

Western critics of China's foreign aid programmes would do well to think instead of panicking, writes Liang Wang

Aid, not bait

China is extending its influence in Africa, and the whole west is in a state of panic. To many, the tipping point was the November 2006 Beijing Summit of the Forum on China and Africa Co-operation, with 48 African countries attending. That marked a tangible Chinese threat to the centuries-long western dominance in the African continent. Even worse, China's economic, political and cultural influence seemed to have parachuted on Africa overnight, taking the west by total surprise.

Among China's various activities in Africa, its foreign assistance programme seems to be the most controversial and has drawn the most attention. Critics of Chinese aid generally advocate three propositions. First, Chinese aid to Africa is driven by Beijing's own narrow political and economic interests – such as the isolation of Taiwan and access to natural resources and markets.

Second, Chinese aid, with no conditionality, does not promote

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sustainable development. Rather, it is often used to fund controversial projects like hydro-power dams, and to sustain corrupt and authoritarian regimes – such as those in Sudan and Zimbabwe. Third, Beijing's no-strings-attached aid undermines western donors' development efforts.

The editor of *Foreign Policy* magazine, Moises Naim, wrote recently about a case in Nigeria where Chinese aid out-competed a World Bank loan package for the reconstruction of the Nigerian railway system. It labelled Chinese assistance "rogue aid".

As a consequence, China's aid flow is being closely monitored not only by foreign policy analysts, but by the international development community as well. The presidents of the World Bank and the European Investment Bank have openly expressed their concerns over Chinese foreign assistance.

All these criticisms are based on

legitimate concerns, but the one-sided, negative rhetoric misses some key points about Chinese aid to Africa and its implications. This unbalanced view potentially confuses people's judgment, and is squeezing the space for the Chinese to respond positively to western pressure. A more thorough and balanced understanding needs a counternarrative which, thus far, has been absent in public discourse. The following views are presented to fill that gap, not necessarily to justify China's behaviour in Africa.

First, every country's aid programmes are naturally tailored to its own foreign policy objectives. During the cold war, the US provided large amounts of "development" assistance to Mobutu Sese Seko's regime in Zaire, for strategic purposes. Today, as the US Agency for International Development is coming more and more under the control of the State Department, its biggest aid recipients are countries of current strategic importance, including Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and Egypt.

Looking at it in this light, China is simply repeating what the US did 30 years ago. That, of course, does not justify China's behaviour. But criticising China for using foreign aid to pursue its own foreign policy and economic agenda is just as hypocritical as Beijing constantly describing its aid as "sincere and altruistic".

Second, with no strings attached, Chinese aid apparently operates differently from the western assistance model. But it would be premature to conclude that Chinese aid is not promoting sustainable development. In the mainstream western development model, "conditionality" is imposed to make sure the aid recipient countries follow what the west defines as the best practice for promoting broad-based sustainable development. Yet, that model is not without its detractors. In fact, some veteran World Bank economists are the most vocal challengers of this model.

Admittedly, Chinese aid may not be an alternative model of best practice. Yet, to many, its focus on infrastructure-building – and the flexibility it grants to recipient countries – are instrumental to their growth. So it's not a solid argument to say that Chinese aid doesn't help development simply because it doesn't follow the western model.

Third, it is legitimate for western donors to be concerned about the potential competition caused by China's aid. To defuse that tension, western donors should effectively engage their Chinese counterparts. As several recent cases – such as the Nigerian railway project – have shown, Chinese aid challenges western

donors by creating "unfair" market competitions: providing aid recipients with an alternative, and often more attractive, choice. As one employee of an international development group told me, "once China starts moving more of its large foreign reserves into development aid, such competition [will] inevitably take off, and western donors are doomed to lose".

To avoid such unhealthy competition, effective engagement with the Chinese aid programme is highly necessary. So far, this engagement has largely been preliminary and ineffective.

In the short term, western donors should adopt a realistic agenda, starting with basic information-sharing. This is no easy task: for political and historical reasons, China's overall foreign assistance remains opaque. Operational communication and co-ordination between western donors and China is

essential to avoid harmful competition.

In the long run, only engagement can direct Chinese assistance towards a much healthier path of development. China is not yet a full-fledged donor. It does not have a ministerial-level aid agency.

Even though Beijing is unlikely to adopt western aid criteria any time soon, as it becomes more aware of the impact of its foreign assistance, it may feel more obliged to open to co-ordination – if not co-operation or harmonisation – with western donors.

It is high time for western donors to stop panicking, to understand Chinese foreign assistance in a more balanced fashion, and to take immediate action to effectively engage their Chinese counterparts.

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Tamar blues

Have you seen the Tamar exhibition? It is well worth a look, to test your own alertness to fact versus fiction. There are four large models of the new government office complex, replete with drawings and even videos, in the lobby of the Queensway Government Offices. They give the public a chance to see what the four consortia bidding for the design-and-build project have put forward.

You are asked to choose which design you like: there is a form available to fill in. Should you have questions – such as what was the design brief, and what are the costs involved – there is nothing available for you to read. So, if you want to make a choice, you are presumably going to choose based on the overall look of the models and plans.

On the day I went to see the exhibition, there were about six other people there. While looking at one of the models, I overheard one of the visitors say to her companion that she liked the long waterfront promenade. The video for that model was showing how nice the promenade would be. Indeed, the sales pitch was all about the promenade: all four models paid a lot of attention to its design. The focus on the promenade is not surprising, since the government and consortia know this was a key promise to the people of Hong Kong. They know the public wants open public space and greenery.

However, take a closer look at the models: you'll see a small explanation saying that the waterfront section is not a part of the project. That means the bids are for the design and construction of the office complex area, not the entire waterfront promenade.

No doubt there will be a promenade along the harbourfront, but it won't be based on one of these models on exhibition. We could be forgiven, however, for believing that the models represent a total design.

In each one, the office towers are massive structures. The models make another thing clear about the design brief: the office of the chief executive must be a separate building. In other words, he doesn't want to work in the same structure as other officials.

Each model shows another structure housing the chief executive office. Proportionally, he will occupy a lot of space. Some of the supporting drawings for the models show a palace-like interior. No doubt, the brief requires something large and impressive.

Whoever wrote the brief sees the position of the chief executive as exalted and emperor-like – unbefitting a modern-day politician running a mid-sized city. Then again, the whole of Tamar is excessive. Grandiose offices do not produce better governance: in fact, ostentatious facilities are seldom a positive sign of modesty and efficiency.

One more thing is obvious: the brief must have required specific security considerations. There are high walls that seem to be designed to prevent protesters from getting too close.

We do not know if the design and construction brief include specific measures to ensure that the structures will be built using resources efficiently, from sustainable sources, as far as possible; or, once built, that they will be low-level energy consumers and carbon dioxide emitters. I doubt it, just from looking at the models. There are places where materials and resources are used in a very wasteful way.

The main office buildings will house thousands of civil servants. So perhaps the brief should set out specific conditions about how the interior will have lighting and ventilation that promote productivity and workers' health.

None of the government offices that I have ever visited seem to comply with such conditions. They were unlikely to have been in the design briefs for existing government offices. It would be a crime not to ensure that the newest offices meet the highest possible environmental and health standards.

Can legislators do the public a favour, and get the full design and building brief published as soon as possible?

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Other Voices

Enlightenment values – Europe's road map with Islam

Ian Buruma

An ideology which holds that people from different cultures must live in separate communities within a country, should not take an interest in each other and must not criticise each other, is both wrong and unworkable. Of course, multiculturalism's more thoughtful advocates never imagined that a cultural community could or should substitute for a political community. They believed that so long as everyone abided by the law, it was not necessary for citizens to have a single hierarchy of values.

The Netherlands, where I was born, has perhaps been divided by the debate over multiculturalism more than any other country. The murder of the filmmaker Theo van Gogh 2½ years ago by an Islamist assassin has incited a wrenching debate about the country's entrenched culture of tolerance and easy access for asylum-seekers.

Long before the arrival of Muslim guest workers in the 1960s and 1970s, Dutch society was in a sense multicultural in that it was already organised into Protestant, Catholic, liberal and socialist "pillars" – each with its own schools, hospitals, TV stations, newspapers and political parties. When guest workers from Morocco and Turkey became de facto immigrants, some began to champion the creation of an additional Muslim pillar.

But at the moment that multiculturalism's advocates were making this suggestion, Dutch society was undergoing a dramatic transition. With secularisation taking hold, the traditional pillars began to break down.

Moreover, fierce attacks on

Muslims started to come from people who, raised in deeply religious families, had turned into radical leftists in the 1960s and 1970s. From defining themselves as anti-colonialists and anti-racists – champions of multiculturalism – they have become fervent defenders of so-called Enlightenment values against Muslim orthodoxy. These people feared the comeback of religion; that the Protestant or Catholic oppressiveness they knew first-hand might be replaced by

Fear of Islam and of immigrants in Europe could lead to the adoption of non-liberal laws

equally oppressive Muslim codes of conduct.

But their turn away from multiculturalism is not what prevented the emergence of an Islamic pillar in Dutch society. The main problem with this idea was that people from Turkey, Morocco and the Arab countries – some deeply religious and some quite secular, and all with perceptible animosities towards each other – would never have agreed on what should constitute such a pillar.

Whether Europeans like it or not, Muslims are part of Europe. Many will not abandon their religion, so Europeans must learn to live with them and with Islam. This will be easier if Muslims come to believe that the system also works to their

benefit. Liberal democracy and Islam are reconcilable. Indonesia's current political transition from dictatorship to democracy, although no unqualified success, shows that this is achievable.

Even if all of Europe's Muslims were Islamists – which is a far cry from reality – they could not threaten the continent's sovereignty and, by the same token, its laws and Enlightenment values. Of course, there are groups to which Islamism appeals. The children of immigrants, born in Europe, sense they are not fully accepted in the countries where they grew up. But neither do they feel a special bond with their parent's native country. Islamism, besides offering them an answer to the question of why they do not feel happy with the way they live, gives them a sense of their self-worth and a great cause to die for.

In the end, the only thing that can truly damage European values is the response of its non-Muslim majority. Fear of Islam and of immigrants could lead to the adoption of non-liberal laws. By defending Enlightenment values in a dogmatic way, Europeans would be the ones who undermine them.

Our laws prohibiting incitement to violence and insulting people for reasons of their religion are sufficient. Further constraints on freedom of speech – such as anti-blasphemy laws or, indeed, those laws that make Holocaust denial punishable – go too far.

But this doesn't mean that we should not weigh our words with care. We should distinguish carefully between different kinds of Islam, and not confuse violent revolutionary movements with mere religious orthodoxy. Insulting

Muslims simply on the basis of their faith is foolish and counterproductive, as is the increasingly popular notion that we must make sweeping pronouncements as to the superiority of "our culture". For such dogmatism undermines scepticism – the questioning of all views, including one's own – which was and is the fundamental feature of the Enlightenment.

The trouble today is that Enlightenment values are sometimes used in a very dogmatic way against Muslims. They have become, in fact, a form of nationalism – "our values" have been set against "their values". The reason for defending Enlightenment values is that they are based on good ideas, not because they are "our culture". To confuse culture and politics in this way is to fall into the same trap as the multiculturalists.

And it has serious consequences. If we antagonise Europe's Muslims enough, we will push more people into joining the Islamist revolution. We must do everything to encourage Europe's Muslims to become assimilated in European societies. It is our only hope.

Ian Buruma's most recent book is *A Murder in Amsterdam*. Copyright: Project Syndicate in co-operation with Dziennik in Poland



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A harbour for swimmers

Sarah Liao

In the next 10 years, to improve our water quality and protect public health, the government plans to invest almost as much money (about HK\$20 billion) in new sewerage and sewage-treatment facilities as it has in the past 20 years. As well as the capital cost, which will be borne by the government, there will be additional operating expenditures of about HK\$1.3 billion per year.

We are glad that the adoption of the polluter-pays principle has taken root in the community. The firm support expressed by members of the Legislative Council has laid the cornerstone of the package of measures needed to take our sewage services to the next level.

Legislation for the proposed increases in the sewage charge is now before Legco. The average domestic charge at the moment is HK\$11 per month. To fund the operating costs of our planned sewage services, that will have to rise to HK\$27 per month in 10 years.

This translates into a modest increase each year, over the next decade. The arrangement will provide predictable, sustainable and stable funding support to the operation of these important facilities.

Subject to the passage of the legislation, the government will seek funds for the construction of the new programme's centrepiece – the Harbour Area Treatment Scheme (Hats) Stage 2A. It will finally rectify the highly unsatisfactory situation in which hundreds of thousands of tonnes of wastewater are discharged, largely untreated, into Victoria Harbour daily.

Hats 2A will involve collecting the untreated sewage from the northern

and western shores of Hong Kong Island and transferring it through deep tunnels to Stonecutters Island for chemical treatment, before disinfection and discharge in the western anchorage area. It will cost HK\$8 billion to build and about HK\$420 million per year to operate. But, when commissioned in 2014, it will improve water quality – reducing the bacterial levels in the main harbour area by a further 90 per cent.

Then we will finally be able to resurrect the annual cross-harbour swim and hold other water-based recreational activities.

To bring about early improvements in the western harbour, we plan to advance the disinfection facilities so that they can be completed in about two years' time. That will allow early reopening of some of the closed beaches in the Tsuen Wan area. To achieve this early benefit, a technical option is to chlorinate the effluent to kill the germs, then dechlorinate it to remove any residual chlorine. The environmental impact of this is being assessed in a study: its findings will be subject to public inspection and comment under the Environmental Impact Assessment Ordinance.

Some environmental professionals have raised concerns about the potential environmental impact of chlorination. It is relevant to note, however, that chlorination is a widely used disinfection technique for treated sewage effluent. Its use continues to be adopted in many places overseas, with the appropriate dechlorination step added to remove the residual chlorine.

On the other hand, because of land zoning and the possible need for a new power sub-station, the

adoption of ultraviolet light for disinfection will take substantially longer to deliver. It can only be brought on stream at the same time that the main stage 2A works are commissioned in 2014.

A lot of people in the community would prefer not to have to wait that long to use the recreational facilities near Tsuen Wan again. And rightly so.

Some people argue that stage 2A will not be enough, and that a higher level of biological treatment (Hats stage 2B) is required. We agree, and have already begun the necessary procedures on land and related matters for planning Hats 2B. We have also made a public commitment to thoroughly review, in 2010 and 2011, how this important next step should be implemented.

As for the land required, we have identified a site close to the Stonecutters Island Sewage Treatment Works for Hats 2B: it has the potential to accommodate the treatment facilities under Hats 2B.

On the other hand, recent indications are that the city's population growth is slower than earlier forecasts, which means the consequences for water quality will be less than predicted.

This allows us more time to keep pace with technological advancements, so that the optimal biological treatment system can be adopted in the eventual Hats 2B.

During the implementation of Hats 2A, planning work for stage 2B – such as assessing the environmental impacts, site investigations and land reservation – will go full-steam ahead at the same time.

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