

Why the Beijing Consensus is a Non-Consensus: Implications for Contemporary China-Africa Relations¹

By Max Rebol²

Abstract

When the United States emerged as the victorious nation in the Cold War the “Washington Consensus” became the only remaining credible sociopolitical model. With the financial crisis in 2008, continued African underdevelopment and China’s economic success, it lost this status again. The result is a welcome debate about a “China Model”, referring to the economic and political system that led to sustained growth in China, while many African countries continue to struggle with the effects of “structural adjustment” policies. While the term “Chinese Model” is misleading, because it implies a certain transferability of the Chinese experience, it is clear that some aspects of it are highly relevant for Africa.

This paper describes why China does not refer to a “Beijing Consensus”, and argues that this has to be seen as a good thing for African development. Especially, it questions the universality and, in a second step, the transferability that both terms imply. Rather than finding a consensus on a single model put forward, Beijing recognizes the coexistence of commonality and difference. Africa is a continent that has been told for centuries by foreign powers which model to follow. In contemporary China–Africa relations, it is therefore not the successful “China Model”, but the absence of a single “Beijing Consensus” that makes China so attractive.

Return To a Multipolarity of Ideas

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Africa’s intellectual Left was muted, and the Washington consensus appeared to be the only remaining way forward. Before entering the debate about what effect this set of policies had for African development, we have to stress the perceived lack of alternatives to it at that time. This is the main reason why the policies were adopted without much consideration about the local situation, which might require different policies than the ones that had been successful in the West. The

¹ The views in *The Culture Mandala* are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views, position or policies of the Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies. Bearing in mind the controversial debates now occurring in International Relations and East-West studies, the editors endeavour to publish a range of diverse, critical and dissenting views.

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apparent failure of communism led to a belief in the universalism of a Western model. Considering this background, political and economic reforms in Africa were well-intended and understandable. Nevertheless they failed to recognize that Africa needed some home grown policies that reflect the situation on the ground, rather than a 'one-size fits all' approach that might have worked elsewhere in the past.

At the same time, China, which has never been subject to structural adjustment programs, achieved the most significant reduction of poverty in history within two decades through a gradual opening up reform process that allowed for many experiments to test its own genuine path.³

China's success has now revived the debate in Africa about its own path of development, which had been muted by a perceived foreign consensus. Disillusion has settled upon Africa through failures of structural adjustment policies and "poverty reduction strategies"⁴ subscribed by foreign donors, but Chinese strategies bring fresh wind into the debate.

To be sure, this article does not suggest that Africa should try to imitate Chinese economic and political policies, nor does it believe that this would be feasible. Not only is there no such thing as a single "Chinese model", but even if there was one, it would only trade one evil for the other. If there is something that Africa can learn from China's experience, then it is that there actually is an alternative to conventional wisdom and that each country has to find its own path, leaning on more than one point of reference and genuinely taking into account history and local reality.

As Ndubisi Obiorah writes, 'China's emergence as a major axis of global power is welcomed among many African intellectuals who hope that it may herald a return to a global multi-polarity in which milieu Africa and the developing countries will have a greater role on the global stage than they currently do'.⁵

Multipolarity is definitely a key word in the question of how China might influence African paths of development. Not only in the terms of a multipolar approach to political issues, but also in terms of a multipolarity of ideas and the revival of a debate that had been concluded too early.

³ 金泽虎。以循环经济模式构建中国可持续发展之路。现代经济探讨 2003 年第 5 期

⁴ Jim Levinsohn. The World Bank's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper Approach: Good Marketing or Good Policy. Group of 24 research paper. Nov 2002

⁵ Ndubisi Obiorah. Who's Afraid of China in Africa. Pambazuka News. Issue 282. 14 December 2006 [http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/comment/38853]. See also Ndubisi Obiorah. Rise and Rights in China-Africa Relations. Centre for Law and Social Action. SAIS (School of Advanced International Studies). Working Papers on African Studies. Washington, DC 03. 2008

African Agency

Ironically, in the debate around African paths of development, African perspectives have often been downplayed. It has been a long standing joke that USAID, DIFID and the World Bank hold a trilateral meeting about how to increase the African participation in these issues. The debate about “ownership” has been attempted to counter this problem but has widely failed as Western donors continue to set their own agenda.

Leaning on this experience, Western debate of current China-Africa relations very much puts China in the driving seat. Common phrases include “Because China needs natural resources...”, “China holds the FOCAC...” (Forum on China-Africa Cooperation), and “In Africa, China competes with the West...” This is to say, African *agency* is frequently downplayed in the debate about its own development.

As Ndubisi Obiorah writes in a chapter, very appropriately titled “How Africa discovered China”⁶, that it was African liberation movements that actively sought assistance from China in the 1950s. So did post independence leaders Julius Nyerer of Tanzania and Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia. In an attempt to find an appropriate way of national development, they looked for models in the West, the Soviet Union as well as in China. The collapse of the Soviet Union meant that it ceased existing as a model, and African perspectives of China experienced a shift. While before, China-Africa relations were dominated by ideological considerations, with China’s post-1978 reforms and the collapse of soviet communism, Africa increasingly found business opportunities with China. The way in which these activities are realized, however, differed very much from the West. And here we enter the debate around the concept of a Chinese model.

China As an Active or a Passive Model?

China, being a developing country itself, from the African perspective creates an image that is twofold. First it is a country that has successfully avoided being forced into the neoliberal reforms of the Washington consensus, but still prospered. Second it is a country that does not try to force any other country along a certain path. Commonly, what Western scholars describe as the “Chinese Model” is a strong centralized government, state-centered development and export-led industrialization.

Also, Chinese scholars have pointed at cornerstones of the political and economic system, from which Africa can learn. Li Zhibiao, for example, points at the development of small steps, economic reforms guided by the market, continued opening up policies, strong leadership by the central party and the role of the regional

⁶ Ndubisi Obiorah. How Africa discovered China. Rise and Rights in China-Africa Relations. Centre for Law and Social Action. SAIS (School of Advanced International Studies). Working Papers on African Studies. Washington, DC 03. 2008

government.

While this is correct as such, for Africa it is only one of the two relevant sides. The other side is the fact that these economic and political variables have been developed domestically, and not adopted via a third party institution. To be sure, China has definitely been learning from other countries' experience, especially the Soviet Union, the US and notably Japan. The experiences abroad have been tried out on a very small scale at home or in special economic zones, and only then, if successful, gradually adopted domestically. In any case, the actor of this development always remained Beijing, and not a foreign institution.

Why is this separation between these two aspects so important? Some scholars like to see the Chinese model as competing with a Western one. In fact, free market reforms can be compared with state supported industrialization, so can multiparty democracy with single party rule. The debate about which one produces better results is long and ongoing. If we look however at the second aspect, that all policies of the "Chinese model" were homegrown, this creates a contradiction in terms when calling it a "model". Defining a certain set of policies as a model, presupposes their transferability. If domestic development of those policies is however a key variable within the set, this excludes defining it as a model. The only thing that is therefore left for Africa within the term "Chinese Model" is the fact that the continent has to develop its own policies, and not the actual policies that were successful in China as such.

We should also recall that Beijing has never officially used the term "Chinese Model", nor has it executed its foreign policies towards Africa in a way as if there was one. After China's opening up reforms, it has never said, "Look, this is what works for us, why don't you try it", not to mention coercing Africa into a certain direction. The term "Chinese Model" is exclusively a western creation, which tries to put China into the same category as other countries that have previously tried to gain or keep influence in Africa. (The same is true in calling China a "Donor Country" which it is not in the same way as traditional donor countries). Sometimes the term "Chinese model" is even used to describe the phenomenon of African countries increasingly their cooperation with China (e.g. in natural resources or infrastructure development) rather than trying to emulate it.

Nevertheless, the term "Chinese Model" is increasingly used, not least by African scholars. We do however have to differentiate carefully what is meant by this term. A certain set of policies can either be set or seen as a model. The most common way to use the term is a certain arrangement that is deliberately created in order to be emulated. The second way is an arrangement that has been created as an end goal, but is emulated by others because it is attractive. We could call the first case an active model, and the second a passive model, as in the second case the first actor does not influence the

process of emulation.

Using this categorization, China today clearly falls into the category of a passive model. China's path of development has the single most important goal of raising Chinese living standards. During the financial crisis of 2008 Premier Wen Jiabao's statement that "the biggest contribution that China can make to the world economy, is to ensure the steady and fast growth of our national economy"⁷ became famous. Since China's economic reforms, it has never tried to set examples in the way it creates policies or institutions. (Under Mao Zedong this was different. China actively tried to spread Maoism and supported various liberation movements, especially in developing countries. At that time China had a few followers, although overall success was limited. With Deng Xiaoping's reforms this came to an end, and China until today focuses on domestic development)

This is different from how the Western countries operated. During the Cold War, they fought an ideological war with the Soviet Union on African soil and very actively tried to spread a "Western Model". Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, being much more advanced than most of Africa, Western countries continued with the naive agenda of making "Africa more like us".

So what is left of the Chinese model in Africa? Before China's post-1978 reforms, China was about as poor as the average African country. Today, of 53 African countries only South Africa, Botswana, Mauritius, Seychelles, Libya, Algeria, Namibia and Equatorial Guinea have a higher GDP per capita.⁸ Not surprisingly, many African leaders ask which model China was perusing to achieve this outstanding record of development. This question of a China model was however created through China's domestic success, more than through what it actively did in Africa. Increasingly China was put into the role of a passive model, in a way it could be called a "side effect" of China's development, rather than an active policy.

Obviously, considering China as a model and actually emulating it, are two different things. As described above, an essential part of China's development is the fact that all policies were created domestically, rather than copied from elsewhere. Nevertheless, the fact that following the Chinese model is only possible to a very limited extent, does not mean that China is not seen as a model.

As has been pointed out, the term "Chinese Model" is often used in an unclear or even contradictory way. At this point we therefore also have to enter the debate around the term "Beijing Consensus"⁹

⁷ Wayne Morrison. China and the Global Financial crisis: Implications for the United States. Congressional Research Service. June 2009

⁸ World Bank. World Development Indicators Database. 2008

⁹ Bates Gill, Yanzhong Huang. Sources and limits of Chinese 'soft power'. *Survival*, Volume 48, Issue 2 June 2006 ,

The Beijing Consensus as a Non-Consensus

Comparable with the term “Chinese Model”, “Beijing Consensus” has also been coined by a Western scholar, in this case Goldman Sachs China advisor Joshua Cooper Ramo.¹⁰ He famously wrote in an article in 2004:

China is marking a path for other nations around the world who are trying to figure out not simply how to develop their countries, but also how to fit into the international order in a way that allows them to be truly independent, to protect their way of life and political choices in a world with a single massively powerful centre of gravity. I call this new centre and physics of power and development the Beijing Consensus.¹¹

While this makes sense as such, the term has created a lot of confusion and I argue that it should be avoided. By its name, it implies to be an alternative to the Washington Consensus, which it is not. While the term Washington Consensus was coined in 1989 by Williamson John to describe a set of recommended specific economic policies¹² which were then promoted by the IMF and World Bank, the term “Beijing Consensus” was never used by any official Chinese source.¹³ Let us not forget that Beijing does not only not use the term, but that within Chinese foreign policy there simply is no such thing that could appropriately be described as a “Beijing Consensus”.

Instead of that, there is a lively debate amongst Western scholars about what could be meant with the term, each school projecting its own reading into it. US neoconservatives often reduce it to economic growth without the constraint of political institutions.¹⁴ Others emphasize the aspects of liberal trade and finance with strong state leadership.¹⁵ Yet others point at state guided development with concern for stability.¹⁶ While all of these aspects quite accurately describe what is going on in China, the term consensus implies a certain agreement coming out of Beijing, which is not case.

Still more importantly, there is the implied parallel with Washington consensus. Even if there was a certain set of political and economic policies that accurately describes China’s current state, the Washington consensus never simply described what was

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¹⁰ Zhang L. The Rise of China: media perception and implications for international politics. *Journal of Contemporary China*, Volume 19, Issue 64 March 2010, pages 233 - 254

¹¹ Ramo, Joshua Cooper. *The Beijing Consensus: Notes on the new physics of Chinese power*. London: Foreign Affairs Policy Centre. 2004.

¹² Williamson John: *What Washington Means by Policy Reform*, in: Williamson, John (ed.): *Latin American Readjustment: How Much has Happened*, Washington: Institute for International Economics 1989.

¹³ 贺文萍。中国对非政策: 驱动力和特点。《亚非纵横》2007年第5期

¹⁴ Wortzel, Larry and Devin Stewart ‘The US Formula for China’, *Asia Times*, 9 November 2005. <www.cctr.ust.hk/articles/20051109_USformula.htm>

¹⁵ Alert Unit. *Alert 2004: Report on Conflicts, Human Rights, and Peace-Building*, School of Peace Culture. Pau, Spain: Escola de Cultura de Pau. 2004

¹⁶ Lieberthal, Kenneth ‘Why the US Malaise over China?’ *Yale Global*. 2006

going on economically and politically within the United States. While the set of policies surely were aligned with the current US position, the essence of its formulation was the promotion of these policies towards the outside world, especially developing countries. Similarly the Post-Washington consensus adjusted some of its policies but never abandoned its claim of universality. As has been stated before, China does not have the intention of promoting policies that might have been successful domestically to the outside world,¹⁷ and the term “Beijing consensus” is therefore misleading and should be avoided.

So while the term is confusing, the debate behind it is a very real one. Leaving aside for a moment the aspect of promotion towards the outside world, according to Eric Teo Chu Cheow the debate between over the Washington/Beijing consensus comes down to no less than a US-China ideological struggle between a neoliberal Anglo-Saxon and an Asian “socially orientated” approach.¹⁸ For Mark Leonard, director of foreign policy at the Centre for European Reform, the debate between the Beijing and Washington consensus is the “biggest ideological threat that the West has faced since the end of the cold war.”¹⁹

In this emotional debate, anything that happens in China that opposes American “Imperialism” is simply labeled the “Beijing Consensus”, including statements from women's organizations through to labor and union meetings in Beijing.²⁰ (Whereby as Morgenthau put it, “Imperialism” is often “indiscriminately applied to any foreign policy . . . to which the user happens to be opposed”.²¹)

There are some variables that we can know contributed significantly to China’s development, while being different to recommendations by institutions following the Washington consensus. Examples include the effectiveness of state ownership of strategic key sectors and “of the banking system, strong state control over capital allocation and powerful regulation of investment and international trade”.²² But a certain set of policies and institutions do not make a consensus.

The term “Beijing Consensus” has therefore two distinct inherent problems, but it is interesting that academia focuses much on the first one: The disagreement between different scholars for a credible definition of which set of policies compose the Beijing Consensus. The second, and much more fundamental problem however is, that even if

¹⁷ 张晓静。探索金融全球时代的发展道路：华盛共识到北京共识。学士时报 2004 年 8 月

¹⁸ Cheow, Eric Teo Chu ‘US-China Ideological Rivalry Heats Up’, Japan Times, 5 January 2006

¹⁹ Leonard, Mark ‘The Road Obscured’, FT, 9 July 2005 and Leonard Mark 2005 ‘The Geopolitics of 2026’, Economist, November 16, 2005 <www.cer.org.uk/articles/leonard_economist_16nov05.html>

²⁰ China Daily. Trade Unions Launch Beijing Consensus. 11 October 2004; No to US Unilateralism, Reaffirm Beijing Consensus: Statement of Latin American and Caribbean Women's Networks and Coalitions" 3 March 2005

²¹ Morgenthau, Hans. Politics Among Nations. New York: Knopf. 3rd ed. 1960. Page 45.

²² Guerrero, Dorothy-Grace. China’s Rise and increasing role in Asia. In: China’s new role in Africa and the South: A search for a new perspective. Manji Firoze and Guerrero Dorothy- Grace. Fahamu/ Pamazuka. 2008

this definition could be found, the term inevitably indicates a competing framework to the Washington consensus which consists of outwards-orientated policy recommendations. A policy and a policy recommendation are two inherently different things, and cannot be described with the same term.

Non- Enforcement of Values

Asked about his take on China's attraction in Africa, the Director of the UK centre of foreign policy analysis stated that:

"The phenomenal growth rates in China and the fact that hundreds of millions have been lifted out of poverty is an attractive model for Africans, and not just the elderly leadership. Young, intelligent, well-educated Africans are attracted to the Chinese model, even though Beijing is not trying to spread democracy."²³

While this statement shows a certain admiration for China's achievements, what is really interesting about it are the words "even though" that link to the last sub-entence. Western development theory has for such a long time taken democracy as such a central feature that its desirability was taken for granted, and only the question of how to achieve it continued to be debated. The pro-democratic argument is easy to make with the right of self determination. Every man and woman will prefer to have their voice heard, which should create a preference for democracy. It has, however, also been shown in numerous studies that the possibility for any party to grasp total power creates incentives to do so by illegitimate means. The discussion how valid this argument is goes beyond the scope of this paper, but the point is that the spread of ideas that are accepted in the West, are believed to be universally applicable. Democracy is one example, a liberal market and even human rights are other ones. But the question here concerns not the individual variables themselves, but rather the idea that something that is good for 'us', should also be good for someone else. This belief is so deeply embedded in the minds of many people, that it is difficult to overcome. When China now increases cooperation with Africa, some Western observers see what has been successful in China, and therefore automatically think that China will try to transfer some of these policies and institutions to Africa. Since democracy is seen as superior to China's one-party rule by many Western scholars, the statement above does not come as a surprise. The question about the superiority of either system as such is long and old and will not be discussed here. What it fails to recognize is that the popularity of China in Africa does not stem from spreading some values that are different from Western ones, *but that it does not actively spread any values at all*. Africans have been told ever since independence and before what to do and why this is good for them. Much of it might have been well-intended, but naturally always aligned to benefit Western

²³ Moorcraft Paul. Why Beijing is winning in Africa. BD 2.2.2007

interests.

Taking the example of trade liberalization, Zambia's president stated that:

"Developed countries are not prepared to discuss the issues of justice and fair play concerning the international trade and commercial sector, which imposes considerable suffering and privation on developing countries the developing world continues to subsidize consumption of the developed world, through an iniquitous trade system. The existing structure is designed to consign us to perpetual poverty and underdevelopment ... It is unrealistic to expect support, relief or respite from those who benefit from the status quo."²⁴

While this is true as such, there is also more to it. Any policy that is recommended by foreign powers always carries a certain amount of self interest within it. China recognizes this, and exactly for this reason does not tell Africa what is working at home and why.²⁵ To be sure, China is a country that learned a lot from other countries, including America, Europe and Japan. At the same time however, the experience of encroachment by foreign powers at the time of the opium wars is not forgotten, even today. Based on its own experience, China in its relations with Africa emphasizes the importance of respect for sovereignty and self determination. This does not exclude learning from each other but makes the distinction between the directions of learning.

The most obvious example is aid, which Western countries have long used to coerce African governments in a certain direction. China's aid, which is often commercial in its terms, allows the recipient to decide much more in which way the aid is used. The UK commission on Africa, for example, reported in 2005 that Africa should adopt the private finance initiative, which means that major projects have to be built "in conjunction with the private sector".²⁶ China does not undertake similar attempts to try to force African towards a certain direction, and continues successfully to support both state run and private projects.

Alhaji Momodu Koroma, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Sierra Leone explained the difference between China and Western donors that:

[Western Donors] . . . say: "Look, we think there is a need here." The German President visited. They promised EUR 12.5 million [\$17.5 million] for assistance. President Kabbah said we will use this for rural electrification. But a few months later, GTZ [the German aid agency] said it would be used for their human security project.²⁷

²⁴ Chiluba, Frederick 'Statement by the President of the Republic of Zambia', 27 December 2000 <www.statehouse.gov.zm/press/news/viewnews.cgi?category=3&id=977917598>

²⁵ 张义明。对西方“新殖民主义”之考与中非合作之辨。东南亚纵横 2007 年 4 月

²⁶ Nelson, Fraser 'How African Aid Can Be the New Imperialism', Scotsman, 8 June, 2005, 26

²⁷ Brautigam Deborah. *The Dragons Gift: The real story of China in Africa*. Oxford University Press. 2010. page 139

Non-Transferability and Soft Power

The foregoing analysis demonstrates that China aims to be a partner with Africa, not a tutor. The rhetoric that is common at the various FOCAC (Forum on China-Africa Cooperation) about equal partnership and win-win relations only underline this.²⁸ The partnership is based on economic cooperation, free of ideology. In fact a partnership can only be equal when neither side believes that its political or economic system is superior to the other and wants to bring the other closer to its own values. This is however exactly what is going on in most Western countries' relations with Africa. Because of a belief in superiority of the system, equality is sacrificed in the partnership. In the beginning, Africans had been attracted by this approach, and looking at the prosperity of the West, this easily leads to the conclusion that the adoption of Western economic and political institutions will lead to similar results. An unequal relationship was therefore not necessarily seen as negative but as a logical step in a process of catching up. It took a while to realize that the adoption of the same institutions do not necessarily lead to the same results, but that local conditions and path-dependency have to be taken into account. Nevertheless a tutoring relationship between the Western countries and Africa has never been fully abandoned.

It therefore has to be emphasized, that in its growing relations with Africa, China does *not claim to have any better alternative to offer*, nor that it possesses institutions that are in any way superior to Western ones. In fact, the attractiveness that China increasingly enjoys in Africa comes from the very fact that it does not claim superiority in institutions or in values. This is where the debate about 'Soft Power' begins.

Columbia University professor Andrew Nathan stated at a conference in 2010 that "a certain amount of Chinese soft power in Africa stems from the fact that it does *not* have a certain set of values that it wants to promote."²⁹ This is an interesting point. As introduced by Joseph Nye, Soft Power is the ability to achieve your goals through attraction rather than coercion.³⁰ It is derived from the attractiveness of a country's culture, foreign policies and value system. Attractiveness of China's culture and foreign policies to Africa can be discussed separately, but what if the main aspect of China's value system is the emphasis on non-transferability of those values? Unlike Western countries, China does not believe that these can or should be transferred elsewhere.

We have to ask the question of whether the commitment to non-transferability in itself can also be counted as a value.

²⁸ 刘乃亚. 互利共赢:中非关系的本质属性. 西亚非洲杂志社 2006 年第 8 期 及于民. 非洲石油经济依附性发展与中国非洲石油市场开拓. 学术论坛. 2007 年第 7 期 总第 198 期

²⁹ Andrew Nathan. China and Power Transitions. Statement at the BICCS conference China's response to Security threats in Africa. Brussels, May 17th 2010

³⁰ Joseph Nye, Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics. New York: Perseus, 2004.

The question of soft power has always been seen as one about whether a certain value system is attractive as such, but not whether it is actually achievable. Admittedly, what matters for soft power is perception more than reality. Engagement in Africa by Western countries is no longer new, and Africans have over time come to the conclusion that a simple emulation of foreign institutions is not going to bring about the same results. Rather than pointing at the superiority of one system over the other, what makes Chinese soft power special is the admission that even if one system was superior to another, its adoption would lead to different results.

It has been argued that this value of non-transferability is also a non-value. This not a particularly valid argument, since it only considers one part of the non-transferability value. While China emphasizes that one system cannot simply be adopted into a new environment, it also encourages the development of institutions and policies domestically. This is also what best reflects China's own development path. While always learning from more advanced countries, China only picks the aspects of certain institutions that will work in the specific context of China as well, and modifies others accordingly. This is what can be called a value of non-transferability, which however also implies domestic development of institutions while absorbing experiences from abroad.

Of course, this approach leaves a lot of space for incoherence. While pointing at the universality of democracy or a free market economy may seem like a coherent approach, it does not sufficiently reflect local differences and differences in the state of development.

Dirlik, who points to the Beijing consensus's lack of conceptual coherence, has argued, that its appeal acknowledges the attractiveness of a global order 'founded, not upon homogenizing universalisms that inevitably lead to hegemonism, but on a simultaneous recognition of commonality and difference.'³¹

As pointed out above, the reason why there is not such a thing as a "Beijing Consensus" is not that Beijing has not managed to find a set of policies that are consistent and can rival the Washington Consensus, but rather that it realized before others, that this kind of consensus can never exist on a global scale, and that every country has to find its own set of institutions that fit the local situation.

It goes without saying that China cannot become particularly active in promoting the value of non-transferability, as any attempt to do so means dis-acknowledging the value. Ironically some international institutions have tried to react to a similar problem, which led to the debate about capacity building and ownership. This claims a transfer of

³¹ Dirlik, Arif 'Beijing Consensus: Beijing "Gongshi": Who Recognizes Whom and to What End', 2006 <http://anscombe.mcmaster.ca/global1/servlet/Position2pdf?fn=PP_Dirlik_BeijingConsensus>

sovereignty to Africa, while in reality donors continue telling them “how to use this sovereignty.”

The main difference between China and Western countries here is that China gains soft power from admitting that transferring a successful set of policies into another context will lead to different, and often worse results. Unfortunately some Western countries have yet to reach this conclusion.

Hegemony and the Beijing Consensus

As Dirlik noted, a claim of universalism is never far from hegemonism and it is exactly this that China wants to avoid. The anti-hegemonic agenda has been part of China’s foreign policy since the Cold War and before, but in the question around a Beijing Consensus it has shifted into a new light. The idea of a Beijing Consensus, similar to the Washington Consensus implies a universality of certain values. This universality leads to exactly that kind of hegemony that China tries to avoid, especially in its relations with the developing world. This has been emphasized many times by Chinese leaders, including Premier Wen Jiabao who stated in an interview that “China will never seek hegemony.”³² (中国永远不称霸) The absence of a Beijing consensus demonstrates China’s commitment against hegemony, and the constant commentary in Western media and academia can be seen as an attempt to imply the opposite.

The best way to see that this is not the case is to see the rise of China as a paradigm shift rather than a power shift.³³ While the rise of other countries have always been accompanied with the spread of their values, until now it appears that China is working differently. Although China’s development is the fastest of its kind in human history, China does not claim universality in the way it is doing so. Instead China stays committed to a multi-polarity of ideas, in which different models can exist peacefully next to each other. The most obvious effect of recognizing this is denying universality of one’s own approach. Especially in its relations with developing countries China emphasizes that each country has to find its own set of policies and institutions that fit the local requirements instead of copying what has been successful elsewhere.

Any reference to a Beijing consensus, however, implies that there is such a set of policies and institutions, which have been successful in China and can be applied elsewhere. With its commitment to anti-Hegemony, China does not only endorse a multi-polar world, it also shows that there simply is not such a thing as a Beijing Consensus.

³² 温家宝。东方早报 2010 年 6 月 2 日。A12 页

³³ 门洪华。权力转移、问题转移与范式转移——关于霸权解释模式的探索。美国研究 2005 年第 19 卷第 3 期

Conclusion

China has never been forced into the reforms laid out by the Washington Consensus, but has developed relatively rapidly. Most Africa countries that have been coerced in this direction lag behind. This simple observation has given rise to the question of whether there is another model of development that is superior to the Washington Consensus. The debate that followed was fruitful in the sense that it seriously challenged the universal status of the neoliberal reforms supported by Washington, but very soon took the wrong direction. The main point of discussion was which policies are part of this “Beijing Consensus” rather than questioning if such a thing as a Beijing Consensus actually exists.

While the Washington Consensus is a set of policies that has been recommended for successful development, the debate around the Beijing consensus only tries to sum up which policies were successful in China’s development. This, however, totally leaves out the question of promoting this consensus to the outside world and is therefore not comparable. It would now be easy to argue that the debate around the Beijing Consensus only tries to compare the effectiveness of two different sets of policies within a certain country. This is still not a valid argument, as the non-transferability of these policies is one of the most central elements of the concept.

To put it the another way, China has understood, before others, that the same policy that has been successful in one country might create different results elsewhere. The term “Beijing Consensus” however implies that a “good” policy will always bring about good results and it is now a question of finding the right policies. As this is not what China believes, neither in its rhetoric nor in its actions, the term “Beijing Consensus” is misleading and should be avoided.

Instead, Beijing believes that in its relations with Africa each country has to choose its own distinct policies that fit to the local conditions and their individual history. In a way the Beijing Consensus could therefore be described as a non-consensus, meaning that it recognizes the fact that there are no universally correct policies on which a consensus could be found.

The Washington Consensus on the other hand (as well as the post-Washington consensus) has always claimed to be universally valid. It is this claim of universality that is never far from seeking hegemony. The absence of a Beijing Consensus is therefore the best proof that China does not have any hegemonic ambitions, but sees its own a model as one of many ways that can bring about successful development. Instead of claiming universality of its model, China acknowledges that every country has to

find its own institutions that bring about domestic development. What makes China so attractive to Africa and other developing countries is not a certain set of policies that could help them to achieve similar results, but the very absence of it.