

Peter Köppinger: The Policy towards Developing Countries – A Field for a Strategic Partnership between Europe and China?

Cooperation between Europe and China has found its own profile in the last few years. The 'strategic partnership', as it is called, rests on the pillars of political dialogue, cooperation programmes, and sectoral dialogue. While issues such as weapons exports, human rights, and political developments in Asia are addressed regularly, the question of the policy towards developing countries has hardly been made an issue.

China's engagement in many Asian, African, and Latin American countries is nothing new; however, it has assumed considerable proportions within the last few years, involving enormous sums of money. Today, China's presence in the developing countries shows itself in humanitarian and political programmes – a fact that gives rise to concern and criticism in Europe.

Beijing is responding to this criticism by now, endeavouring to improve the international image of its policy towards the developing countries: China's government says that it intends to help the people and improve their situation, and that it regards the principle of non-interference in the politics of the countries concerned as one of the cornerstones of its own strategy. What is more, it states that it has gathered valuable experience with regard to the development of poor countries, which it now intends to pass on. According to official statements, it is not true that China rejects democratic participation; what is true, however, is that a durable democracy can only be founded on the basis of successful development. And finally, it is wrong to claim that China steps in to profit wherever the international community has renounced its involvement due to bad governance on the part of the partner country.

This year, the policy towards developing countries will be included in the European-Chinese dialogue for the first time. A few years ago, this would have been unthinkable. Yet this development is to be welcomed, for mutual trust can only develop where people talk to each other.

Europe's policy towards developing countries relates not only to poverty alleviation and achieving the millennium development goals but also, on an equal rank, good governance, democratic participation of the population, and respect for human rights.

That the policy towards developing countries is being integrated in the dialogue mechanisms between Europe and China also results from the insight that such a step is unavoidable, given the tremendous challenges the developing countries are placing before the international community. Nevertheless – that a partnership may be inevitable certainly does not mean that it is possible.

To evaluate the chances of the new strategic partnership, four questions should be considered. First: Do the visions, the understanding of development, and the development goals of both sides resemble each other closely enough to permit a partnership? For many years, the Chinese model of societal and political development as well as China's image of the future society has clashed with Europe's concept of respect for human rights and the role of the constitutional state. These differences between the two dialogue partners have not been overcome to this day. However, there has been a process of rapprochement for many decades which is worth continuing.

Second: What priority is given to supporting economic and social development in developing countries in the foreign policies of the EU or China? Europe has serious doubts about China's motives in its engagement in the developing countries; Beijing, on the other hand, speaks of a 'win-win situation'. It is certainly true that in its dealings with developing countries, the EU itself, i.e. its leading members, similarly subordinated the goal of development to other short-lived self-serving

objectives many a time. Yet partnership between Europe and China does not have a chance as long as both sides go on giving priority to their own interests in their contacts with developing countries.

Third: Do the Europeans and the Chinese use methods and tools in their development cooperation that are comparable and/or compatible? In fact, both sides are very different. These differences, however, should not seriously hamper establishing a European-Chinese partnership in their policy towards developing countries.

Fourth: How could China's position of non-interference be reconciled with the European principle of keeping economic cooperation and development aid conditional? That this point constitutes a grave problem is beyond question. And this is exactly why it is so important that China should demonstrate its engagement for human rights, the rule of law, good governance, and democratic participation and reinforce it through concrete efforts.

Now, what steps should be taken first? Both sides could enter into collaboration agreements in selected fields of development cooperation. Moreover, they could work together to establish a basis for their future cooperation through joint research projects on developmental questions. And finally, Europe and China could, through communication and dialogue, build up that confidence in the motives and intentions of the other which is currently lacking. In fact, the climate between the two sides is still marred by mistrust, which may only be abolished if China is integrated and integrates itself. This is the only way of injecting life into a partnership both sides are talking about.