto the US wields within both the Bank and the Fund, and to contrast it with the more plural and inclusive arrangements of the UN General Assembly and Security Council.

⁴⁸ See SCIO-PRC (2021, Section III).

⁴⁹ See Ibid, Section VII.

⁵⁰ Ibid.



The language here is clear: China claims to be the leading actor in the heterodox development enterprise, a new, and muscular, counterpart to the ‘developed countries’ and ‘international organisations’ that have traditionally dominated the more established variant.

By late 2021, the CSFM was fleshed out and expanded through three subsidiary components, concerned, respectively, with global security, global civilization and global development. Addressing the final and, to date, the most important of these, Xi announced a new Global Development Initiative (GDI, 全球發展倡議) in a UNGA speech on 21 September 2021, setting out a novel set of principles underlying China’s evolving international development policy, and seeking buy-in from other countries, especially in the global South, for China’s challenge to Western development orthodoxy. ‘We need to foster global development partnerships’, Xi argued, ‘that are more equal and balanced, forge greater synergy among multilateral development cooperation processes and speed up the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’ (Xi 2021; GDI 2021).

In late 2023, the Chinese State Council issued two additional white papers, reflecting further iterations of Chinese policy at pace. The first, published in September, replaced the ‘Community of Shared Future for Mankind’ initiative with a new, more assertive, ‘Global Community of Shared Future’ (GCSF, 全球命運共同體) paradigm, setting out ‘a Chinese plan for improving global governance and a Chinese proposal to address various challenges in the twenty-first century’, based on ‘China’s wisdom in handling contemporary international relations from the perspective of world peace and development’ (SCIO-PRC2023a, p. 15). In a long charge-sheet, it criticises ‘certain Western countries’ for, *inter alia*, ‘the old path of colonialism and hegemonism’, ‘protectionism’, ‘bloc politics’, ‘cliques’, ‘unilateralism’, ‘selective multilateralism’, and Western attempts at ‘de-sinicization’ (i.e. obstructing the rise of China). It called instead for ‘multipolarity’ and ‘economic globalisation’, built on ‘the principles of mutual respect’, ‘mutually beneficial cooperation’ and the ‘internationalisation of the Renminbi’ (the Chinese currency)(code for the dedollarization of the world economy and the replacement of the IMF as the world’s apex monetary authority) (Ibid:16–17). Linking the new narrative to the 2021 GDI, the GCSF white paper argues that:

The fundamental aim of the [GDI] is to accelerate implementation of the UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Its core requirement is a people-centred approach, its foremost philosophy is united, equal, balanced, and inclusive global development partnerships, and its pivotal measure entails results-oriented actions to bolster stronger, greener, and healthier global development and jointly build a global community of development (Ibid: 24).

The white paper argues that China ‘leads the reform of the global governance system’ and that ‘the international community should work together to turn the grand blueprint [that it represents] into a roadmap...step by step’ (SCIO-PRC 2023a, pp. 19, 15). Chinese foreign and international development policy, it claims, substantiates ‘China’s sense of duty as a responsible major country’ (7), directly addressing Western fears in asserting that it will ‘never seek hegemony or engage in expansion’ (Ibid: 7 & 17). A second white paper, published in October 2023, focuses on the



role of the BRI as a component of the GCSF policy and an illustration of its aims, arguing that the BRI '...targets development not only for China but for the world at large' and '...dovetails with the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in concept, measures and goals' (SCIO-PRC 2023b, pp. 4–5). The BRI, it argues, '...has become the world's largest platform for international cooperation' (Ibid: 13), reiterating the basis for China's claim to leadership of the international development enterprise.

While these white papers make grand claims, embellished with no small measure of rhetorical flourish, the work of Chinese academics and development practitioners has added some intellectual heft. Former World Bank officials Justin Yifu Lin and Yan Wang,⁵¹ for instance, set out the Chinese approach to international development in substantive terms, eschewing the traditional focus on aid flows (or official development assistance), as well as assertions of a distinct 'Beijing Consensus', in favour of a more structural and state-centric approach to tackling macroeconomic bottlenecks. Advocating a New Structural Economics in opposition to the neo-classical economics underpinning both the Washington and Post-Washington Consensus, they explore substantive means by which developing countries can promote structural transformation, building on comparative advantages and economies of scale through, for instance, targeted industrial policy, the improved management of reform, and ahead-of-time infrastructure provision (Lin and Wang 2017).

This heft is augmented by Chinese influence over key UN organisations, often supported by senior Chinese officials placed within them. While, by convention, a US national always heads the World Bank, a British national, the UN Office for Conflict and Humanitarian Affairs, and a European, the International Monetary Fund, China has acquired significant influence over the World Health Organisation (WHO), the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), and the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA). The FAO, for instance, has been headed by Dr Qu Dongyu since August 2019, reelected to a second four-year term as Director General in July 2023 following a vigorous Chinese electoral campaign.⁵² In the case of the WHO, its Director General since 2017, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus (Ethiopia), has enjoyed the voluble support of China in twin election campaigns in 2017 and 2022, replacing Margaret Chan, who ran it 2006–2017, and has been widely criticised in the West for excessive deference to China, especially in the WHO's response to, and investigation of the origins of, Covid 19 (or SARS-nCov-2) (Calvert and Arbuthnott 2021). DESA, meanwhile, has been headed by a Chinese national, Li Junhua, since 2007, while, overall, five of the UN's top 40 entities were run by Chinese nationals at various points between 2015 and 2022 (Baumann et al. 2022, p. 14).

Ultimately, this policy heft buys support and compliance from beneficiary countries for Chinese foreign policy positions in key international fora. In October 2022, for instance, the UN Human Rights Council voted 19–17 against considering a report by Michelle Bachelet, the outgoing UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, on

⁵¹ Lin is former World Bank Chief Economist.

⁵² See <https://www.fao.org/director-general/biography/en#:~:text=Dr.,term%20on%20%20July%202023>, accessed September 2024.



the human rights situation in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in China, with Western countries (predominantly) voting in favour and global South countries, most of them beneficiaries of Chinese aid since 2013, voting against. Among them was Indonesia, a country with a recent history of human rights advocacy, just months before the opening of a BRI-funded high-speed rail-link in the country (see section “[Chinese Development Policy 2013–2023: Infrastructure](#)” above). The vote represented a landmark in China’s mobilisation of support behind its foreign policy and in defeating a UN initiative to scrutinise its human rights record, a harbinger of China’s rising power.

Conclusion: The ‘Power to Shape’

What unites or explains the disparate elements of China’s evolving approach to international development under Xi Jinping? In the ‘Great Game’, the British and Russian empires manoeuvred for influence over Afghanistan and the neighbouring states of central and southern Asia for most of the nineteenth century. Both Britain and Russia, leading global powers of the age, competed and cooperated with each other as they jostled for the support of local potentates, with miscalculations on both sides a key dynamic (Fromkin 1979). The analysis here explores a more contemporary ‘great game’, amidst China’s commitment to ‘national rejuvenation’ and to becoming the world’s leading superpower, focusing on the contributory role of its international development policies. The original ‘Great Game’ involved a stand-off, often violent, between (democratic) Britain and (autocratic) Russia, and that explored here involves a similar stand-off, as yet barely a few decades in the making, and peaceful in nature, pitting the democratic West against a China widely perceived by it to be both autocratic and with intentions that are difficult to predict or foretell.

Viewed holistically, the components of China’s international development policy under Xi Jinping, explored here through the conceptual trinity of institutions, infrastructure and influence, represent a key feature of Xi’ foreign policy and a radical, substantive and ambitious challenge to Western-centric development orthodoxy. This challenge comes in the form of novel institutional arrangements such as the New Development Bank, the Contingent Reserve Arrangement and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank; in an infrastructural initiative of enormous geopolitical import, the Belt and Road Initiative; and in increasingly assertive discursive claims such as those in its Global Community of Shared Future and Global Development Initiative white papers. China, as argued above, now asserts a leading role, indeed *the* leading role, in the reframing and delivery of international cooperation to support countries in the global South. It does so from a position of evident strength, with China now the main provider of official (bilateral) development finance in the form of grants and loans to countries in the global South (Dreher et al 2021, p. 135), and ‘the second largest contributor to the UN regular budget’ (SCIO-PRC 2023a, p. 29). Financial fire-power of this size buys diplomatic support, evident, for instance, in the UN Human Rights Council vote in 2022 noted above, a landmark victory for Chinese diplomacy.



China's international development policy under Xi Jinping has become an important political lever and a significant driver of global change, giving it, ultimately, as Xi claims, 'the power to shape'. 'China', Xi argued in 2017,

champions the development of a 'community with a shared future for mankind' and has encouraged the evolution of the global governance system. With this we have seen a further rise in China's international influence, ability to inspire, and power to shape; and China has made great new contributions to global peace and development (Xi 2017).⁵³

The discursive claim here and those throughout the GDI and GCSF serve clear functions domestically and abroad. Domestically, they help to coordinate and harmonise a hitherto 'fragmented, poorly coordinated [international development] governance domain' (Hameiri and Jones 2018, p. 579) in which government departments, state-owned enterprises, policy banks and private companies compete with each other or duplicate activities in the absence of policy direction from above. Internationally, they help to rally global South governments estranged by Western neoliberal conditionality, securing support for Chinese foreign policy positions and providing countries with opportunities to pool risks and hedge bets.

This assertiveness, in turn, has contributed to a distinct 'great game' redux in which China seeks both to cooperate and compete with the West to shape and influence change in the global South. Like British policy towards Russia in the nineteenth century, however, Western policy towards China in the twenty-first century is complicated by the difficulty of discerning China's ultimate motives, and in interpreting relatively vague and ambiguous assertions in its official policy pronouncements. Certain realities, however, seem evident. The rise of China benefits countries in the global South both economically and politically: economically, they benefit from enhanced trade and investment opportunities, band-wagoning on the strength of the Chinese economy, while politically, they benefit from the opportunities to stand up to the putatively neo-colonial and neoliberal West and to hedge their bets on the future of global order, riding the wave of China's new foreign policy heft. The economic benefits seem evident. 'Chinese development projects', according to one recent study, 'boost short-term economic growth in recipient countries...by increasing investment and—to a lesser extent—consumption', with growth rates typically increasing by 0.41 to 1.49% 2 years after financial commitment (Dreher et al 2021, pp. 138, 166). The political benefits, especially in terms of risk-pooling and collective action, also seem evident, with four new countries (Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and UAE) joining the expanded BRICS alliance in January 2024, and more countries applying to join.

For G-7 countries, the rise of China both augments resource flows to developing countries and helps to share the burden of political coordination traditionally borne by the West. But it also promotes tension and unease, given a perceived gap between the rhetoric and reality of Chinese foreign and international development policy, and the gap between its authoritarian rule at home and demands for 'multi-polarity' and

⁵³ Within-quote italics added. The 'community with a shared future for mankind' policy thrust was replaced by the 'Global Community of Shared Future' initiative (see above).



‘inclusive’ partnership abroad. The expanded BRICS alliance also consolidates a divide within both the UN and G-20, between democracies and autocracies, with the more democratic members (Brazil, India and South Africa) hedging their bets between alliance with the West and East and manoeuvring to become an intermediary force between them. Western countries have embraced the rise of China, joining and contributing operating capital, for instance, to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank,⁵⁴ but have also pushed back against the evident powerplays in China’s BRI (in particular), including through the EU Global Gateway Initiative (GII) and the G-7 Partnership for Global Investment and Infrastructure (PGII) (See above).

China’s evolving approach to international development fuels development heterodoxy and reframes development discourse. In the immediate term, the consequences are largely positive, as China and the West assume joint and coordinated leadership of the development enterprise and inter-mix their respective approaches, as in the West’s new-found commitment to infrastructure investment or China’s continued reliance on the US dollar in the operations of the New Development Bank and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. China’s policy will continue to evolve. Over the next five to ten years, for instance, China may succeed in launching a gold-backed BRICS currency that challenges the role of the US dollar as the world’s reserve currency, in displacing the IMF as the world’s apex monetary authority, in using the expanded BRICS to challenge the influence of the G-7 countries within the G-20, or in leveraging its Global Community of Shared Future and Global Development Initiative policies to influence the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development or, more significantly, the negotiation of its replacement from the late 2020s. For the most part, these developments will be welcomed by most global South governments, helping them potentially to escape from a model of dependent development and shift to one of diversified dependence in which they acquire more power, not least to balance the rising power of China and the established power of the West through emergent development heterodoxy. In the ‘Great Game’ of the nineteenth century, historians later appreciated, British fears of a Russian attack on British rule in India ultimately proved unfounded (Fromkin 1979). Perhaps China, in the case of its international development policy at least, will prove less threatening to the West than more sceptical commentators expect, with investment-hungry and infrastructure-deficient developing countries primarily the biggest winners.

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⁵⁴ While neither the US nor Japan is a member, most members of the DAC-OECD have joined, including France, Germany and the United Kingdom (see <https://www.aiib.org/en/about-aiib/governance/members-of-bank/index.html>, accessed September 2024).



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