



China's rise in Africa and the response of the EU: a theoretical analysis of the EU-China-Africa trilateral cooperation policy initiative

Bas Hooijmaaijers

To cite this article: Bas Hooijmaaijers (2018) China's rise in Africa and the response of the EU: a theoretical analysis of the EU-China-Africa trilateral cooperation policy initiative, Journal of European Integration, 40:4, 443-460, DOI: [10.1080/07036337.2018.1465418](https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2018.1465418)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2018.1465418>



Published online: 24 Apr 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 85



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



China's rise in Africa and the response of the EU: a theoretical analysis of the EU-China-Africa trilateral cooperation policy initiative

Bas Hooijmaaijers^{a,b,c}

^aSchool of Advanced International and Area Studies, East China Normal University, Shanghai, China; ^bLeuven International and European Studies (LINES) Institute, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium; ^cMr. & Mrs. S.H. Wong Center for the Study of Multinational Corporations, Los Gatos, CA, USA

ABSTRACT

This article explores and explains the drivers of the EU-China-Africa trilateral cooperation initiative. In order to do so a qualitative assessment was made of how well the various hypotheses flowing from three candidate theories neorealism, institutionalism and the bureaucratic politics model (BPM) fit this policy initiative. It specifically tests them across three distinct stages of the policy cycle, including issue identification, decision-making and policy implementation. Cutting the dependent variable into policy stages allows us to see if the independent variables truly are powerful. This study demonstrates that institutionalism contributes to a better understanding of every distinct stage of the policy process regarding the EU-China-Africa trilateral cooperation initiative. Aspects of neorealism illuminate some stages of the policy process as well, while BPM is only applicable to a limited degree.

KEYWORDS

EU foreign policy; China; Africa; bureaucratic politics; neorealism; institutionalism

Introduction

Since the early 2000s the African continent has become an increasingly important arena for both traditional donors including the EU and emerging powers including China (see Brautigam 2009; Carbone 2011; Stahl 2011, 2018). The launch of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000 marked China's rise in Africa, and this forum has since then become the main institutional framework that governs China-Africa relations.¹ The establishment of FOCAC and the China-Africa relationship need to be situated in the context of increasing South-South cooperation, and changing patterns and partners in developing cooperation (see Cheru and Obi 2010; Chaturvedi, Fues, and Sidiropoulos 2012). China's rise in Africa was a rather gradual process, even if fast it came with several steps. It grew with its increasing Gross Domestic Product (GDP), trade² and overseas investment, and not as a deliberate strategy to diminish Western influences (Wissenbach 2011).

China's rise in Africa has forced the EU to rethink its own relationship with both parties (see Berger 2006; Bach 2008; Wissenbach 2009; Carbone 2011). When the People's Republic

of China (PRC) and African leaders established a strategic partnership in November 2006 this surprised the EU, suggesting that they failed to respond to China's rise as an emerging donor in Africa (Wissenbach 2011). The delayed reaction of the EU indicates a clear paradox given the close and intense (historic) relations between Europe and Africa (Huliaras and Magliveras 2008). To deal with the increasing presence of China on the African continent, eventually in October 2008 the Commission launched the EU-China-Africa trilateral cooperation initiative (European Commission 2008). However, no concrete joint development projects have so far seen the light (Stahl 2015).

Various scholars and practitioners have discussed the relations between the EU, China and Africa including the trilateral cooperation initiative before (see Berger 2006; Bach 2008; Grimm 2008, 2011; Alden and Sidiropoulos 2009; Wissenbach 2009, 2011; Carbone 2011; Stahl 2018, 2011). This paper distinguishes itself from other work related to this topic, given the tripartite combination of being empirically rich, theory driven and systematically focused on the various stages of the policy cycle. Its theoretical relevance is to test the relative usefulness of BPM, neorealism and institutionalism across three policy stages. We will not only theory test, but also identify the scope or limits in the applicability of these three theories. It also enriches the EU-China literature, which predominantly is policy-driven and rarely explores EU-China relations from a theoretical dimension (Bersick 2015). The policy relevance lays in detecting which actors are most influential in what stage and why. Given the peculiar institutional framework of the EU this can be regarded as highly important.

Embracing theoretical perspectives on EU foreign policy (EUIFP) making contributes to a better understanding of its complicated policy-making process. Incorporating multiple conceptual lenses draws attention to several facets, as it may take the perspective of member states that via the EU seek to safeguard their own interests, it may look into EU law and procedures, or it may get insights from the role and influence of EU bureaucracies in EUIFP making. A deeper look into the stages of the policy cycle provides us with an analytical tool to gain more specific knowledge in order to explain the EU foreign policy-making process. In more scientific terms, cutting the dependent variable into policy stages allows us to see if the independent variables truly are powerful. Explanatory variables that may be irrelevant in one stage of the policy process may turn out to be important in others. Below, the three policy stages will be further discussed, however given their importance for this paper they are briefly introduced here. Issue identification is the stage where a certain issue secures the serious attention of the EU foreign policy-makers. During the decision-making stage the EUIFP actors that possess decision-making power approve the course of action. In the policy implementation stage the adopted policy is put into effect (see Versluis, van Keulen, and Stephenson 2011; Young 2015).

This article will continue as follows. First, a brief introduction to the three selected theories Bureaucratic Politics Model (BPM), neorealism and institutionalism will be given, including a justification. Also, a section is devoted to the three distinct stages of the policy cycle. In the subsequent sections a systematic analysis of the EU-China-Africa trilateral cooperation initiative will be given for each of the three distinct policy stages. The final section will highlight and summarize what was discussed in the previous sections, in order to come to the policy and theoretical findings of this research.

Theoretical framework

Three theories are selected that have the potential to illuminate the policy-making process of the EU-China-Africa trilateral cooperation initiative. Given the features of the case and actors that are studied, BPM, neorealism and institutionalism were preferred over alternative theoretical models.

BPM is a logical theoretical candidate, given that the European Commission is one of the world's largest bureaucracies. Particularly in the field of development the Commission is a substantial bureaucratic player. The growing bureaucratization of EUFP means the latter is no longer merely determined by intergovernmental dynamics, and accordingly it may be necessary to study it from a BPM perspective (see Vanhoonacker, Dijkstra, and Maurer 2010). BPM states that players make governmental decisions not by a single rational choice, but by pulling and hauling (Allison and Halperin 1972, 43). As a consequence there is no such thing as a single 'maker' of foreign policy (Clifford 1990, 162). In this light it is important to highlight that administrative dynamics matter and to point at bureaucracies' interests. Essential in the behaving of bureaucracies is Miles' Law 'where you stand depends on where you sit.' The different institutions involved in the making of EUFP including their staff and Directorate-Generals (DGs), the division of competences and the multiple decision-making methods (see Vanhoonacker, Dijkstra, and Maurer 2010; Delreux 2015) give us reason to believe that BPM is relevant for understanding EUFP and thus should help explaining its complex policy-making process.

In addition, a theory that looks at state power and interest is needed, because states are discussed in this paper, justifying the choice for neorealism. Neorealism speaks to the strategic behaviour of states, which it regards as the central actors in international affairs (Waltz 1979). Neorealism generally takes the position that the security interests of the most powerful states are decisive, followed by economic and other interests. A neorealist argument would argue that not only state interests dominate, but that the most powerful EU member states dominate. Without consensus among France, Germany and the UK it will be hard to get anything of significant importance done (see Bendiek 2012).

Institutions are relevant for illuminating the EU foreign policy-making process given the multiple actors and institutional procedures that make EU decisions, norms, policies and actions. Both the EU's China and Africa policies are not exclusive competences, but a shared competences, which means that the member states may have their own policies as well. Given the wide range of types of institutionalism (Peters 2000), it is necessary to limit its scope. Hence, for theory testing purposes the focus will be on the role and effect of formal institutional rules. The justification of this selection lays in the nature of the EU with its various policy-making methods, competences, actors and procedures, suggesting that particularly this version has the potential to illuminate the EU foreign policy-making process. The formal institutional rules, competences and procedures define who is identifying the issue, how a decision is made and how it was implemented. Because institutions matter, EU law and procedures are considered as being decisive.

Based on the three theories, below in Table 1 hypotheses are formulated for the distinct stages of the policy-making process, stating what to expect when the selected theories are valid.



Table 1. Overview hypotheses.

| Stage in the policy-making process | Hypotheses based on BPM | Hypotheses based on neorealism | Hypotheses based on institutionalism |
|------------------------------------|---|--|--|
| <i>Issue identification</i> | EU bureaucracies are driven by their own agenda and interests when identifying an issue | The (in order) security, economic, and other states influence what issues are identified as the key EU foreign policy-making issues | Issues are identified following the formal institutional rules of the EU and the institutional division of competences |
| <i>Decision-making</i> | Decisions are made by pulling and hauling between the involved actors with possible bargaining advantages, whose preferences correlate highly with their bureaucratic positions, making that the decisions can be seen as the outcomes of compromise, competition, political bargaining, confusion and coalition forming between officials and actors who see different aspects of a policy issue | Decisions are made according to the (in order) security, economic, and other interests and preferences of the most powerful EU member states | EU law and procedures are decisive with regards to EU decision-making |
| <i>Policy implementation</i> | Where a decision leaves leeway for the implementing body, implementation should reflect delays, contradictory actions, duplications, and distortions of original purposes | The implementation of policies tracks with (in order) the security, economic, and then other interests of the EU's most powerful states | The implementation of policies follows EU institutions |

Table 2. Overview of the distinct policy stages.

| Policy stage | Focus of enquiry how...? |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Issue identification ^a | How problems become political issues and secure due attention or climb up the political agenda, how solutions search for problems |
| Decision making | How decisions are made (or not made) and the rules, procedures, and means of deciding |
| Implementation | How legislation resulting from decisions is transposed (absorbed) and put into place politically and technically |

Source: Versluis, van Keulen, and Stephenson 2011, 29.

^aFor this paper we will use issue identification instead of agenda setting that is used by Versluis, van Keulen and Stephenson.

The three distinct stages of the policy-making process

This section is devoted to the three stages of the policy cycle, because they play a central role in this paper. Table 2 provides an overview of the relevant issues for each stage (Versluis, van Keulen, and Stephenson 2011, 29).³

Issue identification focuses on how problems become political issues, how they secure due attention or how they climb up the political agenda. Relevant is which actor identifies a certain issue as an issue of critical importance to the EU. In the stage of decision-making the focus is on the decision what course of action to pursue or not (Young 2015). When a policy is adopted it must be put into effect, which happens in the stage of policy implementation (Ibid.). The follow through on the policy is critical here.

In the next sections the hypotheses extracted from the three selected theories will be tested in the case of the EU-China-Africa trilateral cooperation initiative, providing the framework for the theory guided analysis of the three distinct stages of the policy-making process.

Issue identification

Since the 2000s China has become a prominent actor on the African continent. This development has forced the EU to rethink its own relationship with China and with Africa (see Berger 2006; Brautigam 2009; Wissenbach 2009; Carbone 2011). Although China's rising presence in Africa was increasingly evident by 2000, the EU and its member states were slow to recognize the magnitude of the changes occurring on the African continent (Alden and Sidiropoulos 2009). After the lack of initial response the EU and its member states started belatedly to respond to the PRC's increasing and multifaceted role in Africa (Huliaras and Magliveras 2008). Late 2005, the former European Commission's DG Development (DG DEV) acknowledged the importance of China's rise in Africa for the EU. This was witnessed in Stefano Manservisi, Director General of DG Development, visiting China and having a first discussion with China, when the FOCAC Summit preparations were going on. European Commissioner for Development Louis Michel and Director Manservisi found that China is making a big imprint on the continent, in particular with FOCAC Summit 2006, hence they decided to start a dialogue with China on Africa and to explore areas of cooperation, 'because the overarching objective of development is something that we shared' (Interview senior EU official November 2015).

Suddenly, there was a Summit of African countries with another power, while the EU-Africa Summit experienced difficulties,⁴ because the EU's views on Zimbabwe's President Mugabe were a major stumbling block in the process, with the UK in particular not wanting Mugabe

to attend the Summit (see also Huliaras and Magliveras 2008; Tull 2008; Carbone 2011). Germany did not hide its annoyance at this development, arguing that Africa is a top priority for the EU, that the influence of China on this continent is increasing, and that a whole continent cannot become hostage because of one head of state (Huliaras and Magliveras 2008). Commission spokesman for Aid and Development Amadeu Altafaj commented on the situation that whereas the policy of the EU towards Zimbabwe will not change, the Second EU-Africa Summit should have place because '[t]he Africa-China summit in particular has been an alarm bell for some' (REUTERS 2007). Portuguese diplomats, whose country held the rotating EU Presidency⁵ during the second half of 2007, said the long delay in holding 'a proper dialogue' with Africa 'has cost Europe a lot, not least in losing business opportunities to China' (Ibid.).

Indeed, it was when French firms, particularly in oil and infrastructure business, started to feel the pressure of Chinese competition in the mid-2000s that French diplomats 'took note of' the rise of emerging powers on the African continent (Melly and Darracq 2013, 16). However, even though it identified China's rise in Africa, in some ways France could live with China's increasing role as for instance mining is not a major area of strength for French business, and French companies present in Africa in sectors including telecoms, shipping, port operations, railways and air transport stand to benefit from increasing Chinese investment in Africa because this generates more business for the services that they provide (Ibid.).

The Chinese government was getting the African leaders to Beijing, increasing awareness of the political significance of China. Even though China's rise in Africa had become increasingly evident since 2000, it only attracted attention when there was a big event. Yet, it is worth highlighting that although China's engagement in Africa started a long time ago, it only became significant and visible around that time. In reality, China's rise in Africa started to become a topic 'a bit before' the FOCAC Summit, although obviously the Summit played a role in the public debate (Interview senior EU official November 2015).

China's Africa policy became a critical issue on the agenda of the China-EU political dialogue, as the Commission first raised the issue of EU-China-Africa trilateral cooperation in a October 2006 Communication to the Council and the European Parliament (see European Commission 2006) after initial talks in 2005 and during the 9th EU-China Summit that was held in Helsinki in September 2006 during the Finnish Presidency (Berger and Wissenbach 2007). During that 9th EU-China Summit the China in Africa issue was discussed, marking a shift in the EU's policy that dialogue on the issue is needed (Huliaras and Magliveras 2008; Carbone 2011).⁶

The Commission stated in that document that 'the EU and China should (...) engage in a structured dialogue on Africa's sustainable development' arguing that there are significant downsides if both parties are not able to co-ordinate effectively (European Commission 2006, 4). As was stated by a senior EU official: 'What we saw was that a confrontational debate was emerging,' hinting at papers being under preparation by DG RELEX and DG Trade that were critical on China. However, from their development point of view 'a confrontational attitude between Europe and China in Africa would not be very good,' suggesting it would lead to competition rather than cooperation (Interview senior EU official November 2015). DG Development had no concerns with the increasing trade between China and African countries and China's growing infrastructure investment in African states, because they saw it as 'a good opportunity' to maximize the benefits for 'the common goal' development in Africa (Ibid.).

In 2006, a EU official was put in charge by DG Manservisi to deal with China in Africa and formulate a policy response. This can be regarded as another illustration that China in Africa became a notable issue for the EU.

The importance of China's emergence was also mentioned in another communication from the Commission:

[The EU] is not Africa's only partner, and not its only source of finance, aid and trade - China, for example, has rapidly emerged as Africa's third most important trade partner (...). This means that if the EU wants to remain a privileged partner and make the most of its relations with Africa, it must be willing to reinforce, and in some areas reinvent, the current relationship – institutionally, politically and culturally. (European Commission 2007, 3)

Hypothesis testing BPM-ISID

Hypothesis BPM-ISID: EU bureaucracies are driven by their own agenda and interests when identifying an issue.

Late 2006 it was Commissioner Michel and Director Manservisi who found that China was making a big imprint in Africa, in particular with the upcoming FOCAC Summit in 2006, so they decided to start a dialogue with China on Africa. DG Development made it an issue of critical importance for the EU, as a new, big player with its own vision on development became increasingly present on the African continent. We did not see that bureaucracies were driven by their own agenda and interests, rather DG DEV observed a new trend in their policy field upon which they decided to act. Consequently, BPM does not illuminate this stage of the policy-making process.

Hypothesis testing Neorealism-ISID

Hypothesis Neorealism-ISID: The (in order) security, economic, and other interests of the most powerful EU member states influence what issues are identified as the key EU foreign policy-making issues.

When French businesses, particularly in oil and infrastructure, started to feel the pressure of Chinese competition French diplomats 'took note of' the rise of emerging powers in Africa (Melly and Darracq 2013: 16; see also Hackenesch 2009). However, in some ways France could live with the increased role of China as some French companies present in Africa stand to benefit from Chinese investment in Africa because this generates more business for their services (Melly and Darracq 2013). Germany argued that Africa is a top priority for the EU and that the influence of China on this continent is increasing. Moreover, the UK supported the Commission's move. Consequently, neorealism illuminates this stage of the policy-making process.

Hypothesis testing Institutionalism-ISID

Hypothesis Institutionalism-ISID: Issues are identified following the formal institutional rules of the EU and the institutional division of competences.

The fact that DG Development identified China's rise in Africa as an issue indicates that some institutional division of competences were at work. Indeed, DG Development possesses

the competences to do so. However, it is not an exclusive competence for DG Development. Several member states, wanted the EU to pay attention to the rise of China in Africa as well. On a related note, member states can have their own China and Africa policy (see also Tull 2008; Carbone 2011; Stahl 2011, 2018). The EU's institutional setup allows various actors to identify China's rise in Africa as an important issue for the EU.

Decision-making

Within the Commission a number of policy-makers were more than eager to launch a policy initiative to directly tackle the PRC's new role in international development (Carbone 2011; see also Stahl 2011). The EU had several strategic choices for consideration to deal with China's rise in Africa⁷ (Wissenbach 2009, 663), with the option of getting involved with the PRC in a new process where it is considered a partner with valid interests in the African continent prevailing, as a possible confrontation over Africa could have affected the balance in the EU-China strategic partnership (Wissenbach 2011). Development Commissioner Michel got involved with the trilateral cooperation and took political responsibility for it, although it was a DG Development officials' initiative (EU Diplomat September 2010 retrieved in Carbone 2011, 212).

The search for trilateral cooperation faced substantial resistance, not only between the various EU institutions, but also between the Commissions' various DGs, and there were diverging opinions as well concerning Europe's industrial interests. As described by a EU official: 'It was not an easy one' (Interview senior EU Official November 2015). The substantial differences in approaches and visions within the EU became visible when in April 2008 the European Parliament adopted a resolution on China's policy and its effects on Africa (European Parliament 2008). This resolution stressed their strong commitment to the prominence of human rights, democracy and good governance in EUFP (see also Alden and Barber 2015). It alleged that China's unconditional support for African autocracies has caused human rights violations and urged the PRC to cut down its fiscal support to those regimes. The normative approach of the Parliament clearly contrasted with the more pragmatic approach of the Commission.

By adopting this resolution the Parliament got ahead of DG Development⁸ and its trilateral cooperation initiative, and countered its endeavours. Not surprisingly, the different, incoherent messages of EU institutions created tension with the Chinese. Against this backdrop, during his China visit Commissioner Michel used a rather different tone in a written contribution to the China Daily late August 2008, where he pointed out that the objectives of the Chinese, including the access to resources and markets and the deepening of political and diplomatic relations, are in no way incompatible with European views and priorities, but rather offer important opportunities for the African continent. He also stressed that he wanted to explore a framework for a triangular partnership with the Chinese leadership (Michel 2008).

Besides the China critical resolution of the Parliament, DG Development had to deal with internal resistance, mainly coming from the Secretariat-General and the former Commission's DG for External Relations (DG RELEX), as they did not want to add another layer to the already highly complicated EU-China bilateral relationship (Carbone 2011). At the Secretariat General there were 'some mid-level officials' that wanted to stop the initiative, yet their own superiors overruled them (Interview senior EU official November 2015). It created difficulties at some

stages writing the process and discussing it at the political level with the cabinet's involvement and the DG's involvement. The initiative was controversial, because it meant a particular way of engaging with China, which in the public debate was seen critically.

Besides the Secretariat General, DG RELEX was not in favour because they felt they were in charge of China policy and they wanted DG Development to focus on Africa rather than on China. In this light it is important to mention that in 2006 when preparing the *EU—China: Closer partners, growing responsibilities* document (see European Commission 2006), there had been a strong internal discussion, because DG Trade wanted to publish its own China paper, separate from the DG RELEX paper, with DG RELEX being adamant of that paper being part of the overall strategy paper that they were working on.⁹ This made that RELEX was sensitive about their leadership on China, which was contested by DG Trade in 2006, who had a more critical view on China than RELEX, because of anti-dumping issues. Against this backdrop, when DG Development initiated another paper in 2008 DG RELEX was 'not particularly happy' because they were contested again (Interview senior EU official November 2015).

Within the EU there was discussion whether to include human rights and good governance. Eventually it was agreed upon not to do so, because the EU's position on good governance and human rights had already been made clear in various other papers (see European Commission 2006) so there was no need to repeat it. Moreover, it was a controversial debate at the time with the Parliament stressing human rights (see European Parliament 2008). If DG Development would have started their own document in the same vein, the intended effect of the initiative, which was to make sure that China is no longer anti-cooperative and hostile when discussing China in Africa, would have been counter carried. This was discussed with the member states in the Council Working Group and 'they all agreed' (Interview senior EU official November 2015).

The general tendency among the EU member states was supportive of the trilateral cooperation initiative, because they realized that the EU had to do something: 'We could not just let the whole issue of China in Africa sort of poison the relationship' (Interview senior EU official November 2015). This does not mean that all member states were enthusiastic about the initiative, because some felt there was not much else they could do, but other countries like Germany were devoted to making sure that the strategic relationship between Africa, China and the EU was not deteriorating into antagonistic competition for Africa.¹⁰ The French government at the time was supportive and was willing to give it a try, although 'some French companies' were among the firms that lobbied against it (Interview senior EU official November 2015).¹¹ Because the against-lobby was largely overruled, there was considerably strong support from France on this approach. The UK rather strongly supported the Commission's proposal, as led by the Department for International Development (DFID) it had also started a dialogue and trilateral cooperation proposals with China and Africa.¹²

Eventually, in October 2008 the Commission proposed its 'The EU, China and Africa: towards trilateral dialogue and cooperation' initiative (European Commission 2008). The Commission stressed the importance of a trilateral dialogue and cooperation in addition to bilateral relationships, and suggested trilateral cooperation in the following fields that are key for Africa's stability and development:

- (1) Peace and security in Africa,
- (2) Support for African infrastructure,

- (3) Sustainable management of the environment and natural resources,
- (4) Agriculture and food security.

(European Commission 2008, 5, 6)

The rationale for the choice of the first three topics was that they were believed to be in common interest where cooperation could produce results, and not areas with direct competition. By contrast, the fourth subject was suggested informally by the Chinese to be added to the Commission's original three ideas.¹³

In November 2008, the Council stated that it supported the Commission's trilateral cooperation proposal (Council of the European Union 2008). Whilst pragmatically endorsing the Commission's communication it stressed that the trilateral dialogue would support the efforts undertaken by Africa and the international community 'to promote democratization, political and economic integration, good governance and respect for human rights' (Council of the European Union 2008; Alden and Barber 2015). The short time period can be attributed to the cooperative approach of France, that held the Presidency at that time as well as the general consensus that confronting the PRC would just be 'pointless' and 'detrimental' for the EU and the development of the African continent (EU and European diplomats 2009; 2010 retrieved in Carbone 2011, 214).¹⁴

Hypothesis testing BPM-DM

Hypothesis BPM-DM: Decisions are made by pulling and hauling between the involved actors with possible bargaining advantages, whose preferences correlate highly with their bureaucratic positions, making that the decisions can be seen as the outcomes of compromise, competition, political bargaining, confusion and coalition forming between officials and actors who see different aspects of a policy issue.

DG Development had to deal with resistance, difficulties and diverging opinions among other European actors, including the European Parliament, the Secretariat-General and DG RELEX. It had to take the member states into account, otherwise the trilateral cooperation would not receive the Council's endorsement, and it had to be careful not to antagonize the African and Chinese partners.

We see DG Development approaching it from a development perspective, while DG RELEX approached it from their perspective being the general external relations DG. RELEX was not pleased with another DG increasing its focus on China, as they felt they were in charge of China policy, especially since DG Trade already challenged them back in 2006. This means that both DGs preferences correlate highly with their bureaucratic positions. We cannot speak of a bargaining game, especially not between the Commission and the Council. The parties were 'developing a policy line,' which should be seen as seeking engagement with China on a sensitive issue (Interview senior EU official November 2015). During the Council Working Group discussions all involved parties agreed that building bridges to overcome the antagonistic debate was critical, and that introducing problematic issues into the initiative would not be beneficial.

Based on BPM one would expect compromised outcomes and net results, with decisions not mirroring the intentions of any actor in particular. This is not the case, as the intention was to make sure that the China in Africa issue does not become a problem between China and the EU in a critical phase of their partnership. What is in line with predictions based on

BPM is that there is no such thing as a single policy-maker. The EU cannot be regarded as a unitary actor. The Parliament adopted a critical resolution on China in Africa, while DG Development was more cooperative. These different messages led to confusion among the Chinese.

Hypothesis testing Neorealism-DM

Hypothesis Neorealism-DM: Decisions are made according to the (in order) security, economic, and other interests and preferences of the most powerful EU member states.

We did not see the powerful EU member states taking the lead in this case. However, following EU procedures the member states were consulted in the Council Working Group, with the general consensus being that they could not let the China in Africa issue poison the relationship. Germany was devoted to making sure that the strategic relationship between Africa, China and the EU was not deteriorating into antagonistic competition for Africa. The French government was supportive and was willing to give it a try, also within their role as EU Presidency, because they saw that in a number of countries Chinese investment was actually beneficial to stabilize the country. Moreover, the UK supported the Commission's proposal. While neorealism does not tell us what policy was selected, it created an environment in which other explanatory variables became critical. The member states were supportive of the initiative, which created an environment in which the Commission could launch its initiative.

Hypothesis testing Institutionalism-DM

Hypothesis Institutionalism-DM: EU law and procedures are decisive with regards to EU decision-making.

EU procedures were not decisive, however they do contribute to a better understanding of the decision-making process. Following EU procedures DG Development made the first draft as the lead DG. This draft went into inter service consultation within the Commission, where other DGs could have their input. After that it went into discussion in the Council Working Group, where the member states had their role (Interview senior EU official November 2015). The Commission possesses the competences to propose new policies, yet the Council should be considered as the EU's main decision-making institution here. EU procedures also make that the Council conclusions adopting the trilateral cooperation initiative are not legally binding.

Policy implementation

The EU's policy proposal for trilateral cooperation faced major resistance from the Chinese and African partners, with it being mostly addressed to Chinese audience, hence failing to reach out to the Africans (see Carbone 2011; Stahl 2011). Consequently, some of the African countries got the impression that the foreigners were colluding without consulting them, in order to exploit them better. They sought to play as many donors off against each other and get as much out of them as they could, leading to a lack of taking up the initiative in the beginning. Moreover, as was pointed out by Hackenesch, African initiatives and attempts

to influence the EU-China dialogue have been 'marginal' just as the trilateral actions, with political responses remaining 'rather anecdotic.' Part of the explanation lays in 'a lack of African governments' (and African regional organisations) capacities in formulating a common position or a common response strategy' vis-à-vis China's Africa policy or vis-à-vis the EU-China dialogues on Africa (Hackenesch 2009, 9).

There are some initiatives where more cooperation has started, for instance in EUNAVFOR Atalanta, to secure the Horn of Africa (see Larik and Weiler 2011). Recently, former 'Western' policies including violent extremism, security issues and infrastructure for Africa, became 'more acceptable and neutral' for the Chinese officials (Interview senior EU official November 2015). However, no concrete joint development projects have so far seen the light (Stahl 2015). This contrasts with the Council conclusions that requested 'the Commission, Member States and the competent Council bodies to examine these proposals in greater detail and participate actively in the process of implementing concrete proposals' (Council of the European Union 2008).

Additionally, on the EU level momentum was lost, with Commissioner Michel, Director Manservisi and the policy entrepreneur of the initiative changing jobs, which meant that the people pushing for it were no longer around. In January 2009 the Czech Presidency had taken over from France, however the Czech government is far less Africa focused and thus lacked the expertise regarding this initiative.¹⁵

In addition, according to a EU official, with the newly launched European External Action Service (EEAS), which was established following the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, being separate from the Commission the whole issue of trilateral cooperation became 'no longer that big of an issue' for the EEAS as it was for DG Development. The official also mentioned a problem with the current institutional separation between the EEAS and DG development: 'It is like walls going up that people have to try and bridge somehow' (Interview senior EU official November 2015).

The combination of these factors made that the trilateral cooperation initiative was not implemented as agreed upon, although the goal of normalizing discussions on Africa between both partners was achieved. Moreover, several EU member states have over the past years either shown interests in or established trilateral development projects with China on Africa, which has further undermined the endeavours of the EU and illustrated the difficulties the EU has to engage with third countries as a coherent actor (Stahl 2011).¹⁶ Particularly, since these dialogues are generally conducted with little coordination at the European level (ECFR 2011). Nonetheless, the annual EU-China Dialogue on Africa that is held at Africa Directors' level continues to have place since 2006.

Hypothesis testing BPM-IMPL

Hypothesis BPM-IMPL: Where a decision leaves leeway for the implementing body, implementation should reflect delays, contradictory actions, duplications, and distortions of original purposes.

The initiative came and went with the politicians involved, thus distortions of original purposes could be detected, as well as contradictory actions given that what was agreed upon was not done. So far, no trilateral development projects have seen the light (Stahl 2015). We do not see bureaucratic bodies aiming to maximize their powers by claiming those

areas that leave room for political interpretation. We see some parts of BPM, but not others.

Hypothesis testing Neorealism-IMPL

Hypothesis Neorealism-IMPL: The implementation of policies tracks with (in order) the security, economic, and then other interests of the EU's most powerful states.

For various reasons that were discussed above momentum was lost and the initiative was not implemented as agreed upon. However, worth highlighting is the initiative's objective of building trust and bridges. By doing so, it played a role for subsequent individual member states' initiatives, because they could build on the EU agreed policy platform. The initially controversial debate about China-Africa in Europe, for instance reflected in the European Parliament's report (see European Parliament 2008), subsided, making China-EU dialogues on Africa fairly pragmatic. Thus, neorealism does shed some light on the implementation.

Hypothesis testing Institutionalism-IMPL

Hypothesis Institutionalism-IMPL: The implementation of policies follows EU institutions.

We do not see that the implementation tracks with the policies and decisions made, because for various reasons the initiative stalled. The Council conclusions were not legally binding, and there was no legal power to enforce them. When the Commission initiates a proposal these Conclusions only set out the direction of policies to be pursued by the EU. Moreover, it is not an exclusive EU competence, which means that EU member states can have their own dialogue with China on Africa. Hence, institutionalism does contribute to a better understanding of the implementation stage.

Conclusion

This article aimed to explore and explain the drivers of the EU-China-Africa trilateral cooperation initiative (see European Commission 2008) across three distinct policy stages from multiple theoretical perspectives including BPM, neorealism and institutionalism. Late 2005, it was Commissioner Michel and Director Manservigi of the European Commission's DG Development who found China is making a big imprint in Africa, in particular with FOCAC Summit 2006, so they started a dialogue with China on Africa. From a development point of view they found that a confrontational attitude between Europe and China in Africa would not be good, because it would lead to competition rather than cooperation. DG DEV launched and drove the initiative of trilateral cooperation, however despite its effort it had to deal with resistance and diverging opinions from other EU actors including the Parliament, the Secretariat-General, and DG RELEX. The member states however, in general were supportive because they felt something needed to be done.

Commissioner Michel was so focused on getting the Chinese on board that he 'forgot to lobby the Africans' for this approach, meaning that the initiative experienced a lack of support from the other partners (Interview senior EU official November 2015). Additionally, Commissioner Michel and DG Development bureaucrats changed jobs, which meant that the people pushing for the initiative were not longer around, and the subsequent EU

presidencies did not show the same degree of engagement as France did in 2008, denoting a loss of momentum. Consequently, so far no trilateral development projects have seen the light (Stahl 2015). Nonetheless, to some degree the trilateral cooperation initiative can be regarded as a success as it took out the antagonism of the debate and that was one of its key objectives. As a senior EU official stated: 'lurking behind this there was the intention to make sure this does not become a problem between China and the EU in a critical phase of the strategic partnership' (Interview senior EU official November 2015).

The theoretical relevance of this paper was to test the relative usefulness of BPM, neorealism and institutionalism across three policy stages. We did not only theory test, but also identified the scope or limits in the applicability of these three theories., BPM does not illuminate the issue identification stage, because we did not see that bureaucracies were driven by their own agenda and interests. Rather DG DEV observed a new trend in their policy field upon which they decided to act. Following the hypothesis distracted from BPM the decision-making process can be regarded as a bargaining situation that leads to compromised outcomes, with decisions not mirroring the intentions of any actor in particular. That is incorrect, because DG DEV's intention was to make sure that the China in Africa issue does not become a problem between China and the EU in a critical phase of their strategic partnership. There was no bargaining game between the involved parties, pointing at the limited explanatory power of BPM for this stage. Regarding the initiative's implementation, distortions of original purposes and contradictory actions had place, because what was agreed upon was not done. Following the BPM hypothesis bureaucratic bodies aim to maximize their powers by claiming those areas that leave room for political interpretation, however this did not occur here. We see some parts of BPM, but not others, pointing at its limitations.

Regarding neorealism, Germany argued that Africa is a top priority for the EU and that the influence of China on this continent is increasing. When French oil and infrastructure firms started to feel the pressure of Chinese competition, French diplomats started to notice China's rise in Africa. However, in some ways France could live with it, because Chinese firms were not always business competitors and sometimes they could even benefit from the Chinese presence. Although neorealism does not tell us what policy was selected, it created an environment in which other explanatory variables became critical. The member states were supportive of the trilateral initiative, which created an environment in which the Commission could launch its initiative. The initiative was not implemented as agreed upon, however worth mentioning is its objective of building trust and bridges. This played a role for subsequent individual member states' initiatives, because they could build on the EU agreed policy platform. The initially controversial debate in Europe about China-Africa subsided, making China-EU dialogues on Africa fairly pragmatic. Consequently, neorealism does shed some light on the implementation.

Following the institutionalism based hypothesis for issue identification, issues are identified following the formal institutional rules of the EU and the institutional division of competences. The fact that DG Development identified China's rise in Africa as an issue indicates that some institutional division of competences were at work, however it is not a EU exclusive competence. EU procedures were not decisive as the hypothesis predicted, however they do contribute to a better understanding of the decision-making process. The trilateral cooperation agreement was not legally binding, which means it is a weak institutional agreement and partially explains why its implementation stalled. Moreover, it is not an exclusive EU

competence, thus the EU member states can have their own dialogues with China on Africa. In short, institutionalism contributes to a better understanding of every distinct policy stage of the EU-China-Africa trilateral cooperation initiative.

Notes

1. However, FOCAC mainly functions as a platform for Chinese public relations, rather than a forum for negotiation (Wu 2012, 110).
2. However, this trade is limited to a few countries and a few commodities, with the main interests of China in raw commodities including oil, minerals and timber (Mazimhaka 2013, 102).
3. For analytical purposes and for manageability reasons we focus on three policy stages thus not including the policy formulation stage. Policy formulation is encapsulated in the decision-making stage though.
4. In 2003 no Summit had place, however on 8-9 December 2007 the second Africa-EU Summit was held in Lisbon and the Joint Africa-EU Strategy was launched (Council of the European Union 2007).
5. The Presidency of the Council of the EU (in short 'The Presidency') is taken in turn by each of the EU member states according to a rotation system for a predetermined period of six months.
6. Correspondingly, in the Council conclusions of December 2006 the EU member states stated they intend 'to begin as soon as possible the structured dialogue on Africa with China as agreed at the September 2006 Summit. This is an area of key strategic interest to both the EU and China, demonstrated by the EU's strategy on Africa and the China-Africa Cooperation Forum in Beijing in November 2006' (Council of the European Union 2006: 7).
7. It is worthwhile mentioning the non-existence of concrete ready-to-implement policy instruments through which the EU could limit Chinese influence in Africa (Huliaras and Magliveras 2008).
8. The delay of the release of the Commission's communication that had originally to be presented before the EU-Africa summit in December 2007, can to a large degree be explained by the EU's difficult consultations with Chinese policy-makers (Stahl 2012).
9. RELEX prevailed in the end through a compromise of having their own paper with an Annex written by DG Trade.
10. In terms of debate among constituencies the Nordic countries and the Netherlands were among the member states that had to be convinced to drop strong support for good governance in the initiative.
11. As was mentioned by Carbone, 'some pressure' was placed by 'some European enterprises,' predominantly those operating in the infrastructure sector, as their main concern was that Chinese firms would be able to win all the contracts tendered by African governments, however these actions had mainly place at the national level (Carbone 2011, 214, 215). Hackenesch also mentioned that French construction firms felt the strong competition of Chinese companies and put pressure on their government (Hackenesch 2009).
12. In this context, the DFID office in Beijing was relevant. DG DEV and DFID Beijing had meetings, while DG DEV officials also met with the UK Foreign Office.
13. Chinese officials were not pleased with the Commission publishing a paper on China and Africa because it was seen as sensitive, also in their own relations with African countries. However, they accepted it and were pleased that at least DG Development consulted with them on it so they were not taken by surprise and could take preparations (Interview senior EU official November 2015).
14. As in most other cases the Commission drafted the Council conclusions.
15. With the establishment of the EEAS there became more continuity, as they took this role over from the rotating Presidency.
16. France and the UK have established their own bilateral dialogues with China on Africa, and Germany has its *Ankerländer* concept, which focuses on trilateral cooperation with China and other emerging countries.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers and the editor for their constructive feedback and encouraging comments.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This research was supported by the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities [grant number 2017ECNU-HLYT019].

References

- Alden, Chris, and Laura Barber. 2015. "EU-China-Africa and the Challenges of African Development." In *China, the European Union and the Developing World. a Triangular Relationship*, edited by Jan Wouters, Jean-Christophe Defraigne, and Matthieu Burnay, 402–413. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Alden, Chris, and Elizabeth Sidiropoulos. 2009. "Africa-China-EU Cooperation in Africa Prospects and Pitfalls." *The Nordic Africa Institute Policy Notes* 2009 (11): 1–5.
- Allison, Graham T., and Morton H. Halperin. 1972. "Bureaucratic Politics: A Paradigm and Some Policy Implications." *World Politics* 24 (Supplement: Theory and Policy in International Relations (Spring, 1972)): 40–79.
- Bach, Daniel. 2008. "The European Union and China in Africa." In *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon? Africa and China*, edited by K. Ampiah and Sanusha Naidu, 278–293. Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Bendiek, Annegret. 2012. "European Realism in the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy." In *EU External Relations Law and Policy in the Post-Lisbon Era*, edited by Paul James Cardwell, 35–57. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Berger, Bernt. 2006. "China's Engagement in Africa: Can the EU Sit Back?" *South African Journal of International Affairs* 13 (1): 115–127.
- Berger, Bernt, and Uwe Wissenbach. 2007. "EU–China–Africa Trilateral Development Cooperation: Common Challenges and New Directions." *DIE Discussion Papers* 21: 34.
- Bersick, Sebastian. 2015. "The EU's Bilateral Relations with China." In *The SAGE Handbook of European Foreign Policy*, edited by Knud Erik Jorgensen, Asne Kalland Aarstad, Edith Drieskens, Katie Verlin Laatikainen, and Ben Tonra, 615–633. London: Sage.
- Brautigam, Deborah. 2009. *The Dragon's Gift. The Real Story of China in Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Carbone, Maurizio. 2011. "The European Union and China's Rise in Africa: Competing Visions, External Coherence and Trilateral Cooperation." *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 29 (2): 203–221.
- Chaturvedi, Sachin, Thomas Fues, and Elizabeth Sidiropoulos. 2012. *Development Cooperation and Emerging Powers. New Partners of Old Patterns?* London: Zed Books.
- Cheru, Fantu, and Cyril Obi. 2010. *The Rise of China and India in Africa*. New York: Zed Books.
- Clifford, Garry J. 1990. "Bureaucratic Politics." *The Journal of American History* 77 (1): 161–168.
- Council of the European Union. 2006. *Press Release 2771st Council Meeting General Affairs and External Relations External Relations C/06/353 16291/06 (Presse 353)*, December 11–12. Brussels.
- Council of the European Union. 2007. *The Africa-EU Strategic Partnership: A Joint Africa-EU Strategy*, December 9. Lisbon.
- Council of the European Union. 2008. *Council Conclusions on Trilateral Dialogue and Cooperation between the European Union, China and Africa*, November 10. Brussels: 2902nd General Affairs Council Meeting.

- Delreux, Tom. 2015. "Bureaucratic Politics, New Institutionalism and Principal-agent Models." In *The SAGE Handbook of European Foreign Policy: Two Volume Set*, edited by Knud Erik Jorgensen, Aasne Kalland Aarstad, Edith Drieskens, Katie Verlin Laatikainen, and Ben Tonra, 152–165. London: Sage.
- European Commission. 2006. *EU-China: Closer Partners, Growing Responsibilities*, October. 24. Brussels: Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament (COM (2006) 632 final).
- European Commission. 2007. *From Cairo to Lisbon: The EU-Africa Strategic Partnership*. COM 357.
- European Commission. 2008. *The EU, China and Africa: Towards Trilateral Dialogue and Cooperation*. Brussels: European Commission.
- European Council on Foreign Relations. 2011. *European Foreign Policy Scorecard 2010*. London: European Council on Foreign Relations.
- European Parliament. 2008. *European Parliament Resolution of 23 April 2008 on China's Policy and its Effects on Africa (2007/2255(INI))*, April 23. Strasbourg.
- Grimm, Sven. 2008. "The Triangle China-Africa-Europe – Why Co-Operate and How?" Paper Presented at the EDC2020 Briefing to Parliamentarians and Policy-makers entitled "The EU, Africa and China: Opportunities and Challenges of a Trilateral Cooperation", Brussels, October 29.
- Grimm, Sven. 2011. "Engaging with China in Africa – Trilateral Cooperation as an Option?" *EDC 2020 Policy Brief 9*.
- Hackenesch, Christine. 2009. "China and the EU's Engagement in Africa: Setting the Stage for Cooperation, Competition or Conflict?" *DIE Discussion Papers* no. 16/2009.
- Huliaras, Asteris, and Konstantinos Magliveras. 2008. "In Search of a Policy: EU and US Reactions to the Growing Chinese Presence in Africa." *European Foreign Affairs Review* 13 (3): 399–420.
- Interview senior EU official. November 2015.
- Larik, Joris, and Quentin Weiler. 2011. "Going Naval in Troubled Waters: The EU, China and the Fight against Piracy off the Coast of Somalia." In *China and the European Union: Partners or Competitors in Africa?*, edited by Jing Men and Benjamin Barton, 81–104. Hampshire: Ashgate.
- Mazimhaka, Patrick. 2013. "China and Africa: An African View." In *The Morality of China in Africa*, edited by Stephen Chan, 89–121. London: Zed Books.
- Melly, Paul, and Vincent Darracq. 2013. *A New Way to Engage? French Policy in Africa from Sarkozy to Hollande*. London: Chatham House.
- Michel, Louis. 2008. "EU, China to Join Hands for Africa's Development." *China Daily*, August 29.
- Peters, B. Guy. 2000. *Institutional Theory: Problems and Prospects*. Vienna: Political Science Series 69.
- REUTERS. 2007. *China Rivalry Pushes EU to Hold Africa Summit*, September 27. Accessed <http://www.reuters.com/article/uk-eu-zimbabwe-summit-idUKKRA75582620070927>.
- Stahl, Anna Katharina. 2011. "The Impact of China's Rise on the EU's Geopolitical Reach and Interests in Africa." *European Foreign Affairs Review* 16 (4): 427–446.
- Stahl, Anna Katharina. 2012. "Trilateral Development Cooperation between the European Union, China and Africa: What Prospects for South Africa?" *CCS Discussion Paper 4*.
- Stahl, Anna Katharina. 2015. "A Novel Conceptual Framework for the Study of EU Foreign Policy in a Multipolar World: The Case of EU-China-Africa Relations." *NFG Working Paper Series, No. 14, March 2015, NFG Research Group „Asian Perceptions of the EU“*. Freie Universität Berlin.
- Stahl, Anna Katharina. 2018. *EU-China-Africa Trilateral Relations in a Multipolar World. Hic Sunt Dracones*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Tull, Denis M. 2008. "China in Africa: European Perceptions and Responses to the Chinese Challenge." *SAIS Working Papers in African Studies*.
- Vanhoonaeker, Sophie, Hylke Dijkstra, and Heidi Maurer. 2010. "Understanding the Role of Bureaucracy in the European Security and Defence Policy: The State of the Art." *European Integration Online Papers* 14 (1): 1–33. http://eiop.or.at/eiop/texte/2010-004a_h.htm.
- Versluis, Esther, Mendeltje van Keulen, and Paul Stephenson. 2011. *Analyzing the European Union Policy Process*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Waltz, Kenneth. 1979. *Theory of International Politics*. Reading, MA: Addison & Wesley.
- Wissenbach, Uwe. 2009. "The EU's Response to China's Africa Safari: Can Triangular Co-operation Match Needs?" *The European Journal of Development Research* 21 (4): 662–674.

- Wissenbach, Uwe. 2011. "The EU, China and Africa: Working for Functional Cooperation?" In *China and the European Union in Africa. Partners or Competitors?* edited by Jing Men and Benjamin Barton, 245–268. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Wu, Chien-Huei. 2012. "Beyond European Conditionality and Chinese Non-interference: Articulating EU-China-Africa Trilateral Relations." In *China, the European Union and Global Governance*, edited by J. Wouters, Tanguy de Wilde d'Estmael, P. Defraigne, and J.-C. Defraigne, 106–121. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Young, Alasdair R. 2015. "The European Policy Process in Comparative Perspective." In *Policy-making in the European Union*. 7th ed, edited by Helen Wallace, Mark A. Pollack, and Alasdair R. Young, 45–68. Oxford: Oxford University Press.