

GEG Memo

China in Busan: Demonstrating Power or Learning?

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The presence and participation of China in the Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness has been a major source of fear and questions. During the last Working Party on Aid Effectiveness last October, its delegates had already systematically suggested to delete all parts of the draft outcome document that did not conform to its aid principles and interests, leaving other country delegates – who were desperately trying to find suitable and consensual formulations - puzzled. In Busan, Chinese delegates left the negotiation table on Monday night (day One) on various grounds. They argued that they had taken part in the forums in Paris and Accra as an *aid-recipient* country, and that they were not ready to endorse the principles and commitments they felt DAC donors expected them to take as a *donor*. Like other big powers have done in the past, they are reluctant to make binding commitments when they do not have a clear idea of their meaning and implications. Finally, they do not want to join the evaluation and monitoring efforts constitutive of the Paris agenda on aid effectiveness.

On Tuesday morning (day 2), the atmosphere was gloomy and many feared that it might not be possible to get an outcome document after China left the negotiation table. At the end of the conference, however, China (like Brazil and India) had agreed to endorse the document and Busan subsequently was considered a “success” by its organisers. This has generated mixed feelings amongst participants. Some regret this has come at a cost. Representatives of African countries feared donor commitments were going to be downgraded in hope to get China’s agreement. During the final plenary, civil society organisations underlined that the will to get everybody (and in particular China) on board has contributed to weakened commitments concerning the respect of human rights and the promotion of “democratic

ownership”. So what can be said about China’s presence at the negotiation? I argue that controversies over China’s participation at HLF4 are reflective of the current state of aid, and that the country’s delegates may well be engaged in a process of learning - rather than abruptly demonstrating power in multilateral arenas such as the OECD.

On the one hand, rumours and controversies about China’s participation in Busan do not only reveal the country’s position in the negotiations: they also reflect the state of debates, tensions and positioning within the so-called “traditional” aid community. Firstly, they show the OECD’s willingness to integrate emerging countries in the Paris and broader aid processes. The amounts of Chinese cooperation and investments in less developed countries (in Africa, for example) are considerable, and the DAC efforts to track official development assistance are vain if they do not include Chinese aid. Also, because its members are developed countries only, some criticisms blame the organization for being a “rich club”. Jonathan Glennie (Overseas Development Institute) recently argued that that “the OECD should give up control of the aid agenda” to allow “new governance structures for aid” and “greater input from recipient countries”, needed in today’s very different world.¹ As a consequence, including emerging countries is key to enhance the legitimacy of the OECD - whose members are developed countries only – within the aid community. Finally, the will to associate China also reflects a shift in global powers at a time when traditional powers show greater fragility and when global growth and finance comes from the emerging South. Aid is not isolated from but fully impacted by these transformations. For all these reasons, the DAC has been very active at getting China on board, and the diplomatic mediation of the Republic of Korea - host of the Forum - was instrumental.

On the other hand, while there is no doubt that China has taken a strong negotiating position, it is also true that power is *relative* and built collectively. As a consequence, China’s weight increases when other actors, i.e. so-called “traditional donors” are ready to allow it and show greater doubt or fragility - in aid arenas and others. This is certainly the case of the current international paradigm despite its repeated rhetoric demonstrations of certainty, global moral commitments and self-claimed scientific evaluation of aid impacts and development results. One interviewee from the OECD/DAC ironically commented that representatives of

¹ Glennie, Jonathan. “The OECD should give up control of the aid agenda”, Posted on Friday 29 April 2011: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/global-development/poverty-matters/2011/apr/29/oecd-control-aid-agenda>

“traditional donors” both feared and enjoyed the “great thrill” created by China’s growing engagement in the aid field.

I was not present in the private negotiation arenas that could only be accessed by official delegates only. But *outside* these, there was more than Chinese officials demonstrating power. I saw them reading their speeches in an English of variable quality. I heard them repeat, again and again, the Eight Principles of cooperation – i.e. solidarity, mutual interest and benefit, equality, the respect of sovereignty and self-determination - laid out by Premier Zhou Enlai in 1964. These principles continuity hardly reflects the changing context in which Chinese cooperation operates and its evolving nature. While it was first shaped to promote proletarian internationalism in the Cold War context, it is now directed to broader goals that include the promotion of trade and exports, multilateral presence and cultural diplomacy. The situation of China was arguably comparable to that of African countries in the 1950s and 1960s, but the Third World has become so diverse that the principle of “equality” with recipients does not hold anymore, and that China is at times accused of “imperialism” just like other big powers. Finally, I saw Chinese delegates – representatives of the Ministry of Commerce - speak about aid, which they have been reluctant to do for decades, and thus slowly embracing bits of the existing international language. If, as David Ambrosetti has shown about negotiations at the United Nations², multilateralism is not only made of *Realpolitik* but of processes in which norms, interactions and socialization play a big role, then participating in the HLF4 in Busan may well have been, for Chinese representatives, about *learning* how to play the multilateral game, too.

² See : Ambrosetti, David. *Normes et rivalités diplomatiques à l'ONU. Le Conseil de sécurité en audience*, Bruxelles, P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2009. 349 p.; « Nouvelles normes, nouveaux espaces de jugement : la valeur légitimatrice de l'ONU et ses effets normatifs », in Yves Schemel et Wolf-Dieter Eberwein (dir.), *Normer le monde*, Paris: L'Harmattan, pp. 311-335 ; « Contre l'opposition 'intérêts versus normes' : rivalités interétatiques et relations de clientèle sous un prisme constructiviste », *Études internationales* , vol. 37, n° 4, décembre 2006, pp. 525-546 ; and « L'humanitaire comme norme du discours au Conseil de sécurité : une pratique légitimatrice socialement sanctionnée », *Cultures et Conflits* , n° 60, 4/2005, pp. 39-62.