

# INTERNATIONAL REPORTS

An aerial photograph showing a long, elevated concrete bridge under construction in a tropical setting. A large red and blue gantry crane is positioned on the bridge deck, moving a precast concrete section. Several construction workers in white hard hats and safety gear are visible on the bridge. The surrounding landscape is lush green with dense vegetation, including palm trees and rice fields. In the background, there are rolling hills and a small village with red-roofed houses. The sky is blue with scattered white clouds.

## DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

Global Trends and  
Lessons for Germany

# INTERNATIONAL REPORTS

3 | 2025



Dear Readers,

“There’s nothing of value to anybody.” That is how one of the articles in the present issue of *International Reports* begins. The words are those of Donald Trump, who returned to the presidency of the United States in January. He was referring to his country’s development cooperation – in particular, to USAID, whose budget and structures he consequently slashed.

The remark illustrates a wider reality: Development cooperation is under pressure. This is true across the board, but it applies especially to the kind of development cooperation pursued in recent years by Europe in general and Germany in particular – cooperation that has largely been guided by an aid-oriented logic and that has frequently been associated with an attempt to promote broader democratic and social values in partner countries.

This approach is under strain for several – often-interrelated – reasons. Domestically, public finances have become tighter, while voices that are sceptical of development cooperation have grown louder. Some view this cooperation as inefficient or even harmful, whereas others reject it because it does not fit in with their “my-country-first” agenda. At the same time, the number of recipient countries with democratically minded governments has steadily declined over the past two decades. What is more, the governments in question now also have access to alternative donors that do not impose onerous conditions involving democracy or good governance. Among these alternative donors, we see authoritarian powers in particular – and above all, China – operating in direct global competition with Western states and using development cooperation as a tool to expand and secure their own spheres of influence, which extend from Southeast Asia and the Middle East through to sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America.

All of this is well known. In the present issue, we aim to contribute to the debate both on how German and European development policy can hold its own in this environment and on what lessons might be drawn from the way other countries operate in this field.

Politicians and experts often argue that we need to be more effective in communicating what development cooperation has achieved and how it benefits our own societies. This view is certainly not wrong. Compared with other states that invest less, German and European development cooperation does indeed face a marketing problem both abroad and at home. This point is underscored by Andrew Mitchell, former Minister of State at the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, who stressed in an interview for the present issue how important it is to win over an increasingly sceptical domestic audience: "Every penny of international development is spent in our national interest", he insisted – a view that is very likely much closer to the truth than the above-cited words by the current US President. Even so, it is not enough for Germany simply to claim that everything we are doing is fine and that we just need to get better at explaining it.

Reading this issue, one cannot escape the impression that many other states have been much more successful in embedding their development policy in a broader foreign and economic strategy that serves their own interests in different regional arenas – not just the usual authoritarian suspects such as China and Russia, but also the Gulf states, Turkey, and Japan. Mathias Kamp and Jan-Ole Voß examine this dynamic with regard to sub-Saharan Africa, while Denis Suarsana does so for Southeast Asia.

In the latter region, Japan plays a particularly prominent role as a development partner. Paul Linnarz analyses how Tokyo has managed to establish itself as an attractive alternative to China in the eyes of Southeast Asian governments while also deriving clear security and economic benefits from its engagement for itself. To a far greater extent than Germany, Japan succeeds in mobilizing domestic companies to carry out development projects. While German-funded construction schemes are routinely awarded to foreign firms – all too often to state-owned corporations based in geopolitical rival countries – Japanese-financed projects much more frequently fill the order books of companies based in Japan itself.

Turkey's development cooperation is examined in an article by Ellinor Zeino, with the country representing a prime example of how a state can integrate development policy into what the author terms a networked approach to foreign policy, thereby enhancing its image while simultaneously advancing its own economic and political interests across regions. Calling this policy effective while also encouraging German policymakers to take a close look at it is not the same as adopting the Turkish government's political aims, nor does it mean turning a blind eye to the difficulties Ankara is likely to face as a result of its sometimes-pronounced backing of particular political and religious groups in other countries.

However, it is interesting to take a look at the way Turkish development cooperation views the world and the questions it seeks to answer: While this cooperation may also ask where help is needed, it primarily seeks out those countries and regions that are particularly relevant to Turkey's own interests, focusing on the best opportunities to gain influence swiftly through engagement. That is the difference between two ways of doing development cooperation: basing it purely on an aid-oriented logic, or aligning it with an underlying strategic purpose, as is recommended by Ingo Badoreck, Susanne Conrad, Magdalena Jetschgo, Fabian Wagener, Olaf Wientzek, and Nils Wörmer in the present issue. There are various options for embedding development cooperation strategically within wider foreign policy. One important step in this direction is to establish a National Security Council, as recently resolved by the current German government.

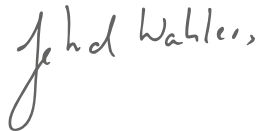
The conclusion to be drawn from all of this is not that humanitarian considerations are no longer relevant to our development policy – quite the opposite, especially from a Christian Democratic perspective – nor should it mean abandoning the promotion of democracy and fundamental human rights when we engage in such activities.

However, just as humanitarian considerations should be aligned more closely with our own interests – which range from economic concerns to the domestically important goal of reducing irregular migration – so too should we take care to remain sensitive to the historical, social, and political contexts of our partner countries when we seek to promote our values. With its broad range of actors, Germany's development cooperation is able to draw on a sound basis here. Churches and political foundations complement technical cooperation with their own tools, their deeply rooted networks, and their access to partner countries, thereby bringing precisely the kind of knowledge of local conditions and priorities that is essential for successful development policy.

Being more business-oriented, more interest-driven, more pragmatic, better coordinated at the European level, and ultimately also better communicated to the domestic public: That is the profile our development cooperation needs to match. Some of these attributes will be uncontroversial; others will be harder to swallow, particularly for the political Left. However, reality will not make allowances. All political actors who regard development policy as important – and important it is – should therefore work to ensure, as quickly as possible, that our activities in this area are more closely aligned with this profile. Failure to do so would put the very existence of development cooperation at risk.

I hope you find this report a stimulating read.

Yours,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Gerhard Wahlers". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly stylized font. The first name "Gerhard" is written in a more compact, cursive style, while "Wahlers" is written in a more open, cursive style.

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# Development Cooperation

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Lessons for Germany



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Visibility guaranteed: China is not the only player regularly implementing large-scale infrastructure projects in partner countries. Our photo shows the construction site of the new port of Al-Faw near Basra, Iraq, which is being built in cooperation with Turkey, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. [Photo: © Haidar Mohammed Ali, Anadolu Agency, Imago.](#)



# Pragmatism in Times of Crisis

## Recommendations for a Realignment of German Development Cooperation



### In a Nutshell

German development cooperation should be more closely aligned with economic priorities and should take a more strategic approach in order both to strengthen public support at home and to make it easier for German companies to access developing and emerging economies.

An open and transparent acknowledgement of Germany's own interests is viewed positively by partner countries because it is seen as respectful and legitimate, whereas paternalistic approaches shaped by socio-political debate in Germany weaken support both domestically and in partner countries.

Development cooperation also benefits the German population, for example, by helping other countries address global challenges such as migration, security, health crises, and climate change.

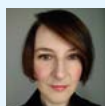
Transparent communication about successes and failures is essential in order to build trust and avoid unrealistic expectations that could potentially hand arguments to (right-wing) populist forces for their blanket criticism of engagement in development policy.

While realignment in line with national interests is important, from a Christian Democratic perspective, development cooperation also derives from an ethical obligation to combat poverty.

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German development cooperation is under considerable pressure. Following budget cuts at the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) under the country's former three-party coalition, the new federal government has likewise announced reductions in development cooperation spending. Surveys show that public support for development cooperation expenditure is declining, though a majority of the public still supports German involvement in principle.<sup>1</sup> While there are legitimate points of criticism regarding the orientation and effectiveness of German development cooperation, nationalist populist forces such as the AfD seek to undermine the legitimacy of German development policy altogether, at times in highly polemical fashion. This situation is compounded by major upheavals at the international level, as reflected – inter alia – in an intensifying systemic conflict and in uncertainty in transatlantic relations. Of particular importance is the new development policy approach adopted by the United States, which has resulted in significant gaps in funding for development projects and has fundamentally altered the conditions under which development cooperation takes place.

### *Coherent foreign policy*

German development cooperation will have no choice but to confront these financial and political realities and to realign accordingly. In adopting a holistic approach, Germany should do much more than before to align the promotion of development and democracy – and the protection of so-called global public goods, such as climate and health – with the pursuit of strategic goals in the areas of security, migration, and the economy. If this goal is to be achieved, development policy must be more closely coordinated with German foreign, security, and economic policy so as to increase the coherence of Germany's external actions. In this context, the decision by the new governing coalition to introduce a National Security Council with a central coordinating role is an important first step towards a genuinely coherent foreign policy.

### *Values-based pragmatism*

German development policy should be guided by a pragmatic stance that does not abandon the value orientation of development cooperation and that, at the same time, gives greater weight



to geostrategic and geoeconomic considerations. Clear criteria are needed to determine how and where Germany is to engage in development policy, and a willingness to more extensively involve domestic business is also necessary. It is additionally worth taking an open look at the approaches adopted by countries that have long used their development cooperation in a highly strategic way and with the extensive involvement of domestic economic actors. In addition, German development policy should work more consistently to ensure that its offerings are based on real needs on the ground rather than being guided by the passing fashions of domestic debate. When it comes to communication with the domestic audience, it makes sense to place greater emphasis on explaining both why Germany can also benefit from effective development cooperation and why development policy is an important instrument of statecraft – one that many other countries use in a targeted manner.

## Germany should view development policy as a relevant pillar of a strategically oriented foreign policy.

### *Realistic goals*

Such a “values-based pragmatism” has no hesitation in openly stating Germany’s strategic interests and is aware of both the potential and the limits of development engagement. This pragmatism stands for a form of development cooperation that sets realistic goals. However, what it does not do is pander to the forces that would recommend retreating into a nationalist protectionist fortress, that would discredit multilateral cooperation and that, in so doing, would advocate policies directly opposed to Germany’s interests. As an export nation and the world’s third-largest economy, Germany depends on trade, on cooperation and connectivity, and on benefits from positive developments in other world regions provided that Germany has good relations with them. This situation underlines

the importance of efficient development cooperation, which – with its wide range of actors – can achieve tangible improvements and can positively influence Germany’s external image and international reputation.

### *Part of Germany’s soft power*

Despite the undeniable challenges in ensuring that development cooperation is accurately targeted, Germany has built a strong reputation through its development engagement over recent decades along with what experts describe as a remarkable network by international standards – one “that is capable of supporting the work of diplomacy in both good times and bad”.<sup>2</sup> A complete departure from this development policy course would diminish Germany’s international standing and scope of influence while at the same time opening up new opportunities for systemic competitors such as Russia and China. Against the backdrop of the US withdrawal from multilateral forums and the severe consequences of the loss of a large amount of US development funding, expectations towards Germany and Europe are increasing. Germany should regard this situation as an opportunity: While the country obviously cannot replace the United States, it can demonstrate itself to be a reliable partner – especially now – through stable development cooperation and can also help to go at least some way towards countering the credibility crisis facing Western policy in many regions – a crisis that has been greatly accelerated by current US policy. Germany should view development policy as a relevant pillar of a strategically oriented foreign policy. In addition to promoting development in partner countries, development cooperation can also serve as an element of soft power that helps to advance Germany’s own foreign policy goals: After all, when pursued effectively, development cooperation enhances Germany’s political weight and power of persuasion internationally.<sup>3</sup>

### **Making development cooperation more strategic**

Beginning around one decade ago, international relations have steadily shifted from a rules-based



Where will the money come from? UN Secretary-General António Guterres addressing delegates at the fourth International Conference on Financing for Development in June 2025. Germany will not be able to fill the gap left by the US, but should seize the opportunity to act as a reliable international partner. [Photo: © Bianca Otero, Zuma Press, Imago.](#)

order – with comparatively broad acceptance of multilateral institutions – towards systemic rivalry and a revival of the notion of spheres of influence and power blocs. The main drivers of this development are Russia and China, which seek to undermine the world order established since the early 1990s – an order they believe guarantees the dominance of the “political West”. Russia’s goal is to weaken NATO and the EU in order to regain significant influence, particularly in the former Soviet republics, while China’s core foreign policy aim is to achieve hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region and to overtake the United States as the world’s leading power within the next two decades.

Accordingly, the joint agenda of Moscow and Beijing in this systemic rivalry is to divide Western

states, weaken or reshape multilateral organizations to serve their own purposes, and to discredit liberal democracies, not least through disinformation. These efforts also target countries outside the contested spheres of influence and power in Eastern and Central Europe and East Asia – notably in Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East. In place of the Western-oriented liberal development paradigm, China and Russia promote infrastructure projects, trade relations, and military cooperation and additionally seek to build a global counter alliance and ultimately an alternative world order, not least through initiatives such as the expansion of the BRICS alliance. These efforts by Russia and China are now taking place against a backdrop of profound uncertainty in transatlantic relations – a situation that not only requires Europe to massively increase



defence spending, but also raises the question as to the extent to which the United States still views itself as part of a Western community of values.

### **It is in Germany's and Europe's strategic interest not to leave the field open to Russia or China in key regions.**

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Given these heightened geopolitical tensions, Germany – as a central EU actor – will have to advocate more assertively at the international level for European interests and values. Development cooperation should play a role in this context and should be deliberately positioned as a counter-model to the authoritarian approaches of China and Russia, in which human rights and rule of law standards have no place. Given that resources are limited, it is important to give greater emphasis to the strategic significance of development cooperation without suggesting that German development cooperation could – on its own – solve complex challenges such as global migration movements, poverty reduction, or the stabilization of fragile regions. Development cooperation can only ever be one element of a broader approach to tackling these major issues: After all, their resolution depends first and foremost on the quality and political will of the governments concerned. This acknowledgement does not diminish the importance of development cooperation, but it does help guard against inflated expectations, which – as critics note – are by no means rare in the German development policy debate.<sup>4</sup> A more strategic orientation of German development cooperation should include the following aspects:

#### *Countering the appeal of anti-Western narratives*

It is in Germany's and Europe's strategic interest not to leave the field open to actors such as Russia or China, particularly in geopolitically significant developing countries. The different players involved in German (and European)

development cooperation can help counter Moscow's and Beijing's aggressive conduct and can also deprive of traction the narratives that predict the decline of the West, that praise China as the more "solidary" alternative, and that find a receptive audience in many developing countries.

In this context, particular importance is attached to development cooperation projects whose target groups are institutions and individuals capable both of influencing public debate in "systemically contested" countries and of helping to expose propaganda and disinformation. Examples include academic institutions, the research services of ministries or parliaments, think tanks, media outlets, and political parties as well as prominent individuals from politics, society, and academia. German development cooperation should thus place greater emphasis on building and strengthening such network-based cooperation, which can also yield geopolitical dividends.<sup>5</sup> When it comes to public debate in strategically important countries, German development cooperation actors also need to be more aware of how the dissemination of certain elements drawn from post-colonial theory can play into the hands of systemic rivals seeking both to delegitimise the rules-based world order and to stir up anti-Western sentiment. German development cooperation should thus avoid uncritically perpetuating such "post-colonial reinterpretations and assumptions".<sup>6</sup> The same applies to the artificial and – in light of the enormous development progress made by many countries – no-longer-timely division of the world into a "Global North" and a "Global South".

#### *Development cooperation and security policy*

Crises in ostensibly distant regions can spill over – as in the case of the so-called Islamic State – and can have direct consequences in Germany. Successful measures for conflict prevention therefore also have a positive impact on Germany's own security. In line with the concept of "comprehensive approach", development cooperation can contribute to stabilizing fragile states and to improving life prospects, thereby helping to

make it more difficult, for instance, for terrorist actors from the Islamist spectrum to recruit new members.

## Experienced politicians and diplomats call for adequate funding for development cooperation.

As such, development cooperation should be understood as part of a broader strategy for achieving security policy objectives. Sustainable security policy is based not only on the indispensable strengthening of military capabilities – that is, on the promotion of hard power – but also on complementing these steps by investing in soft power. Ahead of the last Munich Security Conference, experienced politicians and diplomats stressed the “security policy dimension” of development cooperation in a cross-party appeal calling for adequate funding of German development cooperation: “Development policy is security policy”,<sup>7</sup> they declared.

### *Strengthen cooperation and multilateralism*

To pursue its foreign policy goals, Germany needs functioning multilateral organizations and the willingness of other states to support its objectives, for example, in the UN context. Development policy is one instrument for enhancing Germany’s reputation and power of persuasion, thereby facilitating the formation of alliances and expanding its scope of influence.<sup>8</sup> A further value of development cooperation lies in Germany’s contribution to establishing reliable relationships and multiple channels of communication in developing countries as well as in generating detailed, on-the-ground knowledge of the local context – knowledge that can be put to use in foreign policy.<sup>9</sup>

It is in Germany’s interest to strengthen both multilateral institutions and the cooperative elements of the international order, which are under severe pressure, for example, from the

neo-imperial ambitions of Russia and from the global resurgence of national protectionist tendencies. A system of global powers based on spheres of influence – such as that which Moscow is seeking to impose by force through its war against Ukraine – disregards the sovereignty and self-determination of other states and fundamentally contradicts German and European interests and values.

With regard to the protection of global public goods such as climate and health, effective multilateral organizations are also vital. It is therefore important for Germany to maintain a high level of support both for UN bodies – not least including the WHO – and for initiatives such as the Global Fund and Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance. This commitment is gaining in importance because current US development policy is already having serious consequences in the field of global health and is threatening to reverse significant progress that has been made in recent years. This situation applies to the fight against HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria as well as to issues such as maternal health and child health.<sup>10</sup> According to experts, Germany plays a leading role in promoting global health. The country should maintain this role, particularly because development cooperation measures in this area are considered especially effective and are also highly relevant for the well-being in Germany itself, for example when it comes to pandemic prevention.<sup>11</sup>

Support for multilateral initiatives has also long become a fundamental question of Western credibility. A lack of credibility makes it more difficult to form alliances and can prompt (potential) partners to turn to other actors, thereby undermining a country’s own geopolitical position. This is another reason why it is important for Germany to continue to engage actively and reliably at the multilateral level and to take the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals as a point of reference for its own development policy. At the same time, and in line with the subsidiarity principle, there should also be regular scrutiny of which tasks are best addressed at the global, European, or national level.



## Development cooperation should be understood as one element in a strategy aimed at reducing irregular migration.

### *Limit irregular migration*

Irregular migration is the key mobilization issue for right-wing populist and right-wing extremist forces in Europe – forces that seek to undermine the central pillars of liberal democracy from within, to roll back the European integration process, and to act as influential amplifiers of pro-Russian narratives. If their further rise is to be prevented, a tangible reduction in irregular immigration to Europe is essential.

Development cooperation should be understood as one element in a strategy aimed at reducing irregular migration and at helping to ensure that people do not embark on the often-life-threatening journey to Europe. Strategic and ethical considerations can be well aligned in this regard. For instance, ensuring that facilities and relief organizations are adequately resourced to provide war refugees with dignified accommodation close to home is not only ethically defensible, but also in Germany's interest since this reduces incentives to continue on to Europe. The 2015 refugee crisis demonstrated this point clearly, for instance, when cuts to food aid for Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries were one of the factors that prompted so many to make their way to Europe.<sup>12</sup> Given today's acute humanitarian needs and large numbers of



Key role: The funding – or underfunding – of aid organizations such as UNHCR is a crucial factor in whether refugees can be accommodated humanely in their region of origin or whether they make their way to Europe.

Photo: © Jörg Böhling, Imago.

refugees, adequate funding for the relevant aid organizations (UNHCR, UNOCHA) is essential. It is also important to support fragile key countries in conflict regions that host particularly large numbers of refugees. As a key element of Germany's soft power, development cooperation can also increase the willingness of partner countries to take back rejected asylum-seekers. Countries such as the UK, France, and Sweden have also integrated the issue of migration into their development policy. German development cooperation should place greater emphasis on reducing the causes of displacement while also critically examining the extent to which past approaches have been successful or have even created undesirable incentives (as in Afghanistan).

### **When promoting democracy, a realistic mindset and long-term commitment are essential.**

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#### *Promote democracy pragmatically*

The promotion of democracy and the rule of law remains crucial as part of a development policy that is more closely oriented towards strategic interests. The examples of Canada and France show that a values-driven development policy and the pursuit of one's own interests need not be mutually exclusive. However, the case of the UK does illustrate that finding the right balance can be challenging: In recent years, Britain has aligned its development policy more closely with foreign policy priorities by merging its development and foreign ministries, but according to critics, the nation has lost development relevance – and thus also international standing and influence overall – due to budget cuts and an excessive focus on short-term goals.<sup>13</sup>

Germany is well advised to promote democracy and the rule of law. A strong rule of law increases the likelihood that investments will not be dissipated, while stable and representative institutions

reduce the risk of instability. Democracies are generally assumed to make better allies: The likelihood of good relations with Germany and the EU is greater in democratic societies, so we might speak of a “geopolitical dividend of promoting democracy”. Some countries – especially in Latin America – prefer Germany and Europe as partners precisely due to shared values.

When promoting democracy, however, a realistic mindset and long-term commitment are essential: Indeed, expecting far-reaching progress in a short time inevitably leads to disappointment. All development cooperation efforts in this field must be seen in light of the fact that more than 70 per cent of the world's population lives under regimes with autocratic characteristics. According to an OECD study, around 80 per cent of all public development funds in 2021 went to autocracies. Development policy cannot avoid working with autocracies, but it must be aware that development cooperation funds can indirectly stabilize authoritarian rule. This situation makes it particularly important to assess the weighting of individual instruments, priorities, target groups, and recipient countries.

In the case of transition countries and fragile democracies, the focus should be much more than at present on strengthening representative political institutions (parliaments and parties). The aim here is explicitly not to impose ready-made (democracy) templates; rather, considering the presence of illiberal donor states, development cooperation funds should be used more to strengthen networks and – where they exist – representative institutions, which can act as multipliers and can promote democratic approaches. Combating disinformation should also take on greater importance.

It is not uncommon to hear from countries where German development cooperation is active that Germany's offerings do not reflect local needs. In order to ensure relevant thematic priorities, it is essential to detach from domestic socio-political debate and to focus both on what is in demand in partner countries and on what resonates with their societies. An overly didactic approach – be

it on social issues or on climate matters – triggers defensive reactions and must be avoided at all costs.

### *Think of development cooperation in more European terms*

German development cooperation alone cannot possibly provide solutions to the multitude of global challenges; therefore, it will need to prioritize more clearly in terms of both substance and geography. Any debate about realigning German development cooperation should thus take account of the European context and should note strategic changes both in other EU member states and in Brussels. Stronger intra-European coordination does not mean abolishing national development policies. The conditions for a full Europeanization of development cooperation – as some have called for – are not (yet) in place because the interests and priorities of EU member states sometimes differ too starkly. Moreover, the European Commission would likely still be overburdened with such a task.

Nonetheless, German development cooperation should be more closely aligned with that of the EU and its member states so as to avoid redundancies, to make good use of resources, and to present competitive offers to key partners. It makes sense to strengthen coordination between national development policies (with the medium- to long-term goal of task-sharing within Europe) so that the specific expertise of individual states can be drawn on more systematically. For instance, Estonia could take a stronger role in supporting digitalization in partner countries, whereas Denmark and Germany have extensive capabilities in water management. No other EU state has such in-depth expertise in strengthening the rule of law, in building institutions (especially in work with parties and parliaments), or in promoting democracy as Germany does.

The success of the Global Gateway initiative – which was launched by the European Commission at the end of 2021 – is also in Germany's interest. The aim should primarily be to promote

sustainable infrastructure projects in partner countries, to do more to involve the private sector, and to deliver not only geopolitical benefits, but also an economic dividend for the EU. However, the initiative has not yet achieved the anticipated impact. Germany should also take an active role in discussions on a long-term reform of European development cooperation and – in negotiations on the EU Multiannual Financial Framework (2028 to 2035) – should advocate for a European development and partnership policy that is not geopolitically “blind”; that seeks a sound balance between Global Gateway projects, democracy promotion, and traditional development policy; that takes a more incentive-based approach (also by reducing direct budget support for certain autocratic countries); and that more closely addresses the reduction of causes of displacement based on a strategy for fragile states in the EU's extended neighbourhood. Germany should additionally press for the amendment or suspension of legislative acts (such as the deforestation regulation and sustainability reporting requirements) where these hamper cooperation with key partner countries and place disproportionate burdens on the engagement of European businesses.

## **Countries that have become satellite states of Russia or China should no longer receive development funds.**

### *Develop clear criteria*

In order to make German development cooperation more strategic, a criteria catalogue – which has been called for in the past – should be drawn up as the basis for government-to-government development cooperation – that is, for the “financially intense” projects implemented by the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) and the KfW Development Bank. Within the group of countries eligible for Official Development Assistance (ODA), this catalogue should prioritize countries that are of particular



relevance politically or economically. The terms “geostrategic” and “gloeconomic” could be operationalized using categories such as demographics, geographical location, resource endowment (especially rare earths), and diplomatic relevance. Existing Russian or Chinese influence should not in itself be a disqualifying factor, though countries that have effectively become satellite states of Beijing or Moscow should no longer receive development funds.

It is not possible to ever fully resolve the tension between engaging with strategically important actors – often with autocratic systems – on the one hand and the aspiration to promote democracy on the other hand. Examples can be found in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea littoral states. Although the framework conditions for development cooperation in countries such as Sudan, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Somalia often leave much to be desired, the influence of China, Russia, and Middle Eastern actors; individuals’ migration potential; the competition for resources; and the region’s location along a key shipping route are – from the perspective of Germany and its allies – weighty arguments for maintaining a presence on the ground. Only such a presence can limit the influence of competing actors and secure or indeed create Germany’s own channels of communication. Another strategically important region – not least from a security and migration policy perspective – is the Sahel. Additionally, Germany and Europe have an obvious interest in bringing about a successful stabilization process in Syria.

### **Make development cooperation more business-oriented**

Economic development is crucial when it comes to reducing poverty and increasing prosperity. Despite undeniable progress, the challenges in many countries remain substantial. It is thus hardly surprising that in many development partnership countries, priorities such as private sector promotion, infrastructure development, the expansion of trade relations, greater investment, and improved vocational training rank high on the agenda.

German companies can also make an important contribution to development in partner countries by creating jobs, generating local added value, and transferring technology and know-how, particularly given these companies’ strong reputations for environmental and social standards and for vocational training. In considering the role that development cooperation can play here, it is worth looking at other countries that regard greater involvement of domestic business actors as integral to their own development policies. The Netherlands, for example, is seen as a pioneer in this area, implementing close linkages between development and foreign trade policy with the goal of strengthening both trade and sustainability. The country relies in particular on public-private partnerships that promote cooperation between companies and state actors. However, the extent to which the cuts announced by the outgoing Dutch government will alter the development cooperation policy of the Netherlands remains unclear.

German development cooperation should be aligned more closely with business, thereby bringing it more into line with the approach adopted by other countries. Critics of development cooperation point out that under the former German government in particular there was an almost-complete disregard for the interests of German companies<sup>14</sup> – something that is also damaging to the broad public acceptance of development cooperation in general. Instead, German development cooperation should take more targeted action at various levels to make it easier for German companies to engage in developing and emerging economies.

### *More opportunities, fair competition*

Many geostrategic competitors tie development assistance to the condition that their own companies be involved in implementing projects (tied aid). OECD countries also frequently link their engagement in developing countries to the inclusion of domestic firms: According to the Federation of German Industries, Japan, the US, France, and the UK awarded between 60 and 85 per cent of their contract volume to domestic

companies in 2019/2020 even though they declared the bulk of their ODA-eligible spending to be untied aid. In Germany, by contrast, the proportion of domestic companies benefiting from state-funded development cooperation projects was significantly lower, at around 11 per cent.<sup>15</sup> German development policy must address this imbalance in the interest of creating a level playing field and must also make use of the flexibilities allowed under OECD rules on tying aid in the same way that other OECD competitors clearly do.

Compounding this situation, Chinese companies are often favoured in awards that prioritize cost above all else thanks to state subsidies. Award practices for development cooperation funds managed by the KfW that emphasize sustainability, social factors, and high technical quality standards can improve the prospects of German (and European) companies in developing countries.<sup>16</sup> There should also be a fundamental discussion on whether the current tendering practices – which often benefit systemic rivals – are still appropriate in light of present geopolitical developments.<sup>17</sup>

In addition, there should be a move towards increased competition between the GIZ and other major players (e.g. industry associations, the consulting sector) through open tenders for development cooperation programmes that promote economic development. This move would not only bring greater transparency, but also give specialist industry associations the opportunity to contribute their expertise to the implementation of development cooperation measures in the interest of German business.

#### *Good governance in the raw materials sector*

Given the need to reduce economic dependencies that are potentially harmful from a security policy perspective, Germany and the EU face the challenge of diversifying their procurement markets, especially for critical raw materials. Countries in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa in particular can play an important role here. A raw materials strategy should be backed up by

development policy measures.<sup>18</sup> Beyond supporting economic actors in meeting supply chain requirements, this strategy also involves promoting “good governance in the raw materials sector”.<sup>19</sup> However, while these requirements clearly pursue laudable goals, it is worth questioning the extent to which extensive supply chain regulations ultimately have counterproductive effects given that they impose a high administrative burden on companies. If German companies ultimately shy away from investing in developing countries due to high hurdles and if firms from systemic rival countries with lower labour or environmental standards step in instead, this situation benefits neither Germany’s diversification efforts nor the country’s development policy objectives.<sup>20</sup>

#### **Do more to highlight the benefits of development cooperation**

At a time when public consensus on development cooperation is eroding, a greater focus on geo-strategic and geoeconomic interests can help restore acceptance of the policy field. Partner countries also generally welcome it when Germany communicates its own interests openly because doing so is perceived not only as legitimate, but also as a sign of transparency and respect. By contrast, measures and concepts should be avoided that can fuel accusations of paternalism in partner countries and that can polarize debate at home, thereby weakening public support for development cooperation in Germany itself.<sup>21</sup>

**Development cooperation is not an end in itself; rather, its ultimate goal is to make itself redundant.**

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In order to reverse the trend of declining support for development cooperation, it makes sense to explain more clearly why development engagement in various fields also benefits people in Germany. In addition to migration, security, and

economic issues, these benefits are also easily understandable in global health and climate protection. The COVID-19 pandemic in particular has shown that in an interconnected world, regional developments can have potentially devastating global repercussions. The same is obviously true of climate change, which does not stop at borders. This observation shows that using development cooperation funds in these areas not only is sound in itself, but is also easy to communicate to large sections of the German public since the link to individuals' own lives and well-being is self-evident. A similar approach is adopted by the UK (clean energy, climate resilience, biodiversity), France (climate change, epidemic prevention), Norway (combating infectious diseases, environmental and climate protection), and Sweden (health protection, climate adaptation).

Better communication also means openly acknowledging failures and avoiding unrealistic objectives that not only overestimate Germany's influence, but – when inevitably unmet – hand (right-wing) populist forces arguments for their blanket criticism of development engagement. Conversely, positive trends to which development cooperation has – according to experts – “significantly and comprehensively”<sup>22</sup> contributed should be communicated more clearly, such as reductions in child mortality as well as improvements in healthcare and education.<sup>23</sup>

Regardless of the necessary closer integration with other policy areas, development cooperation requires a certain degree of autonomy,<sup>24</sup> which also means taking account of premises that go beyond cost-benefit considerations. From a Christian Democratic perspective in particular, it remains an ethical duty to pursue development cooperation with the aim of alleviating suffering, reducing poverty, and improving people's prospects. Voices in public discourse that seek to discredit ethical considerations in development policy outright should be confidently rebuffed. The Christian Democratic development policy narrative additionally differs from that of the Green and left-wing political spectrum because it is rooted in Christian personalism and in a

Christian ethic of responsibility while striving for a balance between global responsibility and pragmatic interest-based policy and also adhering to the principles of the social market economy, which include solidarity as well as freedom, individual responsibility, and subsidiarity. Development cooperation is not an end in itself; rather, its ultimate goal is to make itself redundant.

## Conclusion

Development cooperation is increasingly caught up in the vortex of geopolitical rivalries. This situation may be regrettable, but it cannot be changed. German development cooperation must thus respond accordingly. It should pursue a pragmatic approach that takes strategic and economic interests more fully into account than has been done in the past, also as a way of halting the trend of declining support for development cooperation measures at home.

One thing is clear: Many developing countries have little interest in aligning themselves with any particular geopolitical bloc. And today, they have a choice: Alongside China, actors such as Turkey and the Gulf states are also courting the favour of these developing countries in highly strategic ways and view development cooperation as a key element of their foreign policy. Germany and the EU will thus only play an important role in (potential) partner countries if they offer proposals that meet actual demand on the ground – and communicate their own interests openly rather than concealing them.

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*– translated from German –*



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*under discussion*

“Every penny of international development is spent in our national interest.”

An Interview with Sir Andrew Mitchell

Photo: © Vuk Valcic, Zuma Press, Imago.



Foreign, Commonwealth  
& Development Office

For this issue of *International Reports*, Canan Atilgan, Head of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's Office for the United Kingdom and Ireland, spoke with Sir Andrew Mitchell about development cooperation in times of populist attacks and tight budgets, the strengths and setbacks of British development cooperation, and how to reconcile morality and national interests.



**Sir Andrew Mitchell** is a senior British Conservative politician who served as Secretary of State for International Development from 2010 to 2012 and also as Minister of State in the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office from 2022 to 2024. He also served as Deputy Foreign Secretary and, thereafter, as Shadow Foreign Secretary. Sir Andrew was first elected to Parliament in 1987 and currently represents the constituency of Sutton Coldfield.

***International Reports (IR):** Germany and the UK are among the leading donors in international development assistance. However, we are seeing growing pressure on aid budgets across many countries, driven by fiscal constraints and the rise of strong right-wing populist parties campaigning against such spending. To start, we would like to hear your perspective: How has this debate evolved in the UK over the past few years?*

**Sir Andrew Mitchell:** Many years ago, during the leadership of Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, David Cameron, and Theresa May, there was a broad political consensus that international development mattered. All four prime ministers made it a clear priority. So much so, in fact, that under David Cameron – even at the height of what others have termed a period of austerity – the Conservative government ring-fenced the development budget. We committed to spending 0.7 per cent of gross national income on aid, and that promise was delivered. It was a Conservative government that first reached the 0.7 per cent target.

Leadership from the top matters. When political leaders speak up for the value of development, they shape public opinion. Conversely, when Boris Johnson took office – followed by Liz Truss and now, in particular, Sir Keir Starmer – development ceased to be a priority. Johnson disrespected the agenda and reduced spending from 0.7 per cent to 0.5 per cent, but even he would not have dared cut it to 0.3 per cent. Yet that is exactly what the current Labour government has done. Alarming, the polls suggest that this has been their most popular policy decision to date.

We are living in a very different era now. The public and political appetite for development aid has largely dried up. Britain, once a beacon in international development, now sends a very different message. When I was Development Secretary, I could call my German counterpart and say, “We’re committing significant funds – you should too.” Today, by contrast, German politicians justify their own cuts by pointing to Britain’s example. A country once seen as a development superpower has relinquished that role, and other nations are following suit. We are now in a bleak and challenging climate for international development.

***IR:** What explains this shift?*

**Mitchell:** It has come about for a number of reasons. First, the international system itself is under immense strain. There’s the detestable invasion of Ukraine by Vladimir Putin, destroying infrastructure and butchering Ukraine’s citizens. However, it is not just the war; it is also the fact that Putin is one of the permanent five members of the Security Council of the UN. When the UN is so fundamentally divided by having Putin in its own ranks, it becomes very difficult for it to speak with one voice.

Second, nationalists are rampant all around the world: From Xi Jinping to Donald Trump, from Narendra Modi to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, nationalism has triumphed. We see the same trend in Germany with the AfD and in France with the Le Pen movement. Just at the moment when we need a strong and integrated international system – to respond to pandemics, climate change and migration – we are instead gripped by isolationism.



Third, cutting aid may be politically easy, but the consequences are significant. When wealthy nations united behind the 0.7 per cent target, it was a binding together of the world: a demonstration to the “Global South” that we were willing to back our words with action. That message has now been lost.

*IR: What will be the consequences?*

**Mitchell:** As the UK, the US, and possibly Germany, withdraw support from African nations, not just in terms of aid but also long-term development and governance investment, we are leaving a vacuum. And that space will not remain empty. This vacuum will be filled by Russia, China and terrorist networks across the Sahel. For people living in extreme poverty, the terrorist recruiter will be a siren voice as he points to rich nations living in comfort just a few hundred miles away.

We are turning our backs on brilliant projects. Take PEPFAR – the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief – the initiative launched by George W. Bush to combat HIV/AIDS in the Horn of Africa. It saved countless lives. Now, as USAID funding is slashed, the availability of life-saving antiretrovirals is under threat. Between 1990 and 2020, we witnessed the greatest reduction in global poverty in human history. That progress is now being reversed.

Finally, let me address a point that often arises: We hear, from the Starmer government among others, that the money is being redirected to defence.

*IR: Indeed, the decision to reduce aid in favour of increased defence spending: Wasn’t that originally a Conservative proposal?*

**Mitchell:** We never explicitly said we would take money from development and give it to defence. That wasn’t party policy. It was cut by Johnson from 0.7 per cent to 0.5 per cent. That was because of the debt incurred over the pandemic. However, no Conservative leader has proposed cutting development to put it into defence.

I am convinced that development and defence are indeed two sides of the same coin. And soft power is much cheaper than hard power. If we neglect soft power – tools to combat disease, manage migration, and build humanitarian capacity – we miss the bigger picture entirely.

*IR: That is the reason why, in a previous comment, you called the redirection of funds from development aid to defence self-defeating.*

**Mitchell:** Self-defeating. Yes.

*IR: Let’s have a look at another aspect. There was a notable shift in the UK’s approach to development policy around 2020 under Boris Johnson. One major change was not only the budget cuts, but also the merger of two government ministries. This is a recurring topic of debate in Germany as well, including during the coalition negotiations earlier this year. In the end, however, we have consistently chosen not to merge our ministries. Given your government*

*experience as Minister of State at the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office – the FCDO – and also your role as Deputy Foreign Secretary, I would be very interested in your perspective. Do you see more challenges or more opportunities in such a merger? Particularly when the goal is to better align development policy with foreign and national security objectives.*

**Mitchell:** That is an important point. In the past, though not so much today, the alignment of development, defence, and diplomacy in the UK was achieved through the National Security Council. It served as the mechanism that brought these strands together. The alignment did not come from merging departments.

The merger of the Department for International Development – DfID – with the Foreign Office was, in my view, an unmitigated catastrophe. It was a terrible mistake.

*IR: Why?*

**Mitchell:** Because DfID was a proud department, staffed by individuals who truly knew what they were doing. As a result, it was the undisputed global leader in development. DfID introduced innovations such as the Multilateral Aid Review and the Bilateral Aid Review, both of which were designed to ensure value for money for taxpayers. These approaches attracted international attention. The Americans, Germans, French, Canadians, New Zealanders, and Australians all came to DfID to learn from our practices – many



Profound change: In 2020, the government under Boris Johnson enacted substantial spending cuts and merged the Department for International Development with the Foreign Office. [Photo: © Vudi Xhymshiti, VXimages, Imago.](#)

of which they adopted themselves. DfID was not just a department of state; it was home to some of the world's best development experts. Many of the greatest ideas in the field originated there and were emulated internationally. I used to say that while America was a military superpower, Britain was a development superpower. No one argued with that definition. I would say that, since Suez, the only example of Britain showing real and respected leadership was the work Britain did on international development.

Once DfID was merged, that expertise quickly dissipated. The professionals who had commanded respect across the international system – whether at the UN, the World Food Programme, or other institutions in New York, Geneva, or Washington – left. They were not prepared to be subsumed under diplomatic leadership. The result was confusion and internal turf wars within the Foreign Office. The clarity of purpose and leadership that had once given Britain real weight in development policy was lost.

*IR: Irreversibly?*

**Mitchell:** Reviving DfID will be extremely difficult. Because people are understandably reluctant to return to a structure that could be dismantled again. This has already happened twice, and many fear it would happen a third time. Moreover, the few senior civil servants who remain in Whitehall are unlikely to want to spend the final years of their careers rebuilding a department and navigating interdepartmental conflicts.

*IR: Let us turn to the question of priorities and regional focus under the Conservative government. What were the main objectives in terms of sectors? Was the emphasis primarily on poverty alleviation, or more on economic development?*

**Mitchell:** All of this was set out very clearly in the white paper I authored, which was launched by Rishi Sunak in November 2023. Poverty alleviation is right there in the title, but the most compelling chapters are those focused on finance and investment.

The central idea is that the most effective way to lift people out of poverty, whether in the UK or in the world's poorest countries, is through being economically active. It is about having a job and creating opportunities. That is why investment is so important, particularly through British International Investment – BII –, which I believe is now the world's leading development finance institution. BII is currently investing three-quarters of a billion US dollars in Africa.

This is not about loans, this is risk equity. The recipients are not paying it back in the conventional sense. It is a form of long-term investment, and it is one of the key ways in which you build prosperity.

*IR: Does that mean it also takes into account trade and investment considerations that align with the UK's national interest?*

**Mitchell:** Of course. But it is more than that. International development aims to stop conflict, and once conflict has ended, to reconcile and rebuild societies. It also seeks to foster prosperity, because having a job and being economically active is the most effective way for people to lift themselves out of poverty. That is why I would argue that every penny of international development is spent in our national interest.



*IR: Speaking of the national interest: In the past, development aid was primarily framed in moral terms. It was about the global responsibility that countries like the UK, Germany, and other European nations held. Today, however, that moral framing has largely disappeared. The discussion now focuses much more on national security and foreign policy priorities. Given that the UK played a pioneering role in mounting the case of development aid from the perspective of national interests, it would be great to have your assessment: How successful was this approach of putting national security interests before moral obligations?*

**Mitchell:** That is again a very interesting point. We have spent a lot of time discussing this, particularly in conversations with researchers at Birmingham and London University who closely track public opinion on development issues. In the UK, roughly half the population opposes what they perceive as sending money overseas. Their position is often summed up by the phrase, “Charity begins at home”, to which I always respond, “Yes, but it doesn’t end there”.

The other 50 per cent believe that supporting international development is the right thing to do. They believe Britain should be a force for good and that we should use this small amount of money to help make a better world, supporting the people affected by disasters and hardship. Pollsters say the moral argument works best. But my view is that we have already reached those who respond to that reasoning. The challenge now is to develop a new narrative. One that still acknowledges the moral imperative but also emphasizes how it is hugely in our national interest to spend on development aid. That is how we can broaden public support.

*IR: How successful has that been?*

**Mitchell:** We have to be honest with ourselves: We have not yet succeeded in winning over the wider public with the argument of national interest. Interestingly, during the period of austerity under David Cameron, public support for development actually increased. So, it is not impossible. In those days, we were strongly advancing the case that development spending served the national interest, and that argument gained at least some traction.

Now, however, we have to understand that we are on the back foot, and that cutting aid is very popular. We have to find a new compelling argument that will make people say: “Yes, I understand why we should be spending more money on international development.” That is why we are currently talking to many people in the international philanthropic and political sector. We hope to continue this dialogue with the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung as a political foundation as well.

*IR: If people in your constituency asked you to provide one or two examples where development aid really worked – what would you tell them?*

**Mitchell:** So I would say that if you look around Africa and you look particularly in Kenya, a bit in Nigeria as well, Rwanda, you see British development aid at work building jobs. And you then see that those investments come back to Britain, because when, for example, Rwanda wants to raise capital, it uses our capital markets here. So that’s one way British development aid builds prosperity. There are loads of examples.



Here's one that shows the connection between aid and quelling conflict: Somalia is a country where Britain is very heavily invested. And that is not just because we want to. We recognize that women and children in Somalia have a terrible time. I always wear this wristband against female genital mutilation, and Britain was supporting very good local partnerships that aim at stopping that. It's not just a moral issue. It's also a security issue: By improving governance in Somalia, we help them push back the al-Shabab terrorists there. At one point there were more British passport holders training in terrorist camps within Somalia than there were in Afghanistan and Pakistan. So, by intervening there, we don't only stop terror and misery in Somalia. We stop it being exported, possibly onto the streets of Berlin, London or Birmingham.

*IR: Talking about international development cooperation today, there is one aspect that we have not discussed in detail yet but that needs to be mentioned: US development policy. What consequences will the withdrawal of the US from development aid have for the wider international system?*



In the end, the City benefits too: Through its development cooperation in countries like Kenya and Rwanda, the UK has created many jobs, says Sir Andrew Mitchell. And when Rwanda needs capital, it turns to London banks.  
Photo: © Jjfarq, Dreamstime, Imago.

**Mitchell:** The withdrawal of America is very severe indeed because they did what the Johnson government did: They took the cuts in-year which means you're going to your partners and saying: "I'm sorry. I know we signed a contract, but we can't pay." So, as a result of the decision on USAID, clinics in Africa were closed. They weren't allowed even to use the antiretrovirals they had stored. They were stopped from doing it altogether, which is a terrible thing to do. So, we're not clear yet what America, which is the biggest supplier of food aid, intends to do about that. This was American pork barrel politics. They used to take the surplus from American farmers and then insist on shipping it around the world in American ships. So it was a very nationalistic thing to do. I don't think they will really stop that food aid, because there are farmers who overproduce for what's needed in the American domestic market. These farmers expect their crops to be used overseas. So, I'm not sure to what extent the US withdrawal will be disruptive to food-aid. But the decision they took on USAID was incredibly bad for America's reputation. It had real consequences on the health and education of vulnerable people and reflected very badly on America. But if you're an isolationist president, you don't really care about overseas.

*IR: Let's close our conversation by giving a general outlook: What do you believe will the future of development aid look like in actuality?*

**Mitchell:** There will be less money, there will be a greater emphasis on investment. And the current thing that people are saying is: "African countries, they don't want aid, they want investment." And of course, that's true. They do want investment. Britain is a world leader in that through BII. When I came into government, it had 47 employees. It went down to 17 when my reforms bit in. And today it has over 800 people working. Investing in poor countries. That's what will happen and governments will support that investment. But you can't expect successful investment in very poor countries unless you build up their human capacity. And that requires education and health. Of course, we can do much less grant funding, which we have done and are doing. And we can put the money into technical assistance. But at the end of the day, these countries are going to need money, at least from the multilateral system, if not bilaterally.

So, overall, I think there will be more emphasis on investment. There will be an emphasis on technical assistance rather than grant money. And I think there will be a greater rigour – which Britain has had actually through the ICAI, the Independent Commission on Aid Impact. Greater focus on accountability and transparency and also an acceptance that when it comes to disasters, our countries must be leaders in going to the help and assistance of people who are caught in desperate need. But above those individual points, there needs to be an overarching narrative about the importance of development if we are to build it and if we are to win greater public support. We did pay a lot of attention to that, but we clearly didn't do enough. But that's something we should all be working on. And that's where the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung might possibly come in, right? To try and think about this.

*IR: Sir Andrew, thank you for your time and your thoughtful comments.*

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*The interview was conducted by Canan Atilgan.*



# The Trinity Approach

How Japan Combines Aid, Trade, and Investment in Its Development Cooperation

Photo: © AFLO, Imago.



JICA市ヶ谷ビル  
JICA Ichigaya Building

独立行政法人 国際協力機構  
Japan International Cooperation Agency

## In a Nutshell

Japan is widely regarded in Asia as a trustworthy partner whose development cooperation promotes self-reliance rather than dependence. Increasingly, that development cooperation must be viewed within the context of Tokyo's strategic rivalry with China.

While the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is responsible for planning and coordination, implementation is handled primarily by the Japan International Cooperation Agency. Japan concentrates its development cooperation more heavily than most donor countries on a small number of Asian partner states, with a strong focus on infrastructure projects.

In addition to fostering sustainable development in its partner countries, Japanese development policy also aims to cultivate a favourable international environment that serves Japan's own security, development, and economic interests. At the heart of this strategy lies the so-called Trinity Approach – a three-pronged model based on aid, trade, and investment.

Japan has been significantly more successful than Germany in aligning development cooperation with the interests of its own economy. Tokyo often relies on tied aid arrangements, which require recipient countries to award development project contracts to Japanese companies.



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When Japanese politicians travel abroad for government consultations, they are welcomed as respected guests. A recent survey in ASEAN countries found that nearly 60 per cent of respondents consider Japan the most trustworthy country in Asia. Indeed, the country is seen “as a supportive partner, fostering self-reliance rather than dependency”.<sup>1</sup> This strong international reputation goes hand in hand with economic advantages: According to the Research Institute of Economy, Trade and Industry (RIETI), Japan’s economic net benefit from official government delegations between 2001 and 2020 amounted to 53 billion US dollars – an average of 2.6 billion US dollars per year.<sup>2</sup>

A substantial share of these business deals can be traced back to Japan’s development cooperation. In 2023, RIETI reported that 17 per cent of all overseas infrastructure projects awarded to Japanese companies between 1970 and 2020 were funded through official development assistance (ODA). The Japanese economy benefited most when infrastructure projects were supported by a combination of loans and grants. Grants could be used in advance, for example, to fund feasibility studies on the opportunities and risks of an investment, thereby generating “goodwill effects” for Japanese companies – even before Tokyo enters the competition for an infrastructure project with an ODA loan.<sup>3</sup>

Saori Ono and Takashi Sekiyama do not dispute the positive impact of development cooperation on the Japanese economy but argue that ODA plays only a supportive role in the early stages of foreign direct investment (FDI). Looking at the period from 1990 to 2002 – a time when Japan saw a sharp rise in FDI – the authors identify three possible explanations:

- a) Information about the recipient country’s business environment was passed exclusively to Japanese companies via official development cooperation,
- b) the presence of development cooperation in the recipient country reduced Japanese companies’ perceived investment risks, and
- c) through development cooperation, recipient countries became familiar with Japanese business practices and regulatory frameworks.<sup>4</sup>

### Definition, goals, and “philosophy”

According to the revised Development Cooperation Charter (DCC), which was updated in mid-2023, development cooperation in Japan is defined as “international cooperation activities that are conducted by the government and its affiliated agencies for the main purpose of development in developing regions”.<sup>5</sup> Under this definition, any activity financed with ODA funds is considered development cooperation. Other forms of official development finance – such as concessional loans to multilateral institutions (so-called other official flows) and private flows, including direct investments and export credits with maturities of over one year – are categorized separately.

The stated goals of Japan’s official development cooperation include freedom, peace, stability, the rule of law and the protection of human rights, “human security”, poverty alleviation, digitalization, health, education, inclusion, equality, transparency, fairness, trust, environmental protection, and climate change mitigation. Development cooperation is additionally intended to promote “self-reliant development through support for self-help efforts by developing countries”<sup>6</sup> – including through “South-South and triangular cooperation initiatives”.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, Japan's development cooperation is expected to foster "a favorable international environment for Japan"<sup>8</sup> and to "contribute to the realization of national interests".<sup>9</sup> These interests include "securing peace and security for Japan and its people and achieving further prosperity through economic growth".<sup>10</sup> In dialogue with partner countries, the aim is the "co-creation of social values". This collaborative approach is intended to help Japan develop "solutions for its own economic and social challenges and to its economic growth on a domestic level".<sup>11</sup> Using concepts such as "quality growth" and "quality infrastructure", Japan promises development cooperation "that does not involve debt traps or economic coercion, and that does not undermine the independence and sustainability of developing countries".<sup>12</sup>

Japanese development cooperation also promotes "the consolidation of democratization"<sup>13</sup> and commits to "pay[ing] adequate attention to the situation in the recipient countries regarding the process of democratization, the rule of law and the protection of basic human rights".<sup>14</sup> In the revised DCC, civil society is explicitly described as a "strategic partner" in ensuring that Japan's development cooperation is "attuned to the needs of populations"<sup>15</sup>. However, the DCC contains no reference to political parties or political party support, nor is the word "religion" mentioned at any point.

### **In the late 1980s, Japan briefly became the world's largest donor country.**

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While the current DCC marks a significant policy reset, the underlying "philosophy" of Japanese development cooperation has changed little since the 1970s. It remains rooted in the so-called request-based principle.<sup>16</sup> Strictly speaking, this principle states only that ODA should respond to demand. However, the notion of "demand" in Japan's case has never referred exclusively to the needs and wishes of developing countries.

Instead, Japanese development cooperation has long operated within a finely balanced trinity of aid, trade, and investment. This "trinity" therefore also reflects the interests of the donor country.

At least as far back as in the early 1970s, Japanese trading and consultancy firms were already meeting with foreign partners in order to jointly develop commercial projects. During the "East Asian Miracle" period between 1965 and 1990, the Asia-Pacific region experienced faster economic growth than any other part of the world.<sup>17</sup> The demand for power plants, dams, and logistics infrastructure – for sea, air, rail, and road transport – was enormous,<sup>18</sup> and Japanese firms were keen to benefit. At the same time, the post-war Japanese governments had committed to reparation payments.<sup>19</sup> As a result, large-scale foreign investments that could not be financed under market conditions – often due to high risk – were relabelled as development aid, thereby giving rise to ODA requests from recipient countries to the government in Tokyo.<sup>20</sup> In the late 1980s, Japan briefly became the world's largest donor country.<sup>21</sup>

### **Volume, organization, and responsibilities**

Final figures on Japan's use of ODA for the previous year will not be published by the OECD until the end of 2025.<sup>22</sup> According to preliminary 2023 data<sup>23</sup> based on the grant equivalent method,<sup>24</sup> Japan spent a total of 19.6 billion US dollars (0.44 per cent of gross national income, GNI) on ODA. Of this total, 81.5 per cent went to bilateral assistance. Germany, by comparison, spent 37.9 billion US dollars (0.82 per cent of GNI), although its share of bilateral ODA was significantly lower, at 71.8 per cent. Among the 33 members of the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC), including the EU, only Australia, New Zealand, Norway, and the United States allocated more than 80 per cent of their ODA to bilateral cooperation in 2023.

Containing around 2,000 employees – with 80 per cent being in Japan and 20 per cent being abroad – the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) is the country's principal implementing





A cautionary example: China took over this port in Sri Lanka after the island state was no longer able to pay off the debts accumulated through the project. Japan is explicitly committed to avoiding such situations in its development cooperation. Photo: © Xu Qin, Xinhua, Imago.

organization. According to OECD figures from 2022, JICA delivers just over 70 per cent of Japan's total ODA.

### **There is no Japanese equivalent to Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development.**

A further 19 per cent is managed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), with the remainder being spread across the budgets of several other ministries.<sup>25</sup> MOFA is responsible for the planning and coordination of Japan's development cooperation and ODA. There is no Japanese equivalent to Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development.

In addition to its approximately 100 overseas offices, JICA also operates over one dozen domes-

tic offices in Japan. These offices work closely with the Japanese prefectural governments. One of the responsibilities of these local offices is to "provide clear and careful explanations about the significance and outcomes of development cooperation as well as appreciation from the international community to the wider public".<sup>26</sup> The Japanese government acknowledges "the fact that development cooperation is funded by taxes paid by the people of Japan".<sup>27</sup> Public understanding and support are therefore described as being "essential to implement development cooperation".<sup>28</sup>

While ODA is implemented by JICA under MOFA's direction, other public financial flows are managed by various other organizations.<sup>29</sup> In the future, both financing instruments are to be more closely integrated. The Development Cooperation Charter promises that government and implementing agencies will "work as one" in the delivery of assistance.<sup>30</sup> Japan also intends to mobilize greater private-sector funding for more



“effective” development cooperation. To that end, suitable companies are to be involved as early as during the project planning stage. JICA and Nippon Export and Investment Insurance signed an agreement to this effect at the end of 2023.<sup>31</sup>

Although not itself responsible for public financial flows, the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) also plays a role in linking development cooperation with the private sector. With 76 overseas offices in 56 countries, including five in India alone, JETRO originally focused on promoting Japan’s foreign trade. Today, however, it increasingly seeks to attract foreign companies to set up operations in Japan. JICA and JETRO regularly appear together at high-level events and government meetings,<sup>32</sup> such as at the 5<sup>th</sup> Japan-Arab Economic Forum in July 2024. At the 8<sup>th</sup> Tokyo International Conference on African Development, which was held in Tunis in 2022, JICA, JETRO, the UN Development Programme UNDP, and the UN Industrial Development Organization UNIDO launched a partnership in order to promote

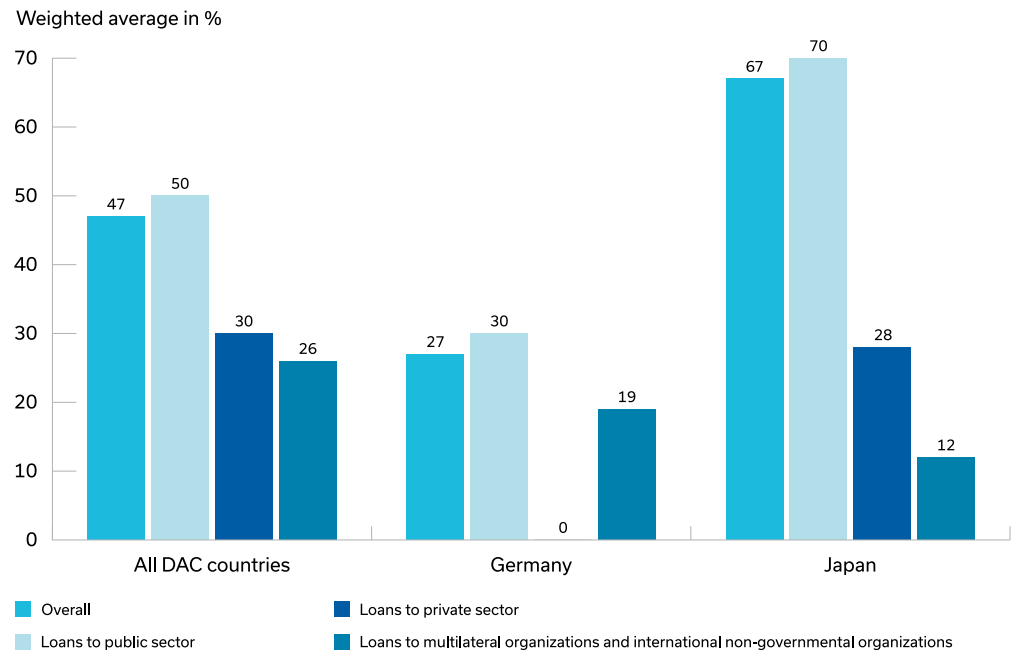
trade and investment between Japanese and African private companies.<sup>33</sup> In August 2024, Ghana’s Deputy Minister of Finance – Stephen Amoah – publicly thanked both JICA and JETRO “for supporting the Japanese private sector in establishing production facilities” in Ghana.<sup>34</sup>

**Long-term, low-interest loans are a defining feature of Japanese development cooperation.**

**Loans versus grants**

While DAC members have recently increased the share of loans in their ODA commitments – partly due to large-scale credit lines to Ukraine – the majority of ODA continues to be provided in the form of grants. Japan, by contrast, has long focused on long-term, low-interest loans as a

**Fig. 1: Average grant element of ODA loans for 2022, by channel of delivery**



Source: own illustration based on Anthony Kiernan et al. 2025, n. 22, p. 23.

**Fig. 2: Characteristics of 2022 ODA loans by income group for Japan ① and Germany ② (weighted averages)**

		LDCs	LMICs	UMICs
Share of income group in total loans (%)	①	20.6	63.0	15.0
	②	2.3	42.5	32.4
Average maturity (years)	①	30.2	35.8	26.8
	②	17.9	21.1	15.9
Average interest rate (%)	①	0.7	0.6	0.6
	②	1.8	2.7	3.0
Average grant element* (%)	①	72.0	70.0	53.0
	②	48.0	35.0	21.0
of which: Loans to the public sector (%)	①	75.0	71.0	57.0
	②	48.0	35.0	21.0
of which: Loans to the private sector (%)	①	25.0	29.0	28.0
	②	n. a.	n. a.	n. a.

LDCs – Least Developed Countries

LMICs – Lower-Middle-Income Countries

UMICs – Upper-Middle-Income Countries

\* New accounting method with grant equivalent

Source: own illustration based on Anthony Kiernan et al. 2025, n. 22, p. 12.

defining feature of its development cooperation. OECD data from 2022 illustrate this situation clearly.<sup>35</sup> In addition to loans to recipient governments, these figures also cover loans to multilateral organizations, international NGOs, and the private sector (see figure 1). Measured against the DAC average – and compared with Germany – loans play a significantly greater role in Japan’s overall ODA portfolio. In most cases, these loans are issued directly between Tokyo and the governments of the recipient countries.

The average interest rate on ODA loans among DAC members rose from 0.95 per cent in 2015 to 1.89 per cent in 2022, while average loan maturity fell from 26 to 24 years over the same period. In this context, too, Japan diverges significantly from the DAC average. According to OECD data, Japan’s ODA loans to lower-middle-income countries (LMICs) in 2022 not only had a much longer average maturity (35.8 years), but also carried much lower interest rates of 0.6 and 0.7 per cent, respectively (see figure 2).

One key reason Japan strongly prioritizes lower-middle-income countries (63.0 per cent) in its loan disbursements is its use of so-called tied aid. According to DAC recommendations, this form of assistance is not permitted for the least developed countries (LDCs) and is allowed for upper-middle-income countries (UMICs) only under strict conditions.

### Tied versus untied aid

Tied aid was long a defining feature of Japanese development cooperation and has seen something of a revival in recent years. “Tied” in this context means that only Japanese companies may be contracted to carry out infrastructure projects abroad that are financed with yen loans. The required materials and services are supplied primarily from Japan, and the maintenance of equipment and facilities is later also entrusted to Japanese providers. By contrast, untied aid allows companies from other countries to bid for project implementation contracts.

Up until the mid-1970s, nearly all yen loans were tied. Ten years later, however, this was true for only one-third of Japanese loans. By the mid-1990s, all yen loans had become untied.<sup>36</sup> This shift was met with frustration by Japanese industry. Firms wanted to expand and use the “Trinity Approach” to open up new markets in Asia through development cooperation. In the 1990s, Japan’s export economy was also experiencing a downturn. Nevertheless, under pressure from Europe and the United States, the Japanese government was forced to reduce its tied aid to zero. Among DAC donors in the West, poverty reduction had become the dominant goal of development cooperation. Japan’s growth-oriented ODA model – focused on (tied) loans and infrastructure projects – came under growing criticism. In 2004<sup>37</sup> and again in 2010,<sup>38</sup> DAC peer reviews recommended that the Japanese government increase the share of grants in its aid portfolio and step up its poverty reduction efforts. Then, China entered the picture.

Beijing adopted the core elements of Japan’s “Trinity” model, applying the approach of tied



loans and large-scale infrastructure projects to its Belt and Road Initiative, thereby promoting its own external economic interests and – to the frustration of the United States – steadily expanding its international influence beginning in 2013. By 2016, when China secured a 99-year lease on Sri Lanka’s Hambantota Port in return for debt relief, it had become clear that the initiative also served strategic interests that extended beyond the South China Sea to include the control of sea lanes and trade routes.

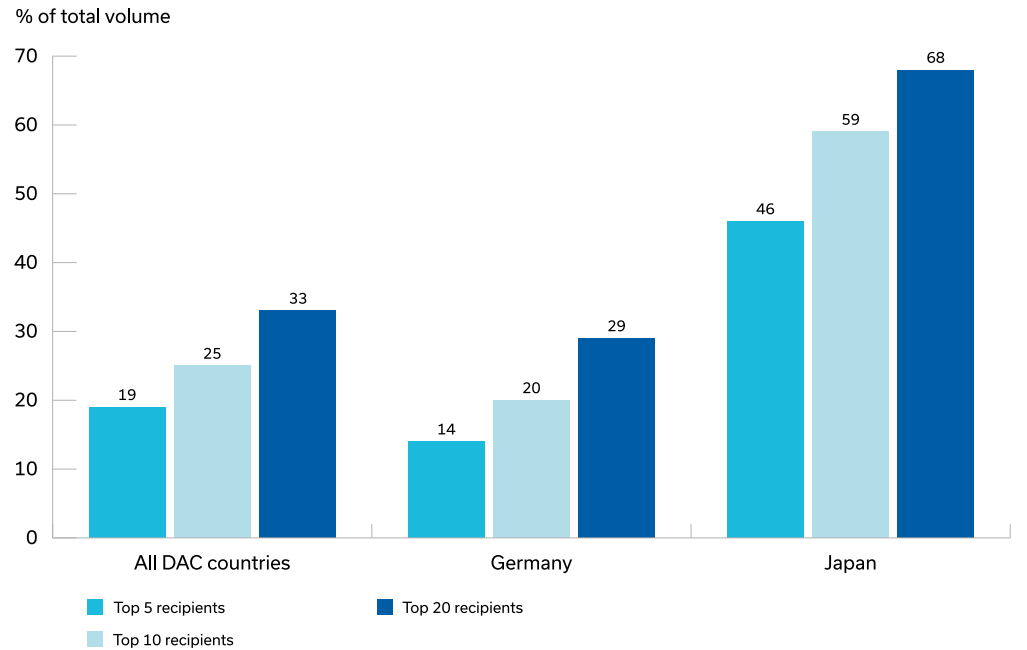
**Japan launched its Quality Infrastructure initiative in order to offer an attractive alternative to China.**

Japan was initially faced with the challenge of distinguishing its ODA from China’s and making it more competitive.<sup>39</sup> With weak economic growth and high levels of public debt, increasing the

share of grants was not an option. Tied yen loans then came back into fashion. In order to offer an attractive alternative to China while also avoiding renewed criticism for investing too much in economic growth and too little in poverty reduction, Japan launched its Quality Infrastructure initiative. To support this initiative, the country defined three guiding standards: “resilient”, “inclusive”, and “sustainable”. Indonesia – one of Japan’s key partner countries – endorsed the code of conduct for responsible lending, with other developing and emerging economies following suit. China had no grounds on which to reject the Japanese code. At the 2019 G20 Summit, the Japanese criteria for quality infrastructure were formally adopted.<sup>40</sup>

Later that same year, the United States established the Development Finance Corporation (DFC). As stated on its website, “DFC investments in infrastructure and critical minerals help address the multitrillion-dollar global gap for infrastructure financing, and counter China’s growing influence around the world.”<sup>41</sup> By that point, the share

**Fig. 3: Concentration of bilateral ODA on main recipients**



Source: own illustration based on OECD 2025, n. 23. Rounded percentages.

of tied aid in Japan's overall ODA had risen once again to 36 per cent. The DAC average stood at 22 per cent,<sup>42</sup> while Germany reported 16 per cent.<sup>43</sup>

## Japan concentrates its development cooperation on a small number of countries.

### Where does Japan's ODA go?

In 2023, Japan's top ten recipient countries by financial volume (in decreasing order) were India, Bangladesh, the Philippines, Iraq, Indonesia, Ukraine, Vietnam, Myanmar, Egypt, and Cambodia. These ten countries alone accounted for nearly 60 per cent of Japan's total ODA (see figure 3). By comparison, Germany's top 20 recipient countries together accounted for just 29 per

cent of its ODA. Even against the DAC average, Japan showed a much higher degree of concentration in its development cooperation.

Another notable feature is the large share of Japan's ODA that was allocated to economic infrastructure projects (see figure 4). This sector is far less prominent in the ODA profiles of Germany and the DAC average. Japan also placed greater emphasis on the productive sector, which accounted for around 13 per cent of its bilateral ODA – a higher proportion than in Germany or among DAC countries overall.

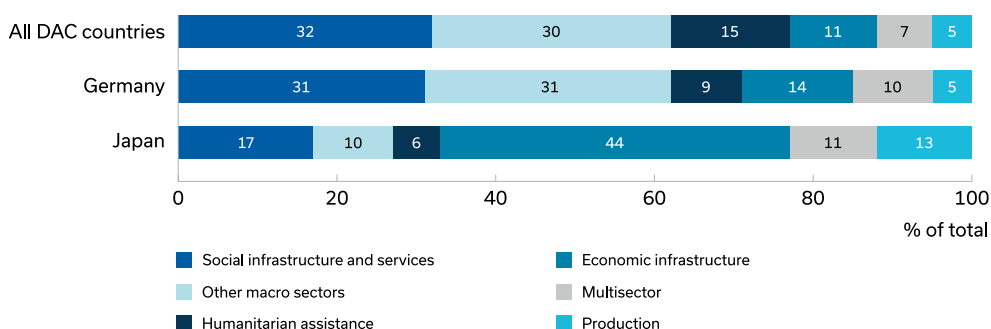
While Germany devoted by far the largest share of its ODA in this category to energy projects, Japan prioritized “transport and storage”, which accounted for nearly 80 per cent of its spending in this sector in 2023 (see figure 5). By contrast, Germany allocated just nine per cent to this area, which was well below the DAC average.



Focus on infrastructure: Japan uses a large part of its development budget for bridges, roads, and similar projects. The picture shows a bridge over the Mekong in Cambodia, built with Japanese funding.

Photo: © Kyodo News, Imago.

**Fig. 4: Bilateral ODA by sector**



Source: own illustration based on OECD 2025, n. 23. Deviations from sums are due to rounded percentages.

With its continued use of tied aid, its strong focus on a few key emerging economies, its emphasis on economic infrastructure, and its growing coordination with the private sector, Japan's bilateral ODA is well positioned to continue leveraging the traditional trinity of aid, trade, and investment for its own benefit. However, that alone is not enough.

### Development and the shifting geopolitical landscape

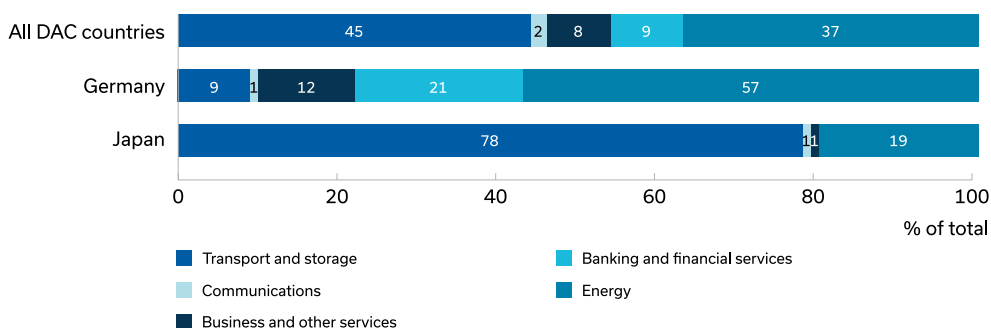
The challenge lies in the fact that “the division of roles between the public and private sectors in development cooperation is changing”.<sup>44</sup> Private Japanese companies now invest significantly more in developing countries than does the government. Between 2021 and 2022, Japan's net ODA rose from 15.7 billion to 16.7 billion

US dollars. At the same time, private financial flows surged from 21.5 billion to 37.4 billion US dollars.<sup>45</sup>

### Development cooperation is also part of Japan's security policy.

In relation to China and India, Japan's development cooperation and foreign economic policy in recent years have evolved in parallel with changing geopolitical demands. Japan stopped providing yen loans to China in 2007. Since then, India has become by far the most important recipient of Japanese ODA. While Japanese FDI in China fell by nearly 32 per cent between 2022 and 2023,

**Fig. 5: ODA by type of economic infrastructure**



Source: own illustration based on OECD 2025, n. 23. Deviations from sums are due to rounded percentages.



reaching 3.8 billion US dollars, investment in India rose by 23 per cent, reaching around five billion US dollars.<sup>46</sup>

While Japan's ODA and the geostrategic priorities of its government played a role in the shift in Japanese investment towards India, these items were ultimately of secondary importance to the investors themselves. What mattered most were India's stable growth potential, market size, and wage levels as well as the skills of its workforce.<sup>47</sup>

In order to ensure that commercial enterprises – including increasingly powerful institutional investors, pension funds, asset managers, and insurance companies – not only take on a key role in development cooperation amid stiff competition with China, but also align their investment decisions with geopolitical priorities as well as with profit expectations, the Japanese government has significantly expanded its policy toolbox. Japan's National Security Strategy – adopted at the end of 2022 – thus mandates that ODA be “strategically deployed” by the government, guided by the vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP).<sup>48</sup> In areas in which such strategic engagement cannot be covered – or legally funded – through ODA, a new instrument was introduced in 2023: Official Security Assistance (OSA). This tool also aligns with Japan's arms export and technology transfer rules and is coordinated closely between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Security Secretariat,<sup>49</sup> and the Ministry of Defence under the broader National Security Strategy. Like ODA, OSA is primarily aimed at developing countries. Its objective is to support “cooperation for the benefit of the armed forces and related organizations of recipient countries where the improvement of security capacities is considered important in terms of creating a desirable security environment for [the] country”.<sup>50</sup> In this respect, development cooperation is also part of Japan's security policy. Indeed, Tokyo views such cooperation as “one of the most important tools of [Japan's] diplomacy”.<sup>51</sup>

The close interlinking of security, development, and economic interests is an approach that could

also offer valuable insights for German and European development policy. As Japan's experience shows, emergency aid for the poorest of the poor on the one hand and investment in transport infrastructure on the other hand need not be mutually exclusive. Twenty-five years ago, during a famine in Sudan, Rania Dagash-Kamara – now the Deputy Executive Director of the World Food Programme – was asked what was needed most urgently. Her answer: “I have food rotting two states away and a famine this side – roads will fix this.”<sup>52</sup>

Even then, public finance expert Andrew H. Chen argued that the successful funding of major infrastructure projects “should be guided by the capital markets' invisible hand”. He believed: “The fundamental challenge of infrastructure financing, then, is how to match the massive demand for capital investments in the world with a supply of capital from millions of private investors through project securities available on a global scale.”<sup>53</sup> At the 2024 G7 Summit, Larry Fink – co-founder, chairman, and CEO of the world's largest asset management firm, BlackRock – echoed this view: “The IMF and the World Bank were created 80 years ago when banks, not markets, financed most things. Today, the financial world is flipped. The capital markets are the biggest source of private-sector financing, and unlocking that money requires a different approach than the bank balance sheet model.”<sup>54</sup>

In Japan, such trends are closely monitored and actively debated in both the political and the business domain. Perhaps this is one of the key lessons Germany and Europe could learn from Japan's approach to development cooperation: namely a heightened sensitivity to emerging dynamics and a willingness to engage openly with both relevant developments and influencing factors.

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*– translated from German –*

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# Nation-Branding, Interest-Based Policy, and New Alliances

## Turkey's Integrated Approach to Development Cooperation

Photo: © Zuma Press, Imago.

### In a Nutshell

Over the past two decades, Turkey has become a leading provider of humanitarian aid and development cooperation. Under successive AKP governments, the country has created its own model of development cooperation that claims to combine humanitarian values with economic and geopolitical interests.

Institutions such as the state development agency TİKA, the Maarif Foundation, and the Turkish Red Crescent operate worldwide, particularly in Africa, the Middle East, and the Balkans. Turkey draws on cultural and religious ties in order to strengthen its soft power.

In Africa, Turkey combines humanitarian aid with a military presence and export promotion ("drone diplomacy"). In Somalia, Turkey is the largest donor, investor, and security partner. As a Muslim NATO member, Turkey has also played an important role in Afghanistan.

Turkey's development cooperation is criticized for its lack of transparency. In many countries, Turkey's increasing military involvement and its targeted promotion of certain religious and political groups is also likely to weaken its role as a neutral donor in the medium term and to provoke resistance.



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Over the past two decades, Turkey has risen to become one of the world's largest donors of development and humanitarian assistance. As an upper-middle-income country, it temporarily ranked first globally in humanitarian aid in 2018, providing more than eight billion US dollars in aid – ahead of the US, the EU, and Germany.<sup>1</sup> Measured against GDP, Turkey claims to hold second place worldwide as a humanitarian donor.<sup>2</sup> Its Official Development Assistance (ODA) ratio is also one of the highest among OECD members, due largely to the inclusion of substantial assistance to Syrian refugees in Turkey.<sup>3</sup>

The role of humanitarian donor has become part of Turkey's foreign policy identity. From 2013 onwards, then-Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu promoted the concept of “humanitarian diplomacy”<sup>4</sup> as a key pillar of Turkish foreign policy. The “Century of Turkey” – proclaimed by President Erdoğan in May 2023 – also rests on Turkey's enhanced role in international cooperation. The country seeks to position itself as a credible partner in the so-called Global South and as an alternative both to Western donor countries and to China. It claims to follow a third path between the traditional Western Development Assistance Committee (DAC) donors and more recent “southern” non-DAC donors, such as China, Brazil, and India. A founding member of the OECD, Turkey has held observer status in the OECD-DAC since 1991 but does not seek full DAC membership.<sup>5</sup> This special status allows the country to operate within the DAC framework of traditional donors and to share data or to distance itself politically from Western donors, depending on its interests. Its self-declared “Turkish-type development assistance model” aims to strike a balance between values and interests openly acknowledging the interplay of humanitarian, geopolitical, and security

interests.<sup>6</sup> Turkey promises “win-win” relations on equal footing without a “hidden agenda” or a neo-colonial stance<sup>7</sup> while combining humanitarian values with foreign policy aims and economic diplomacy in partner countries.

Over the past two decades, Turkey has significantly expanded and diversified its political, economic, and military engagement in many world regions. This diversification began under Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan (1996–1997) and has continued under AKP governments. While the former secular Kemalist elites<sup>8</sup> pursued a purely Western alignment in foreign policy and avoided closer ties with southern or Muslim-majority countries, the AKP leadership has pursued a multi-vector foreign policy, drawing on the Muslim Ottoman and Afro-Eurasian heritage as an identity-forming reference point.<sup>9</sup> Turkey also distances itself from former Western colonial powers by means of anti-colonial rhetoric in international forums. The country is thus asserting its new place in the world with President Erdoğan's high-profile call for UN Security Council reform under the motto “The world is bigger than five”.<sup>10</sup> In Africa, the Balkans, and the Middle East, Turkey has become one of the most significant actors, combining humanitarian and development aid with private direct investment, education and scholarship programmes, arms exports, security and defence agreements, and a diplomatic presence. In so doing, the Turkish model has successfully turned soft power into hard power.

### **Turkish-style development aid – an AKP success story?**

Under the AKP-led governments since 2002, development cooperation has gained markedly in importance in Turkey's foreign policy. One

reason for this was that the new AKP leaders initially sought to gain influence over and control of smaller state bodies such as the Turkish development cooperation agency TİKA, because the old Kemalist elites still held firm sway in the major ministerial bureaucracies.<sup>11</sup> It is therefore no surprise that today's foreign minister – Hakan Fidan – headed TİKA from 2003 to 2007 and was appointed head of the Turkish National Intelligence Organization in 2010. Under Fidan's leadership, TİKA's activities quadrupled, expanding particularly in the Balkans and in sub-Saharan Africa. Overall, TİKA's budget from 2003 to 2013 was five times higher than from 1992 to 2002.<sup>12</sup>

### **Democracy promotion is not a feature of state-run Turkish development cooperation.**

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According to its own figures, TİKA operates in 170 countries and maintains 63 overseas offices.<sup>13</sup> Its original mandate was to coordinate and promote economic, commercial, social, and cultural cooperation with developing countries. The agency also works to promote the teaching of the Turkish language abroad. Founded in 1992 as a department within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, TİKA now reports to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism.

In its first decade (1992–2002), TİKA focused on cooperation with the Turkic states of Central Asia and with countries in the Balkans that have Turkic-speaking minorities. Turkey saw itself as a natural protecting power that supported the process of state identity-building after the collapse of the Soviet Union by means of policies on Turkish language, culture, and religion. Beginning in 2002, under AKP-led governments, TİKA's activities expanded globally, most notably through a significant increase in Turkey's presence in Africa.

TİKA's programmes align with the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals adopted in 2015,<sup>14</sup> which cover areas such as infrastructure,

administrative capacity-building, police training, health and education, climate adaptation, and the promotion of the economic and social inclusion of marginalized groups, including women, rural populations, and young people.<sup>15</sup> Like Western agencies, TİKA is active in crisis and conflict management and in state-building. However, democracy promotion and political participation are not part of its remit, nor are they a feature of state-run Turkish development cooperation more broadly.

Alongside TİKA, a range of other state institutions shape Turkey's international cooperation. Key actors include the Yunus Emre Institute for language and culture,<sup>16</sup> the state-run Maarif Foundation, the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB),<sup>17</sup> the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD),<sup>18</sup> and the semi-state Turkish Red Crescent (Kızılay). The Turkish state also works closely with numerous civil society organizations in a highly networked operation. Until 2016, schools and organizations linked to the Gülen movement were seen as useful front organizations for building local contacts and relationships. After the failed coup of 2016, the Turkish state increased its control over Turkish institutions abroad. The many Gülen-affiliated schools and educational establishments overseas were taken over by the newly created state-run Maarif Foundation, which now operates schools, higher-education institutions, and scholarship programmes in more than 60 countries, including in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia.

Parallel to this network of state and non-state organizations, export-oriented Turkish companies – whose owners are often close to the AKP or to individual members of the government – are important players in this integrated approach. One prominent example is Selçuk Bayraktar – President Erdoğan's son-in-law, who is Chief Technology Officer of the drone manufacturer and exporter Baykar and a key figure in the research and development of Turkey's drone programmes. The rise of numerous medium-sized, export-oriented companies in Anatolia in the



early 2000s – often referred to as the “Anatolian Tigers” – formed the economic foundation of the AKP’s success model. Conservative small-business owners and entrepreneurs are an important voter base for the AKP leadership and constantly seek new markets.<sup>19</sup> Operating under the umbrella of MÜSİAD – the conservative, AKP-aligned business association – they played a pioneering role in forging close international trade relations.<sup>20</sup> When political ties with many Arab states soured after the Arab Spring of 2011, Africa in particular came into focus as a potential market. Following the attempted coup in 2016, Turkey’s defence industry also received a fresh boost and began looking for new customers abroad.<sup>21</sup>

### Regional priorities for cooperation

Encouraged by then-Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, AKP-era foreign policy saw a deliberate return to the legacy of the Ottoman Empire. Described by some observers as “Neo-Ottomanism”, this approach assigned Turkey a role beyond its current geographical borders: For the first time since the staunchly Western orientation of Atatürk and the Kemalist elites, the country diversified its foreign relations towards Africa, the Middle East, and the Muslim regions of Asia.

The historical connections of the Ottoman Empire serve as an ideological touchstone. In countries once within the empire’s sphere of influence, Turkey claims a special duty of solidarity and assistance, emphasizing shared historical, cultural, linguistic, and religious ties.<sup>22</sup> Such countries receive five times as much humanitarian aid and development funding as others, while Turkic-speaking Muslim states receive twice as much as other Muslim-majority countries. Under AKP governments, the share of humanitarian aid going to Muslim states has grown, while economic assistance has increasingly been directed to key trading partners.<sup>23</sup>

Turkey maintains close bilateral ties with the states of the Balkans and pursues active cultural and religious diplomacy there. Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania are the main recipients of Turkish development

funding. Projects range from education and healthcare to support for small businesses and the preservation of Ottoman heritage. The Diyanet<sup>24</sup> has offices in every Western Balkan capital except Belgrade.

In the Caucasus, Turkey’s regional policy is shaped by its special relationship with Azerbaijan, which is encapsulated in the principle of “one nation – two states”. Turkey quickly recognized the independence of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia in 1991, and after the Soviet collapse, it regarded the South Caucasus as both part of the Turkic world and a bridge to Central Asia. TİKA has become a visible player in Azerbaijan and Georgia, funding projects in public administration, judicial reform, infrastructure, security, healthcare, education, and cultural heritage preservation. After Russia’s 2008 war in Georgia, TİKA supported reconstruction efforts there.

### Turkey has significantly expanded its presence in Africa.

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The states of the Middle East and North Africa receive the largest share of Turkish humanitarian and development funding, with Syria, the Palestinian territories, Iraq, and Libya being the primary recipients. In Syria, Turkey became one of the most active political and humanitarian actors after the civil war began in 2011. Following the fall of Bashar al-Assad in 2024 and the subsequent withdrawal of Russian and pro-Iranian or Shi’a militias, Turkey is now considered one of the most influential powers in the country. Even before the regime’s collapse, Turkey had a strong military, humanitarian, and media presence, including a military base in Dabiq, aid agencies such as the Turkish Red Crescent and the İHH Foundation, and an Anadolu News Agency office in Azaz.

In the Palestinian territories, Turkey pursues a policy of solidarity with Palestinian Muslim interests and has long maintained ties with the political wing of the terrorist organization Hamas.





Export hit: Baykar's combat drones are enjoying great popularity in many countries. The company's Chief Technology Officer is President Erdoğan's son-in-law. Photo: © İsmail Kaplan, Anadolu Agency, Imago.

Since the Gaza war, the country has expanded its humanitarian aid to the enclave. In Gaza, the Turkish Red Crescent, TİKA, the Ministry of Health, and various Turkish NGOs organize cash relief, field hospitals, medicines, food parcels, drinking water, clothing, hygiene supplies, fuel, and generators. The İHH – a conservative-Islamist NGO supported by the Turkish government – is a key player in Gaza, running an office there that coordinates aid flotillas. It has repeatedly been criticized for alleged cooperation with Islamist groups.<sup>25</sup>

Over the past two decades, Turkey has significantly expanded and diversified its presence in Africa, emerging as a visible actor and investor in diplomacy, development cooperation, humanitarian aid, security, and defence. Turkey's development agency TİKA now operates 18 overseas offices in sub-Saharan Africa. The state-run

Maarif Foundation runs 160 schools in 25 sub-Saharan countries, most of them in West Africa – especially in Mali – while the Yunus Emre Institute maintains cultural centres in nine African states.

## Development partnerships and foreign trade promotion go hand in hand.

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### Linking humanitarian aid, trade promotion, and regional interests

Over the last twenty years, development cooperation and humanitarian aid have helped establish Turkey as a recognized donor state worldwide, serving both its “nation-branding” ambitions and its drive to build soft power across multiple

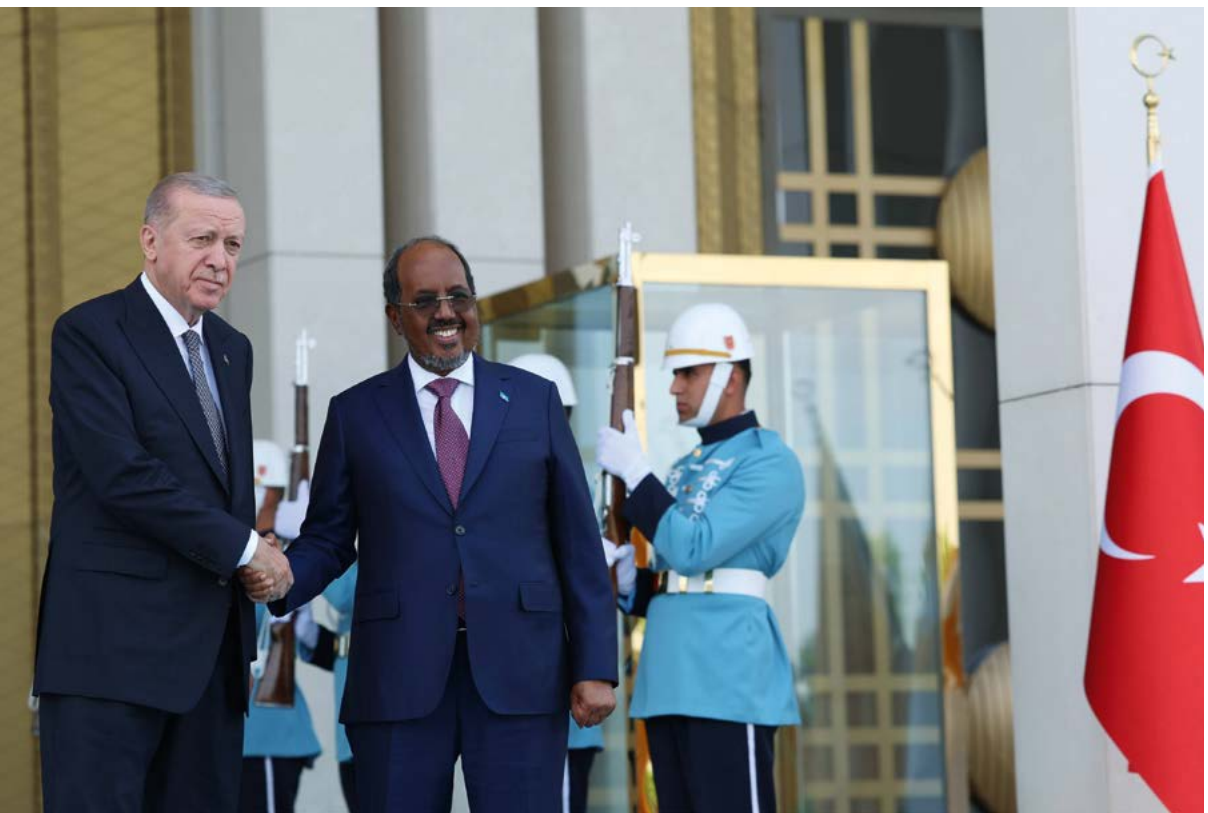
regions.<sup>26</sup> Civilian and humanitarian engagement combined with active peace diplomacy<sup>27</sup> often paves the way for deeper ties in trade, energy, and defence agreements. Recipient countries have in many cases also supported Turkey's positions in UN votes.<sup>28</sup>

Development partnerships and foreign trade promotion go hand in hand, often reinforcing each other. Turkish aid flows correlate positively with trade volumes in recipient countries. What is more, state-owned or politically connected companies are frequently involved in reconstruction efforts – for example, after the second Nagorno-Karabakh war or currently in Syria following the fall of the Assad regime.

The synergy between development cooperation, diplomacy, and export promotion is particularly striking in Africa. The Foreign Economic Relations Board – which coordinates Turkey's

private-sector relations abroad – runs 48 business councils across Africa<sup>29</sup> compared with France's 13 regional offices via Business France. Ankara views Africa as a vast market for Turkish contractors and service providers in fields such as infrastructure, hospitality, textiles, furniture, and defence.<sup>30</sup> The state provides political backing for Turkish business in Africa, easing visa rules for African nationals and granting full visa exemption to many countries. In 2002, Turkey maintained only 12 embassies in Africa; today, it has 44. Turkish Airlines – the semi-state carrier – now flies to 51 destinations in 39 sub-Saharan states.<sup>31</sup>

In Africa in particular, Turkey's geopolitical, diplomatic, and development policies complement one another. Since declaring 2005 its "Year of Africa", Turkey has pursued a notably successful soft-power strategy on the continent. This strategy has been supported by a public diplomacy campaign led by First Lady Emine Erdoğan, who



Mogadishu's most important partner: Turkish President Erdoğan is pictured shaking hands with his Somali counterpart Hassan Sheikh Mohamud in June 2022. Photo: © Murat Kula, Anadolu Agency, Imago.



has accompanied her husband to more than two dozen sub-Saharan countries and in 2016 opened the “Africa House” in Ankara to support African women entrepreneurs. In recent years, a defence export strategy has been added to this mix. The sale of Turkish military equipment – most notably Baykar’s flagship Bayraktar TB2 drone – has been used as political capital in what is sometimes referred to as “drone diplomacy”. Turkey has signed bilateral security and defence agreements with more than 30 African states and conducts military training missions in 21 of them.<sup>32</sup>

### “Istanbul” has become a common female name in Somalia.

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Countries such as Somalia, Syria, Libya, Sudan, and Afghanistan illustrate Turkey’s highly integrated approach of combining humanitarian, development, diplomatic, economic, and military engagement. Somalia and Afghanistan in particular show how humanitarian aid can open the door to deeper strategic partnerships while also positioning Turkey as a Muslim NATO member that is able to act as a bridge between worlds.

#### **Turkey’s leading role as humanitarian donor, security partner, and investor of Somalia**

During the 2011 humanitarian crisis, Turkey was one of the first countries to establish a presence in Somalia and to demonstrate solidarity. President Erdoğan’s high-profile visits from that year onwards laid the groundwork for what remains a unique, multi-dimensional partnership between the two states. Somalia today serves as Turkey’s “gateway” to Africa, with Turkey now being Somalia’s largest aid donor, partner, and investor. The TİKA office in Mogadishu implements a wide range of projects in infrastructure, education, and health. Closed at the outbreak of the civil war in 1991, the Turkish embassy in Mogadishu was reopened in 2011, after which the consulate general in Hargeisa was opened in 2014.

Extensive scholarship programmes for Somali students, direct investments, and a Turkish diaspora of businesspeople, doctors, engineers, and aid workers have fostered close interpersonal ties, thereby strengthening Turkey’s cultural influence and soft power in Somalia. “Istanbul” has even become a common female name in the country.<sup>33</sup>

Since 2017, Turkey has operated its largest overseas military base – Camp Turksom – in Mogadishu for training Somali security forces and now aims to establish a naval base in East Africa. Turkish companies run Mogadishu’s international airport and seaport as well as major hotels and hospitals. In late 2024, Turkey announced plans to build a spaceport in Somalia for rocket testing.<sup>34</sup> Since 2020, Ankara has also shown interest in exploiting Somalia’s offshore oil fields.

On the diplomatic front, Turkey acts as a mediator in regional disputes. Since 2013, the country has facilitated talks between Somalia and the breakaway autonomous region of Somaliland and has also played a prominent role in the Somali peace process. In December 2024, Turkish mediation produced the Ankara Declaration, marking the first step towards rapprochement between Somalia and Ethiopia.

However, with Turkey’s growing political, geo-economic, and military engagement in the Horn of Africa, resistance and criticism have also increased. A July 2024 agreement between the Turkish Petroleum Corporation and the Somali Petroleum Authority to develop oil and gas resources provoked strong domestic criticism and resistance.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, since 2013, Turkish interests and facilities have been repeatedly targeted by the terrorist group Al-Shabaab.

#### **Turkey as a muslim NATO member and mediator for Afghanistan**

Until the Taliban takeover in 2021, Turkey was a military and development partner to successive Afghan governments. Alongside the US, Germany, Italy, the UK, Georgia, and Romania, Turkey remained one of the largest contributors

of troops in the country. Despite its military presence, Turkey sought to be perceived as both civilian and culturally sensitive. The Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) that the country led for NATO in Wardak and Jawzjan provinces were the only PRTs headed by civilian diplomats. Turkey also ran its largest development programme in Afghanistan. The Maarif Foundation operated 45 schools – including many girls' schools – and offered education programmes for women. More than 4,000 scholarships were awarded to Afghan students.<sup>36</sup>

As NATO's only Muslim member, Turkey leveraged its position to act as a mediator in Afghan peace talks ("Istanbul Process"). Thanks to close ties with Qatar, the country enjoyed trusted communication channels with the Taliban leadership in Doha at the time. Throughout the two-decade war, Turkish Airlines maintained one of the few international flight connections to Afghanistan – a lifeline for many foreign aid organizations operating there. After the Taliban takeover, Turkey kept its embassy in Kabul open and today maintains political relations with the Taliban government alongside countries such as China, Russia, Japan, and India.

## TİKA ranked 49<sup>th</sup> out of 50 in the 2022 Aid Transparency Index.

### Overall assessment of international cooperation

The emergence of new donors such as China, India, the Gulf states, and Brazil has intensified competition in the global aid landscape. Turkey has successfully used its role as a humanitarian and development donor to expand its global profile and to secure regional interests. Equally important to its influence are Turkish scholarship programmes, a vast network of direct flights operated by the semi-state-owned Turkish Airlines, and direct investments promising tangible benefits for the local population.

At first sight, Ankara seems to have tapped into the spirit of the times in international relations, appealing to the desire of the "Global South" for "greater equality" and "win-win partnerships" instead of Western values-based policies and "patronising" approaches. In many partner countries, Turkey enjoys greater acceptance and goodwill than Western donors – and more than China. The country has benefited from the West's loss of prestige as well as from rising scepticism towards Beijing in an era of post-colonialism, multipolar alliances, emerging regional powers, and growing prosperity aspirations in the "Global South".

However, despite the considerable soft power Turkey has built up in many regions, challenges remain. For instance, the ongoing economic and inflation crisis in Turkey since 2018 has limited the country's financial resources. One structural weakness of Turkish development cooperation is its low ODA transparency: In the 2022 Aid Transparency Index, TİKA ranked 49<sup>th</sup> out of 50.<sup>37</sup> This situation makes it difficult to distinguish between rhetoric – or "nation-branding" – on the one hand and the reality on the ground on the other hand.

Turkey's increased military engagement in Syria, Libya, Iraq, and Sudan – combined with an active foreign economic policy aimed at securing raw materials and export markets as well as its support for certain religious and political groups – could provoke more resistance and conflict, thereby undermining its credibility as a neutral donor. Turkey is no longer simply a humanitarian actor: Indeed, in many parts of the world, it now competes directly with other players for political and economic influence. The country's political, military, and geoeconomic presence inevitably generates political pushback. However, despite these challenges, Turkey's influence at the crossroads of Asia, Europe, and Africa is set to continue growing.

Given Ankara's expanded role in many world regions, Germany can draw lessons from both the strengths and the weaknesses of the Turkish model. Germany's international engagement should place greater emphasis on

market-oriented approaches and on the promotion of trade and investment in order to foster genuinely “win-win” relationships rather than perpetuating aid economies and donor-recipient dependencies. Genuine local ownership cannot be created through transfer payments alone.

Partnership on equal terms does not mean that Germany has to set aside its national interests. Instead, the different strands of foreign relations – that is, diplomacy, security, and defence as well as economic and development cooperation – need to be strategically interlinked. In operational contexts, multiple national interests often have to be considered at the same time: national and collective defence; countering disinformation, crime, and terrorism; protecting supply chains, export markets, and overseas investments; securing energy and raw materials; safeguarding the ecosystem; and managing migration.

Germany must remain aware of how its actions are perceived locally. By drawing on local expertise and cultural sensitivity, international engagement can better take account of local concerns. Attempting to transplant domestic socio-political debates into other countries and societies either fails to resonate or – at worst – provokes rejection. International cooperation is particularly likely to gain acceptance when it delivers practical, tangible improvements for the local population without placing Germany’s own values centre stage.<sup>38</sup> The tension between values and interests can – contrary to what is suggested by the Turkish model – never be entirely eliminated, but a pragmatic, less ideologically driven, and in some areas more politically restrained approach could prove more effective.

– translated from German –

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# External Actors in Sub-Saharan Africa

## Challenges and Lessons for Germany



Photo: © Allan Mutiso, Xinhua/Imago

### In a Nutshell

German development cooperation is under pressure both financially and in terms of justification, while Europe is also grappling with how to reset its relations with the neighbouring continent of Africa.

China, the Gulf States, and others are successfully forging new forms of cooperation with countries in sub-Saharan Africa, with a strong focus on financing and developing infrastructure. Their far-greater speed and flexibility as donors is viewed highly positively.

Not only Russia, but also China views sub-Saharan Africa as an important arena in the global systemic conflict and actively promotes illiberal ideas as well as anti-Western narratives. The pressure on pluralistic

social models across the continent is an indicator of these states' success.

Germany can in some respects learn from non-European actors and can in other respects set itself apart, for example, by emphasizing transparent cooperation, fair economic relations, and projects that are both environmentally and socially sustainable.

A "Trump-style" withdrawal from engagement in sub-Saharan Africa would send a disastrous signal in the context of the systemic conflict and would deprive Germany of important international partnerships and opportunities for economic development.

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“There is nothing of value to anybody”<sup>1</sup>, said US President Donald Trump of the work of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) – a remark that also attracted attention in Germany in the context of debate on the usefulness and necessity of German development cooperation projects.

Right-wing populist actors are keen to call development cooperation into question in its entirety. Projects such as the infamous cycle paths in Peru make their criticism all the easier: The view is that while China is busy building roads, power stations, and railway lines, Germany is busy building cycle paths. This conveys the impression that German development cooperation is more about activist self-fulfilment than about meeting the real needs of partner countries. The legitimate question arises as to what such spending of German taxpayers' money is actually achieving. Even if this kind of criticism is often superficial, the question as to the efficiency and effectiveness of German development cooperation is justified, especially in light of the shrinking room for manoeuvring in the federal budget. What is often overlooked, however, is the strategic and geopolitical potential of this cooperation. In light of rapidly changing geopolitical realities, some recalibration seems inevitable. Calls for a more interest-driven approach to development cooperation and for better integration of export promotion into a coherent overall strategy are repeatedly voiced in the debate. At present, the German view of Africa still seems dominated by an outdated aid logic. While Germany wrestles with whether and how it should engage in the future, other actors are tapping lucrative potential and gaining influence.

## Brief profiles of selected actors

### *China*

In recent years, few countries have attracted as much attention for their international cooperation as China. The large-scale investments made at the start of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) raised high hopes of rapid, uncomplicated infrastructure development, although warnings from the West about unsustainable debt levels in recipient countries soon followed. After debt problems had emerged in some flagship projects, such as in Sri Lanka, China sought to limit the damage. The country has since shifted towards smaller, more financially sustainable projects. China's projects are notable – and sometimes criticized – for the extensive involvement of Chinese companies not only in infrastructure development, but also in the extraction of strategic resources, where China is deliberately expanding its market power.

China is particularly adept at accompanying its activities on the world stage with image campaigns and strong propaganda narratives that resonate in the so-called Global South. The recent announcement of tariff-free access for imports from Africa also has the potential to strengthen China's image as a reliable partner to Africa – in stark contrast to the actions of the Trump administration and the uncertainties surrounding its trade policy. Despite China's own complex institutional structures, the country is pursuing a relatively coherent strategy: namely by replacing the liberal international order. Year by year, it is proceeding with increasing confidence and building infrastructure worldwide that can be used for both civilian and military purposes – so-called dual-use facilities – in order

to position itself strategically for potential future military power projection.

### *Russia*

In recent years, Russia has arguably expanded its engagement in Africa more strikingly than any other country. In terms of trade and investment, the country remains a relatively small player, but it has gained considerable relevance and influence with its distinctive toolbox. These tools are varied: Alongside traditional diplomacy and economic cooperation, they include a range of questionable military agreements, arms deliveries, the deployment of mercenaries, and targeted influence over elites.

Lacking economic strength, Russia pursues strategies that achieve significant influence with relatively little financial input. As with China, the country has little interest in democracy or the rule of law. On the contrary: Promoting autocracy is one of the central motives behind Russia's engagement. Russia thrives on instability and conflict, on corruption, and on legal grey areas in order to advance its activities.

The country's primary aims are geopolitical: fostering a multipolar world order, pushing back Western influence, and securing strategic resources. In a time of growing isolation, Moscow is actively seeking new allies. Indeed, the country has been particularly effective in using propaganda and disinformation, building on existing anti-Western sentiment and inflaming it further in order to present itself as the better alternative.

In the economic sphere, beyond arms sales – with Russia remaining Africa's leading supplier of weapons<sup>2</sup> – Russia focuses on energy and on the extractive<sup>3</sup> sector. Rising investment in energy signals a strategic commitment to securing long-term energy partnerships with resource-rich African states.

### *The Gulf States*

Among the external actors, the Gulf States of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates also play an increasingly important role. Alongside

traditional security and development engagement, their strategic economic investments have grown massively in recent years. Driven by the need to diversify away from fossil fuels and by competition for geopolitical influence, both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have pursued aggressive, large-scale investment strategies. Together, the Gulf States – including Qatar – made almost 113 billion US dollars in foreign direct investment on the African continent in 2022 and 2023 alone – more than in the entire previous decade.<sup>4</sup> Their investments focus on strategically important high-growth sectors, particularly energy, infrastructure, and mining. Moreover, the Gulf States have capitalized on African countries' efforts to diversify their partnerships, filling funding gaps left by other international actors. On the one hand, these states offer financing that is far more flexible, faster, and more willing to take risks than is the financing provided by Western partners; on the other hand, the lack of transparency in many of these investments has been criticized, with concerns about new extractive relationships and dependencies having also arisen.

## **The US is shifting its strategy away from an aid-oriented paradigm towards an investment-led approach.**

### *Turkey*

Turkey views itself as an emerging middle power, with its growing engagement in Africa framed by its ambitions for regional leadership and its drive to position itself as a global player. This engagement is marked by rapid growth in trade volume, by an expanding diplomatic presence, and by numerous infrastructure projects. Between 2003 and 2023, Turkey's trade with Africa rose from 1.35 to 12.4 billion US dollars.<sup>5</sup> Turkish Airlines has significantly expanded its network<sup>6</sup>, and the presence of Turkish companies on the continent has also grown markedly, supported by joint business councils that Turkey has now established with 45 African countries.<sup>7</sup>



Turkey often combines economic relations with military cooperation, including the use of private security companies and arms sales. It supplies low-cost defence equipment and has become Africa's fourth-largest arms exporter.<sup>8</sup>

The country makes skilful use of its status as a “secondary actor”, operating in the shadow of the major donors and focusing on targeted investments in areas of core interest. In this context, Turkey presents itself as a “neutral” partner in Africa, unburdened by historical baggage.

### *The United States*

Change and uncertainty currently characterize the engagement of the United States, which has historically been the most influential external actor on the African continent. The US is shifting its strategy away from an aid-oriented paradigm towards an investment-led approach that views the private sector as the main driver of growth and development. Although this shift has been evident for many years, it has gained both

momentum and uncertainty under the Trump administration. The sharp cuts to USAID programmes threaten hard-won development gains in many African countries, thereby increasing volatility, opening space for other actors, and weakening an important instrument of American soft power. Added to this are the direct and indirect effects of erratic US trade policy on African countries and the economic relations of these countries with the United States.

The future coherence of US engagement instruments is uncertain, as is the fate of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA)<sup>9</sup> – a central and successful trade promotion measure that is due to expire at the end of September 2025. President Trump has shown interest in Africa only selectively, and then chiefly to pursue transactional “deals”. One example is the peace agreement between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo brokered by the US at the end of June 2025. Trump proudly announced that the deal would secure access to substantial mineral resources in the DRC.<sup>10</sup>



Uncertain future: Drastic reductions in US development cooperation are hitting the African continent hard.  
Photo © Ximena Borrazas, Middle East Images, Imago.

## Overview: Approaches and motives of selected actors

	Motives/ objectives for engagement in sub-Saharan Africa	Instruments/ modalities
China	<p><b>Economy</b> Access to resources and markets</p> <p><b>Geopolitics</b> Arena in context of systemic rivalry   Promotion of illiberal societal models   Influence over elites   Regime security</p> <p><b>Security</b> Stable investment environment   Consolidation of role as global player</p>	<p>No conditionalities ("no strings attached")   Focus on expansion of trade networks   Linkage with BRI strategy   Loans (historically: debt-financed infrastructure; currently: shift to smaller projects)   Private-sector investments   Customs exemptions   Arms trade   Military training   Participation in UN missions   Influence over political parties and elites   Shaping public opinion   Dual-use structures for future military power projection</p>
Russia	<p><b>Economy</b> Resource access   Arms trade   Limited volume</p> <p><b>Geopolitics</b> Weakening the West   Ambitions to be a global power   Hybrid warfare   Support for authoritarian regimes   Multipolarity</p> <p><b>Security</b> Regime protection   Destabilization   Militarization</p>	<p>No conditionalities   Paramilitary forces (Africa Corps; formerly, Wagner Group)   Support for authoritarian regimes   Military training   Resource deals (e.g. arms for gold)   Trade agreements   Disinformation campaigns (including targeted election interference)</p>
The Gulf States	<p><b>Economy</b> Economic diversification   Energy security   Post-carbon strategies</p> <p><b>Geopolitics</b> Strategic influence   New partnerships   Securing trade routes</p> <p><b>Security</b> Protection of investments</p>	<p>Focus on attractive investment models   Sovereign wealth fund investment, loans   Blended finance and public-private partnerships   Security cooperation (limited but growing)</p>
Turkey	<p><b>Economy</b> Energy security   Market access</p> <p><b>Geopolitics</b> Establishment as a middle power   Afro-Eurasian axis   Aspirations to be a global power</p> <p><b>Security</b> Military cooperation   Arms trade   Mediation</p>	<p>Strong focus on expanding trade   Strategic investments   Military cooperation, defence agreements   Conflict diplomacy (mediation efforts)   Cultural, educational, and media initiatives   Religious networks   Expanding diplomatic presence   Turkish Airlines route network as a strategic asset   Humanitarian aid (to a limited extent)</p>
The United States	<p><b>Economy</b> Access to resources and markets   Securing supply chains</p> <p><b>Geopolitics</b> Promotion of democracy   Western dominance</p> <p><b>Security</b> Counter-terrorism   Stability   Influence through military presence</p>	<p>Gradual shift away from aid-based approach   Focus on trade (AGOA, Prosper Africa, support for AfCFTA)   Promotion of private-sector investment   Under Trump: transactional deals, extensive security-sector engagement, continued leading diplomatic presence, development finance   In reduced form: traditional development projects, humanitarian aid, democracy promotion</p>

With or without a coherent strategy, Africa is strategically important to the United States. This also applies to its military engagement, which – alongside addressing security risks and promoting stability – explicitly seeks to curb China’s military expansion.

### **Competing approaches: Differences and common ground**

A review of the engagement of selected actors reveals clear trends and priorities. Strategic positioning and influence in the geopolitical contest are central motives shared by all, as is the interest in increasing trade and securing access to raw materials. In the race for natural resources and rare earths, there is a real risk that competition will become more and more conflictual and overwhelm existing governance structures. Engagement in the security sector shows greater differences, and in some cases, also conflicting approaches.

The most striking contrasts, however, are in the realm of values. While Germany and other Western partners often place values-based engagement with related conditions at the forefront, African countries press for rapid access to finance and infrastructure without what they view as external interference in their sovereign decisions. Approaches with few or no apparent conditions are therefore more attractive, giving an advantage to actors such as China and Turkey, which at least claim to emphasize non-interference.

Another key element is the focus on large-scale infrastructure and energy investment. China is making massive investments in transport infrastructure, hydropower, and other energy projects, for example, while the Gulf States are investing billions in renewable energy, ports, and mining, and Turkey is involved in building airports, roads, and power stations. Providing basic infrastructure and energy solutions lays the foundations for economic development in partner countries, thereby facilitating trade and securing long-term economic influence. Such projects are well received by African partners and increase the visibility of engagement. By contrast, Germany’s engagement is often fragmented, bureaucratic, and low-profile.

A focus on visible, transformative, large-scale projects is only possible by means of a comprehensive, integrated approach to investment.

### **More competition does not automatically translate into greater self-determination or better terms for African states.**

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While a competitive mindset is arguably common to all actors, Russia and China stand out for the vehemence with which they pursue this mindset. Not only is their aim to boost their own attractiveness and competitiveness, but the deliberate weakening and discrediting of Western actors is a strategic element of their engagement. However, a distinction must be drawn here: While China has an interest in stability, not least in order to protect its investments, Russia – lacking economic strength – often actively promotes instability in order to expand its influence.

For African countries, the closer engagement of a wider range of actors offers the opportunity to broaden partnerships and to choose between different offers. Competition, one might say, is good for business. However, more competition does not automatically translate into greater self-determination or better terms for African states. There are too many pitfalls and new dependencies, and there is also a tendency towards extractive deals. In some cases, such arrangements may be lucrative for ruling elites, but these arrangements do not serve the country’s sustainable development. Examples include gold mines exploited by Russia as payment for military stabilization of junta governments in West Africa as well as various costly infrastructure projects of limited benefit.

### **A core challenge for Germany: Strengthening engagement**

The most important conclusion from observing other actors’ engagement is simple yet at the

same time is also Germany's greatest challenge: The country cannot afford to neglect its engagement in sub-Saharan Africa. Germany and Europe face extreme pressure in Africa from the growing – and in some cases, more successful – engagement of other actors. Simultaneously, they also depend on strong partnerships and strategic influence on the continent. While those other actors have recognized Africa's relevance, German – and to some extent, European – engagement is still too often viewed primarily through a humanitarian lens. This underlying approach to development cooperation does justice neither to the agency of African societies nor to our own strategic interests. German activity on the continent still tends to be defined by fragmented initiatives and projects, which almost always lack visibility, are often perceived as being irrelevant, and are shaped by a paternalistic view of Africa as a “recipient of aid”. High bureaucratic hurdles, inflexible financing instruments, and cumbersome approval procedures are met with incomprehension in many countries and hamper effective German engagement. In short, Germany lacks a contemporary guiding vision for cooperation with Africa.

The radical shift in US engagement should serve more as a warning than as inspiration. The drastic cuts in funding for development projects have had dramatic short-term effects and could set back important long-term development efforts. It would be a disaster for the continent if other Western partners were to withdraw in a similar way, not least because they would also be giving up important levers of influence.

One key lesson from comparing different approaches is that an integrated strategy linking economic, security, and development policy dimensions is essential if genuine impact and influence are to be achieved. China demonstrates a highly coordinated, long-term, cross-sector strategic vision. The Gulf States successfully combine diplomatic initiatives, financing models, and the mobilization of the private sector in a single approach. Turkey complements its economic and security engagement with strategic elements of soft power. Such integrated approaches are

also advisable for German engagement, but they require a genuinely cross-ministerial strategic effort.

In light of economic challenges, tight public finances, rising social expenditure, security risks, and a growing defence budget, it is not easy to justify spending on development cooperation. However, Germany should maintain and strengthen its engagement in Africa in qualitative terms. This effort will inevitably require adjusting structures and modalities to increase efficiency alongside a clear understanding that such spending is also an investment in Germany's own interests.

## Germany has traditionally been reluctant to acknowledge its own interests.

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### Lessons for Germany: Five priorities

There is no shortage of recommendations for the future direction of Germany's development policy in Africa. Numerous position papers from associations, political parties, academic studies, and ministerial strategies alike all focus on important adjustments to German development cooperation. However, the actual translation into policy has thus far been disappointing. In the context of competition with other donors and in light of the sometimes-discouraging, sometimes-inspiring examples set by others, five areas stand out in which adjustment is most urgently needed.

#### 1. *Transparent interest-based policy*

Whose interests does German engagement in sub-Saharan Africa serve? Cynics might say neither its own nor those of its partners – which is not true, but the perception is there all the same. On the one hand, Germany has traditionally been reluctant to acknowledge its own interests, instead sheltering behind the aid logic of development cooperation. On the other hand, other



actors currently seem much better at addressing the interests of the African countries.

Germany should align its engagement more closely with African priorities while openly and confidently representing its own. In practice, this could mean responding more to the demand for infrastructure investment rather than leaving the field to others. There is no contradiction in combining long-term sustainability strategies with high-profile projects that deliver fast, visible results. Ideally, cooperation should focus on areas in which there is a clear overlap of interests: A win-win scenario is most likely when active involvement of the German private sector is encouraged.

Better consideration of African priorities may also mean making stronger reference to national and regional development plans as well as to the African Union's Agenda 2063<sup>11</sup>, as China and the Gulf States currently do. Close cooperation with African regional organizations, support for the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), and the strengthening of African-led security initiatives are likewise part of this consideration.

A transparent reference to Germany's own interests can also be an advantage over other actors, as can open discussion of the modalities of Germany's engagement. China's claim that its support is free of political conditions is being questioned more and more in Africa – not least in light of experience to the contrary in recent years. Non-transparent processes surrounding investment deals fuel concerns about new dependencies and exploitation. This concern offers an opportunity for Germany to position itself as a credible alternative.

## 2. *The mobilization of the domestic economy*

A look at other actors reveals that almost all of them are more adept at involving their domestic private sector in their engagement. For China, the Gulf States, and Turkey, this involvement has long been part of their strategy, and most recently, the United States has also made a major shift in this direction. Unlike Germany, these

actors consistently succeed in deriving economic capital from their development cooperation in Africa. In China's case, this includes the near-exclusive commissioning of its own companies in order to implement development projects. Many of Germany's Western partners also manage to involve their own economies much more closely in their development cooperation despite classifying a large proportion of their official development assistance (ODA) as "untied aid" – that is, as aid not explicitly tied to contracts for domestic companies. While other countries actively create opportunities for the economic expansion of their businesses, Germany is far too passive in this area. Worse still, a considerable share of German development cooperation funds flows to geopolitical rivals.

Companies from China and the Gulf States benefit from the absence of fixed standards and requirements that would regulate their activities. At the same time, China stresses its superficial non-interference in the internal affairs of host countries while quietly bypassing standards in ways that often result in exploitation and environmental damage for the local population. Current examples can be found in Zimbabwe, where Chinese companies produce or import plastic bags from China that circumvent Zimbabwean standards and that contribute significantly to environmental pollution.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Chinese mining companies deliberately evade environmental and labour regulations in Zimbabwe.<sup>13</sup> Germany will inevitably have to take a different approach. The goal should be to reduce barriers to participation without abandoning important standards and requirements. However, these standards and requirements must be designed with care – in the context of supply chain legislation, for instance – so as not to impose a major competitive disadvantage on German companies.

The reservations about US President Trump's unpredictable behaviour and the outrage over the aid cuts should not prevent us from examining the new US Africa strategy for useful ideas. Key elements include targeted links between more US companies and Africa, proactive economic

diplomacy (ambassadors are instructed to actively support US companies and promote business deals), a focus on infrastructure projects with US corporate involvement, the promotion of market-relevant reforms, and the adaptation of financing instruments.<sup>14</sup>

In terms of financing tools, it is worth looking at the Gulf States. Their sophisticated financial architectures, risk-mitigation strategies, and emphasis on public-private partnerships for large-scale investments show how private capital can be mobilized.<sup>15</sup> Germany should implement reforms to its export credit and investment guarantees and should additionally introduce innovative financing instruments tailored to the African markets that are perceived as being high-risk. This strategy will prove essential if German companies are to compete successfully with other actors. Germany must also address its typical

bureaucracy problem. Pragmatic approaches and swift procedures must be central to successfully linking development cooperation with foreign trade promotion.

**African countries are rightly calling for investments that promote local value creation, industrialization, and technology transfer.**

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### 3. Sustainable investment

Germany should aim for fair and partnership-based economic relations and should firmly establish the three-pronged approach of indus-



Autocracy promotion: Russia has increased its involvement in Africa in recent years and is weakening democratic processes through manipulation and disinformation. Photo: © Sergei Bobylev, ITAR-TASS, Imago.

trialization, value creation, and local job creation as a top priority of development cooperation in the sense of sustainable development.

In the field of raw material partnerships, Germany and Europe face massive competition, especially in the context of the energy transition. While Western actors still play a major role in resource extraction in Africa, China is actively working to close the gap. Rare earths and other critical resources are a particular focus, and China's already-impressive market power in this field is being further strengthened through targeted investments and agreements. The Gulf States and Turkey are also pushing forward. However, Germany can differentiate itself in qualitative terms from other actors who perpetuate extractive economic models centred on pure resource exploitation. African countries are rightly calling for investments that promote local value creation, industrialization, and technology transfer. With its strong industrial and technological base, Germany is well placed to forge partnerships that go beyond raw material trade.

German engagement can be particularly attractive and competitive when it focuses on investments in key sectors with a high level of mutual benefit and alignment with African priorities. These investments include not only critical raw materials, but also renewable energy. Where emphasis is placed on developing local processing capacity, the result can be profitable partnerships that link Germany's strategic interests with the development goals of its partner countries.

Germany can also bring its expertise to bear – and benefit from its own reputation – in areas such as modern agriculture, manufacturing, and vocational training. German quality workmanship, SME enterprises, and dual vocational training are well known to African partners and carry a highly positive reputation. Germany should confidently highlight aspects of quality, long-term commitment, reliability, and responsibility towards people and the environment. High-quality, sustainable solutions need to be positioned as a competitive advantage compared with cheaper, less sustainable alternatives.

Sustainability also means considering debt sustainability. The often-massive and opaque Chinese investments in the early years of the Belt and Road Initiative have led to substantial national debt in some African countries. While China has since become more cautious about overburdening its partners' state budgets, many projects still place a heavy strain on national finances. Although some projects generate real economic opportunities, benefits are undermined by poor terms, inadequate feasibility studies, and widespread corruption in partner countries. Large-scale investments from the Gulf States are viewed with similar concern. Germany can set itself apart by continuing to promote transparent and sustainable financing practices and by advancing innovative financing models – with the awareness that development aid alone will not suffice.

## Political conditionalities are a double-edged sword.

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### 4. *Values-based policy and democracy promotion*

Alongside economic elements, competition among external actors in Africa is also about rival values and societal models. Authoritarian powers such as China and Russia increasingly “export” their tried-and-tested autocratic tools, deliberately influence political forces and decision-makers, and undermine democratic processes through disinformation and manipulation.<sup>16</sup>

This challenge must be met not only indirectly – by relying on the attractiveness of our offer but also directly through our own measures. Political conditionalities are an important tool, but they are also a double-edged sword: While they promote transparency and compliance with minimum democratic standards, they can also make our offer more complex, slower, and less appealing to our African partners. This dilemma – that is, the need to weigh each case individually – risks inconsistency and a loss of credibility, yet a one-size-fits-all approach is not advisable.

Particular attention should be paid to the instruments of soft power, which include cultural exchange, language and education programmes, and – crucially – measures designed to promote pro-democratic forces, free media, an active civil society, and a pluralistic party landscape.

#### 5. *Communicating Germany's engagement*

When people in different sub-Saharan African countries are asked about their impressions of various states' engagement, responses about Germany are usually vague. This situation is due largely to Germany's weak self-presentation: Unlike with other actors, there is no consistent narrative around German engagement in sub-Saharan Africa.

By contrast, China invests heavily in image-building, using large-scale media campaigns that are mostly effective at creating a positive perception of the country. China skilfully exploits its own history as a victim of European colonialism, and stresses that it is a developing country, is part of the "Global South", is committed to a multipolar world order, and is opposed to colonialism.<sup>17</sup> This image is presented in direct contrast to the liberal order and Europe's colonial past. However, this supposed historical partnership does not reflect reality: Indeed, discrimination against African students in China at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and the activities of Chinese fishing fleets in African waters are viewed highly negatively on the continent.

### **Germany must take care to avoid reinforcing anti-Western narratives in development cooperation.**

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Russian disinformation campaigns likewise exploit the historical burden of Europe-Africa relations, but in a way that is far more hostile towards the West. Modern-day Russia benefits from the lack of awareness among many Africans of its imperialist nature and colonial history,

while its past role in supporting socialist liberation movements during the Cold War still boosts the country's image. Current atrocities committed by Russian Wagner mercenaries – as well as Russia's revisionist agenda – rarely enter public debate.

By contrast, Western states' engagement is often viewed through the lens of colonial continuity. Western actors are also frequently perceived as paternalistic, thereby making it easy for China and Russia to build a positive image by defining themselves in opposition to the West and discrediting it further. This dynamic severely limits the effectiveness of German and European efforts to promote democracy and human rights because it undermines the credibility of such values-based objectives.

Germany must counter this image by genuinely emphasizing partnership-based relations and – in so doing – aiming to give rival actors less room for attack while actively distancing itself from their negative practices. Care must also be taken to avoid either reinforcing anti-Western narratives in development cooperation or including any nuance that might be perceived as paternalistic. At the same time, Germany should promote a pragmatic yet values-based form of cooperation as part of a comprehensive image strategy that encompasses the full scope of German engagement in sub-Saharan Africa.

#### **Conclusion**

In order to avoid falling behind in the competition with other actors, old approaches must be questioned, and the efficiency and appeal of our offer improved. The stakes are high if this strategy fails, with consequences ranging from the loss of influence and the erosion of international alliances to the advance of authoritarian political and social models, the loss of key markets and investment destinations for German business, the insufficient diversification of supply chains, shortages of critical raw materials, and a reduced scope for shaping conflict prevention, counter-extremism, and peace-building. There could also be setbacks in areas such



as environmental protection, equality, and social inclusion.

Deeper future engagement in sub-Saharan Africa – one that can be justified domestically and that can be seen as attractive in partner countries – will require political will for reform and policy innovation. Above all, it will also require sustained attention to the region, even when other crises and challenges dominate the agenda. Development cooperation, foreign trade promotion, and security policy must be reconceived holistically.

Such a far-reaching ambition can quickly lead to inflated expectations and overstretch both in political practice and in public perception. To counter this situation, a sharper strategic focus for foreign policy is needed. Germany should concentrate on the areas in which it holds a comparative advantage and can deploy its strengths in a targeted way. At the same time, there must be a deliberate break with a foreign policy approach that remains too firmly rooted in the logic of traditional development aid, and this break must be in favour of a broader understanding of international responsibility. This strategy requires more coherent cooperation between ministries, which often still operate in parallel. Closer European coordination is also called for not least to overcome fragmented approaches and to strengthen joint capacity for action. Priority should be given in particular to initiatives that make a tangible difference to living conditions on the ground, such as alleviating acute hardship or creating jobs. Foreign policy engagement is also more effective when it aligns with economic interests, strengthens strategic partnerships in the geopolitical arena, supports pro-democracy forces in partner countries, and – not least – makes substantial contributions to peace and stability.

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– translated from German –

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# How China and Japan Are Competing for Economic Dominance in Southeast Asia

And What Europe Can Learn from It

Photo: © Cheng Yiheng, Xinhua, Imago.



## In a Nutshell

The rivalry between the US and China is calling the system of free trade into question. For Europe, this situation is bringing new challenges but also new opportunities – particularly in relation to the fast-growing economies of Southeast Asia.

China and Japan have systematically expanded their economic presence in the region in recent years: China exerts influence through state-directed mega-projects, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, while Japan focuses on targeted infrastructure development and strategic trade initiatives.

Europe – by contrast – has thus far acted overly hesitantly. A coherent strategy that links economic interests

with development policy goals has yet to emerge. Trade negotiations with ASEAN countries are also lacking in speed and pragmatism.

The EU's Global Gateway initiative remains limited in its impact and needs to be reoriented as a strategic investment programme if it is to achieve meaningful results in Southeast Asia.

What is needed is a focused approach to promoting foreign trade that makes it easier for European companies to enter regional markets with the support of closer dialogue between politics and business at the European level.



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Few economic areas are currently more affected by geo-economic turbulence than the European Union. The global system of open trade and the international industrial division of labour – which has underpinned Europe's growth and prosperity for decades – is being fundamentally challenged. China is undermining the principles of fair and open trade through unfair practices and state subsidies for its export companies. Meanwhile, the “reciprocal” tariffs that have been threatened by the Trump administration have the potential to upend the entire system of the international division of labour. For Europe's already-sluggish economies, a lasting US withdrawal from the international open-market system could have serious economic consequences. This is particularly true for Germany, whose economy is more closely intertwined with the US and China than any other in Europe.

Against the backdrop of US tariff policy, one thing has become clear: Europe needs new economic and trade partners in order to generate fresh momentum. Increasingly, attention is turning towards Southeast Asia. The emerging economies of the region with their often very-high growth rates – such as those in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam – form the most dynamic economic region in the world. Although the countries of Southeast Asia cannot replace the enormous economic importance of China and the US for the European economy, they offer major opportunities for companies seeking either to reduce dependence on China through a China+1 strategy<sup>1</sup> or to tap into new markets in response to US tariffs.

At the same time, Southeast Asian economies are increasingly at risk of being caught in the cross-fire of the US-China rivalry. China dominates the region economically, using local markets

and supply chains to bypass American trade restrictions and to create alternative buyers for its heavily subsidized export products. Meanwhile, Southeast Asian states face the threat of steep US tariffs. Vietnam, for instance, was initially threatened with one of the world's highest duties – up to 46 per cent. In the end, a deal was reached that puts tariffs at 20 per cent for Vietnamese products. Unsurprisingly, countries across the region are thus looking to broaden their trade and economic partnerships.

With its vast internal market and highly advanced industrial base, the EU is an attractive candidate for such a broadening. However, in the race to forge new economic alliances in Southeast Asia, Europe risks falling behind. In recent years, China and Japan in particular have both adopted coordinated strategies that closely align politics and business. The two countries have significantly increased their economic footprint in the region and have forged deep, mutually beneficial partnerships with numerous Southeast Asian states. Europe should thus learn from how its competitors have adjusted their strategies. China and Japan each rely on different models of government-business cooperation, but both countries use these models as part of a comprehensive strategy to support market entry and investment by their companies in Southeast Asia. By contrast, the EU and its member states still lack a foreign economic policy that effectively integrates their own commercial interests with the goals and tools of trade, economic, and development cooperation.<sup>2</sup>

### **China's path to becoming the dominant economic power in Southeast Asia**

China's economic rise in Southeast Asia began in the early 2000s when then-President Jiang

Zemin launched the country's "Going Out" strategy. However, it was Deng Xiaoping's reform government that had laid the groundwork two decades earlier, actively steering the economy to drive industrialization. This aim was primarily achieved through state-owned enterprises (SOEs), which were funded first by the government and later by the country's powerful sovereign wealth funds. Under the "Going Out" strategy, Chinese SOEs – along with private companies – were encouraged to invest abroad, to build supply chains outside China, and to access new markets.

In 2013, President Xi Jinping took this strategy further by launching the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI aims to create infrastructure networks linking countries across Asia, Europe, and Africa. It focuses on emerging economies that are heavily reliant on investment to expand their infrastructure. Many of these countries also possess vital raw materials that China urgently needs for its fast-growing industrial and technology sectors.

As with the earlier "Going Out" policy, state-owned enterprises are a key instrument for implementing BRI projects. These SOEs also play a central role in China's own infrastructure development. Today, China is widely regarded as a global leader in this field, with the world's largest high-speed rail network<sup>3</sup>, the fastest internet connections<sup>4</sup>, and the top-ranked container port<sup>5</sup>.

The implementation of the BRI by SOEs is clearly visible across Southeast Asia. Major infrastructure projects in the region carried out by Chinese SOEs include the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed rail line in Indonesia, the Laos-China railway, the Bicol South railway project in the Philippines, the Phnom Penh-Sihanoukville Expressway, and the Siem Reap-Angkor International Airport in Cambodia as well as the East Coast Rail Link and the Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Park in Malaysia. Well-equipped both technologically and financially, Chinese SOEs typically carry out these projects as joint ventures with local SOEs in Southeast Asian countries. In nations such as Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand,

and Myanmar, SOEs also dominate large parts of the economy. Often negotiated at the very highest political level, these SOE-SOE partnerships provide China with access to regional markets. However, such partnerships can undermine fair competition because non-Chinese companies are frequently excluded from submitting bids. Many BRI projects are also carried out in a context of opaque ties between business and government – conditions that would fall short of conventional Western governance standards.

### **China identifies key industries, promotes the creation of integrated regional supply chains, and funds research and development.**

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While the Chinese government uses the BRI to offer new business and investment opportunities for its SOEs, especially in infrastructure, it also actively encourages private companies to "go out" and strengthen their position in Southeast Asia's industrial and technology sectors. As a result, Chinese private companies have gained a significant market share across the region at a remarkable speed. The Chinese government identifies key industries, focuses on strategic investments, funds research and development, drives innovation, and promotes the creation of integrated regional supply chains.

With the help of private companies, China is making deeper inroads into the markets of Southeast Asia and is seeking to overtake its established Western competitors. This situation is especially evident in the technology sector, where firms such as Alibaba, Huawei, and BYD are rapidly expanding their presence. The advance of Chinese private enterprises in Southeast Asia has been supported by the Chinese government's strategic and active trade policy in the region. Shortly after joining the World Trade Organization in 2001, China proposed the creation of the ASEAN-China Free Trade



Area (ACFTA). ACFTA was ultimately implemented in 2010 and has since been expanded at China's initiative. China is also a member of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) – the world's largest free trade agreement – which includes all ASEAN countries along with Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, and Japan.

**Chinese companies have increasingly relocated parts of their supply chains to Southeast Asia in order to circumvent US tariffs and sanctions.**

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As a result, China has become Southeast Asia's most important economic partner. In the past five years alone, the trade volume with ASEAN countries has nearly doubled.<sup>6</sup> However, not only are Chinese companies expanding into South-east Asian markets, but they are also increasingly dominating the region's industrial supply chains. In fact, more than 80 per cent of China's exports to the region are industrial goods.<sup>7</sup> In 2021, China accounted for around 30 per cent of all imports of industrial intermediate products to Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines.<sup>8</sup> These figures are likely to have risen further because the intensifying economic rivalry with the United States is pushing China to deepen its engagement with the region. China needs alternative markets to absorb its industrial output. Above all, however, Chinese companies have increasingly relocated parts of their supply



The friendly face of the Belt and Road Initiative: In the context of the infrastructure initiative, Chinese state-owned enterprises have implemented several major projects in Southeast Asia, including the Laos-China Railway. Photo: © Yang Zixuan, Xinhua, Imago.

chains to Southeast Asia in order to circumvent US tariffs and sanctions. In Vietnam, the British magazine *The Economist* recently reported an almost 100 per cent correlation between the monthly increase in imports from China and the rise in Vietnamese exports to the United States.<sup>9</sup> Although similar data are not available for other countries in the region, there is strong evidence that the same pattern may apply elsewhere, such as for automotive parts from Thailand or for solar panels from Malaysia. Against the backdrop of ongoing tariff negotiations, the Trump administration made it clear to Southeast Asian governments that taking a tougher stance on China's economic influence in their countries would be a prerequisite for concluding any trade deals. Given China's growing dominance in the region and the deepening economic dependence of Southeast Asian economies on Beijing, however, it is questionable whether these governments are willing or even able to comply with such demands.

### **In 2016, Japan developed its own strategy for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific as a direct response to China's Belt and Road Initiative.**

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#### **Japan's response to China's dominance: A strategic shift in Southeast Asia**

Within just a few decades, China has displaced Japan as Asia's leading economic power. Like many European firms, Japanese industrial companies have lost ground in the face of growing competition from China. In response, Japan has in recent years embarked on a fundamental shift in its foreign economic policy, actively seeking to counter China's rising dominance in the region. Japan is working with countries that are closely aligned with China (such as Cambodia and Laos) as well as with countries that maintain a greater distance (such as the Philippines). The aim is to offer all countries in the region an alternative to

China's economic influence and to prevent China from gaining a monopoly position in Southeast Asia.

In 2016, Japan developed its own strategy for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) as a direct response to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). FOIP serves as a framework for channeling Japanese investment into the least developed countries in Southeast Asia. One of its main goals is to support the development of infrastructure that these countries urgently need. In order to achieve this goal, Japan has promoted the creation of so-called economic corridors.<sup>10</sup> One example is the East-West Economic Corridor, which stretches from Da Nang in Vietnam through Laos and Thailand to Mawlamyine in Myanmar. This corridor – inter alia – helps secure Japan's access to India and the rapidly growing economies of South Asia. Japan has also established a Southern Economic Corridor, which runs through Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam, Phnom Penh in Cambodia, Bangkok in Thailand, and Dawei in Myanmar. These corridors are becoming increasingly important not just for Japanese investors, but also especially for local small and medium-sized enterprises. By 2024, some 1,100 businesses – both local and foreign – were operating along these two corridors.

In 2024, Japan signed an agreement with the United States to create a new economic corridor – the Luzon Economic Corridor – in a bid to expand its economic presence in Southeast Asia. The corridor is located in the Philippines, which is currently Washington's closest ally in the region. Luzon was chosen for its abundant reserves of critical minerals, such as nickel, cobalt, copper, and bauxite, all of which are vital to the semiconductor and electric vehicle industries, including battery production.<sup>11</sup> The potential access to these raw materials alone acts as a strong incentive for foreign firms to invest in the corridor. Together, the Philippines and Indonesia account for around 45 per cent of global nickel production.<sup>12</sup>

In 2023, Japan signed the Japan-Vietnam Joint Initiative in order to benefit from Vietnam's

strong growth over the past decade, while in Cambodia, Japan created a Special Economic Zone in 2024 to attract Japanese investment. This latter move was partly informed by Japan's observation of China's heavy investment in Cambodia's textile industry, which helped the underdeveloped country build a robust manufacturing base. Today, Chinese firms own around 90 per cent of Cambodia's garment factories, and the sector accounts for roughly 40 per cent of the country's GDP.<sup>13</sup> By 2022, Cambodia had become the eighth-largest exporter of clothing and footwear in the world. Numerous Chinese firms are now integrated into local supply chains that produce goods for export to Japan, the US, and Europe.

### **To date, the EU has signed free trade agreements in Southeast Asia only with Singapore and Vietnam.**

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Japan itself has learned from first-hand experience what it means to be overly dependent on China. In 2010, Beijing restricted its exports of rare earth elements to Japan: Along with other developments, this move prompted Tokyo to pursue the diversification of its supply chains, particularly in areas previously dominated by China. One central element of this strategy is the Economic Security Promotion Act (ESPA), which was introduced in 2022. The ESPA primarily aims to shield Japan's supply chains from geopolitical disruptions by relocating production or by relying more on allied countries rather than on China. To that end, the law seeks to secure stable access to critical raw materials, to ensure the reliability and continuity of vital infrastructure, and to support the development of key technologies. In order to achieve these goals, the Japanese government introduced a range of subsidies aimed at boosting domestic production, funding R&D, and encouraging investment in global supply chains for strategic industries. Between 2020 and 2023, for example, Japan's Overseas Supply Chain Diversification Project supported

124 initiatives in Southeast Asia.<sup>14</sup> Japan is also increasingly using its development cooperation to support export-oriented companies, particularly through tied aid schemes. These schemes involve low-interest loans to partner countries on the condition that contracts be awarded to Japanese firms. If successful, this approach would not only help Japan reduce its reliance on China, but also significantly enhance the competitiveness of Japanese companies in Southeast Asia.

### **Europe needs an integrated foreign economic policy in Southeast Asia**

While Japan has fundamentally shifted its strategy in order to push back against China's growing economic dominance, Europe remains surprisingly hesitant to engage more decisively with Southeast Asia. Now that many European companies are looking for ways to reduce their dependence on China and to diversify into the region, they are finding it difficult to compete with rivals that have spent years entering regional markets and supply chains with the support of governments pursuing long-term strategies to expand their economic influence. Europe should learn from the success of these strategies and develop its own foreign economic approach to Southeast Asia – one that combines open trade policy with a pragmatic strategy for economic cooperation and proactive support for international business.

### **The EU should seize the momentum created by US tariff threats in order to swiftly close trade deals in Southeast Asia**

To date, the EU has signed free trade agreements in Southeast Asia with only Singapore and – more recently – Vietnam in 2019. Negotiations with a number of other high-growth Southeast Asian countries have dragged on without resolution, in some cases for years. However, recent US tariff threats – particularly under the Trump administration – have sparked new urgency within the EU about securing successful trade deals. In recent months, the European Commission has adopted a more pragmatic trade stance towards Southeast Asia. The political agreement announced on

13 July 2025 by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto to conclude trade talks that had been running since 2014 would likely not have been possible, for example, without the pressure created by US tariff threats.

## **The EU plans to invest 300 billion euros in developing countries by 2027 through Global Gateway.**

Launched in 2010 but suspended in 2012 due to major disagreements, the EU-Malaysia trade negotiations were likewise not revived until early 2025, again in response to shifts in US trade policy. Meanwhile, talks with Thailand and the fast-growing Philippines have been ongoing for years – with little progress to speak of.

One key obstacle in past negotiations has been the EU's attempts to impose non-trade-related conditions on its partners, including far-reaching environmental and social standards. Indonesia and Malaysia in particular have strongly rejected these demands, accusing the EU of protectionism disguised as climate policy. Given the region's growing global economic relevance, Europe's own economic challenges, and stagnating trade with the EU, Southeast Asia's rising economies now find themselves in a position to walk away from negotiations. Meanwhile, the proliferation of bilateral and regional trade agreements in Asia – such as ACFTA and RCEP – has only reinforced the leverage of these rising economies.

In this context, the EU should make the most of the momentum created by US tariff threats to bring all ongoing trade negotiations in Southeast Asia to a rapid and successful conclusion following the positive example set by the deal with Indonesia. This effort would help remove trade barriers and facilitate market access for European businesses in the region. The EU must avoid overloading these talks with non-trade demands

and should continue its new, more pragmatic approach if it is to finally conclude trade agreements with all of the region's dynamic economies after years of stalled negotiations.

## **Global Gateway has the potential to align EU development and economic interests**

In 2021, the EU launched its Global Gateway initiative – partly in response to China's BRI – with the goal of promoting “smart, clean and secure connectivity in digital, energy and transport, and strengthening health, education and research systems around the world”.<sup>15</sup> The EU plans to invest 300 billion euros in developing countries by 2027 through Global Gateway, but only 10 billion euros<sup>16</sup> of this money is earmarked for Southeast Asia – an inexplicably small amount given the region's enormous geopolitical and economic importance. For comparison, China's BRI-backed Rempang Eco-City industrial park project in Indonesia alone has a budget of nearly 10 billion euros.<sup>17</sup>

In Southeast Asia, the Global Gateway initiative supports the construction of grids and roads in Cambodia in line with the EU's green agenda and its vision for “sustainable connectivity”. The initiative also aims to improve the electricity supply in order to boost energy efficiency, including the development of a hydropower plant in Vietnam. In Laos, the initiative includes the construction of urban transport systems, irrigation infrastructure, and roads to enhance connectivity, while in the Philippines, it supports the installation of solar power plants and home solar systems in order to provide electricity to remote areas. Although these projects primarily reflect the EU's green agenda, they also have the potential to create economic opportunities for European companies, to secure control over key infrastructure, and to gain access to critical resources that – for now – are still acquired through Chinese supply chains in the region. In practice, however, Global Gateway in Southeast Asia still largely follows the logic of traditional development cooperation, in which creating economic openings for European businesses is treated as a secondary consideration.



Furthermore, the Global Gateway concept suggests that it is a coherent investment strategy coordinated and managed by the EU Commission. However, in Southeast Asia, the concept remains a loose collection of uncoordinated projects, many of which are funded and managed by national development banks and agencies in EU member states and some of which had already been in planning long before the European initiative was launched. Given the limited scale of most projects, the relatively modest total funding mobilized for the region, and the lack of a genuinely strategic approach to implementation, it is questionable whether Global Gateway can be seen as a credible answer to China's BRI or to Japan's economic corridors.

For this reason, the Global Gateway initiative should be restructured as a strategically coordi-

nated European investment programme. The budget earmarked for Southeast Asia urgently needs to be revised in order to reflect the region's central role in Europe's diversification efforts. In addition, Global Gateway projects should focus on areas in which European companies hold a competitive edge to create entry points and business opportunities for these firms in the region.

### **European businesses need a strategic external economic policy**

To date, the EU still lacks a comprehensive strategy to support European companies in building a stronger presence in Southeast Asia. A structured and perhaps even institutionalized dialogue between the European Commission and the business community – aimed at jointly addressing the challenges faced by European



So far not competitive: The European Union's Global Gateway initiative. Photo: © Sacha Leon, Le Pictorium, Imago.

firms abroad – exists only in rudimentary form. In the most recent EU-ASEAN Business Sentiment Survey, 59 per cent of European companies reported that the EU does not sufficiently support their interests in Southeast Asia – the highest level of dissatisfaction since the survey began in 2015.<sup>18</sup> The EU should take closer note of the cooperation models between governments and businesses that have been established by countries such as China, Japan, and South Korea in order to boost its relevance in the region's economies. While Europe lacks China's state-owned enterprises and Japan's historically close political-economic integration, it does have a vast internal market, globally respected industrial companies, and – crucially – a high level of trust that it still enjoys in the region. Indeed, the EU continues to be viewed by regional elites as a preferred partner for navigating the uncertainties of the US-China rivalry.<sup>19</sup>

Europe clearly has the potential to become one of the region's leading economic powers and to expand its presence in strategic sectors across Southeast Asia. However, for that to happen, the EU must change course by stepping up exchanges between the Commission, national governments, and the business sector to better understand the specific challenges that European companies face in the region and to implement the policy measures that are necessary to boost the competitiveness of these companies. This effort also requires member states to further develop their national approaches to external economic promotion and – where appropriate – to coordinate more effectively at the European level. Such measures must be focused first and foremost on economic goals rather than being weighed down by non-economic requirements that make it more difficult for European companies to compete on equal footing with Chinese or Japanese firms in Southeast Asia.

– translated from German –

- 1 The China+1 strategy refers to a production, sales, and supply chain approach in which companies select at least one additional country alongside China as a manufacturing base. The aim is to reduce dependency through diversification in order to minimize risks such as the loss of market share, supply chain disruptions, rising costs, and political tensions.
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# Post-secular and Popular

What Explains the Rise of  
Evangelicals in Latin America?

Photo: © Leandro Ferreira, Fotoarena, mayo

## In a Nutshell

The conversion of large segments of the Latin American population to various forms of Evangelicalism has to be seen as one of the most significant demographic, cultural, and socio-political transformations in the region in recent decades.

Evangelical movements have succeeded in offering a form of faith that resonates with the late modern age, with Latin America having provided particularly fertile ground for the growth of these movements.

Within neo-Pentecostal groups in Latin America, the “prosperity gospel” has proved especially influential. It interprets material wealth as a visible sign of divine

blessing, which often places believers in a tense and ambivalent space that lies somewhere between spiritual empowerment and economic exploitation.

While the growth of Evangelical churches has led to a stronger political presence and to greater social visibility, these communities have managed to mobilize collectively around only a handful of specific issues.

The rise of Evangelicalism in Latin America stands as a counter-narrative to the idea of modernity as an era of secularization.



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The world's most Catholic region – and spiritual home to both the previous and current Pope – in reality ceased to be exclusively Catholic quite some time ago. Long overlooked and now widely discussed, the mass conversion of large sections of the population to various forms of Evangelicalism stands as one of the most significant demographic, cultural, and attitudinal transformations in Latin America in recent decades. For a long time, Evangelical groups remained on the fringes of political life, but today, they are firmly embedded in the heart of political debate and have become major political players. Depending on the prevailing political and media climate, critical analyses and sensationalist headlines appear at regular intervals. Too often, however, Evangelicals are portrayed in oscillating terms – as exotic curiosities with undertones of alarmism or in the sense of “othering”<sup>1</sup>. The dominant narrative has tended to frame Evangelicals as a new reactionary force, often reducing them to their political significance and interpreting them as an anachronism in an increasingly secular modern age. However, as the present article aims to show, Evangelicalism is not an outdated throwback; rather, it is a product of Latin America's distinct path to late modernity<sup>2</sup> – a development shaped by specific sociocultural and political conditions that have proved particularly fertile in this context.

Even on closer inspection, the growth of Evangelicalism in Latin America remains striking. Once only 4 per cent of the population in 1970, Evangelicals now account for 24.6 per cent of the region's population. However, this picture is far from uniform: Indeed, in countries such as Mexico (4.4 per cent), Uruguay (4.6 per cent), and Argentina (6.3 per cent), Evangelicals remain a minority. Nevertheless, in Brazil (25.5 per cent), Venezuela (31.4 per cent), and especially Central America and the Caribbean – specifically, in Costa Rica

(56.0 per cent), Panama (55.0 per cent), and the Dominican Republic (50.3 per cent) – they account for a significant share of the total population. That said, growth has slowed noticeably in recent years.<sup>3</sup>

### **Evangelicalism as a product of late modernity**

The term “Evangelical” remains heavily loaded with stereotypes, particularly in Germany. Evangelicals are variously described as a sect or as a threat to democracy and tend to be associated with figures like Trump and Bolsonaro. Moreover, what it actually means to be an Evangelical is often poorly understood, which is due in no small part to the sheer heterogeneity of currents, denominations, organizations, and missions. The confusion is compounded by the fact that the term has different religious connotations in Latin America as compared with Europe or the United States. It thus only makes sense to speak of Evangelicals in the plural.<sup>4</sup> In countries such as Venezuela or Brazil, there are many thousands of independent churches, thereby making the term imprecise, fluid, and subject to constant negotiation as to who self-identifies as an Evangelical and who is identified as such by others. The term is thus only useful for drawing very broad outlines.

In Latin America, it is particularly Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal groups – such as the Assembleia de Deus and the Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus (IURD) – that have gained influence, whereas practitioners of historical Protestant traditions – that is, members of the so-called immigrant churches, including Lutherans, Methodists, and Calvinists – are referred to as protestantes and are not usually labelled as Evangelicals. For this reason, the focus in the present article is primarily on (neo-)Pentecostal groups. Pentecostalism and neo-Pentecostalism are characterized



Megachurch in São Paulo: Inaugurated in 2014, the Templo de Salomão offers space for 10,000 worshippers.

Photo: © Rahel Patrasso, Xinhua, Imago.

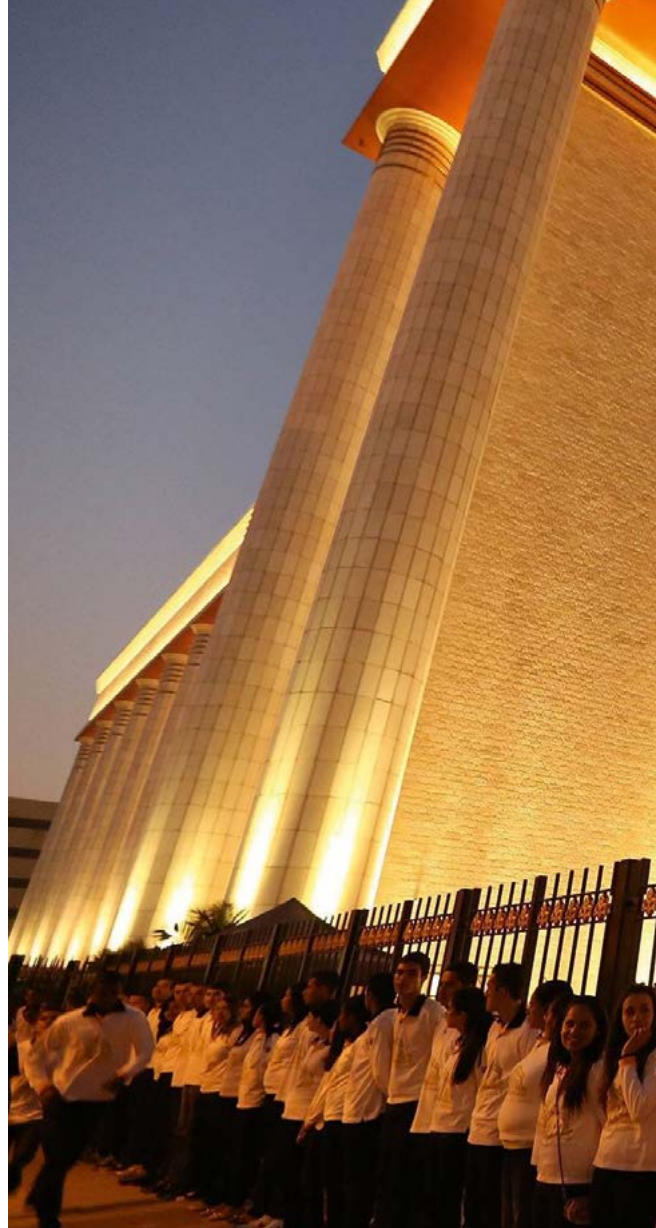
by a strong emphasis on the workings of the Holy Spirit, which in practice finds expression in exorcisms and prophecy as well as in healing through prayer.<sup>5</sup> If common ground is sought within this dynamic, heterogeneous, complex spectrum, these groups are united above all by a pronounced devotion to Jesus and the Cross as well as by a strong focus on the Bible. Evangelicals are also Christians by personal choice, with their religious identity being consciously and individually chosen. Finally, Evangelicals are deeply religious, activist, socially engaged, and mission-driven groups. In short, Evangelicals are people with a mission.<sup>6</sup> These four defining characteristics are arguably key to the success and continued growth of Evangelical groups in Latin America. The idea of Christianity based on individual conversion enables these groups to become culturally embedded within modernity and late modernity, in which the religious self is always subject to the optionality of belief.<sup>7</sup> Being Christian by personal commitment aligns well with late modernity's dominant values, such as authenticity and autonomy.<sup>8</sup> As a result, Evangelical identity tends to play a far more central role in shaping an individual's worldview, ethical beliefs, and political convictions. At the same time, Evangelical churches have become highly effective at staging worship as an event. In this way, faith becomes a consumable, emotional, and experience-driven offering.

### **In many marginalized urban neighbourhoods, Pentecostal churches are institutions with a constant presence.**

#### **Faith in motion: Urbanization as a driver of Pentecostalism**

In addition to this cultural embedding within late modernity, Pentecostal groups have managed to

offer a refuge for those uprooted by urbanization – that is, for the rural poor pushed into the cities and left socially adrift. The rapid spread of Pentecostal groups from the 1960s onwards correlates strikingly with the sweeping urbanization that took place across Latin America over the same period. Between 1950 and 2010, the urban population increased from around 30 to approximately 85 per cent – a demographic shift of historic proportions.<sup>9</sup> It was during this period that today's megacities such as São Paulo and Mexico City became global urban centres. As a result, the traditional Catholic ties – hierarchical,





corporatist, and personalized – that had previously shaped rural society began to dissolve. For many impoverished migrants who had left their communities behind and now had to find their way in sprawling, fragmented metropolises such as Rio de Janeiro, (neo-)Pentecostal churches provided a valuable resource in the face of social dislocation – and they continue to do so. The close-knit personal networks of the congregation, the emphasis on a personal relationship with Jesus, and – in typical Pentecostal fashion – highly charged emotional and spiritual experiences all offer individuals new forms of

support in the urban context.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, in many marginalized urban neighbourhoods, Pentecostal churches are the only institutions with a constant presence. They step into the vacuum left by absent state structures, taking on roles of care, community-building, and moral guidance.<sup>11</sup> In this type of environment, the seemingly clear-cut biblical worldview offered by these churches provides a coherent interpretive framework. In contexts marked by extreme poverty, violence, and social marginalization, people need a faith that offers clear boundaries and rules – a faith that equips individuals to resist the ever-present



lure of self-destruction.<sup>12</sup> Faith may not move mountains here, but it does change lived realities.

## Faith becomes an experience that is customizable and functionally differentiated within a religious marketplace.

### Faith under market conditions

The evolution of the early Pentecostal garage churches on the urban periphery into the neo-Pentecostal glass palaces found in major city centres from the 1980s onwards can also be read as a story of social and economic ascent.<sup>13</sup> Whereas Pentecostal churches originally focused on the marginalized, neo-Pentecostal congregations increasingly draw from the

urban, upwardly mobile middle classes, often from the second generation of Pentecostal families.<sup>14</sup> Neo-Pentecostal groups have developed a form of religion that aligns – organizationally, theologically, and socially – with the values of a status-conscious and consumption-oriented middle class. Faith becomes an experience that is customizable and that is functionally differentiated within a religious marketplace that is shaped by flexibility and by a logic of performance – that is, a faith under market conditions.<sup>15</sup> In Montevideo, Bogotá, and Curitiba, for example, worshippers at the Igreja Universal – the largest neo-Pentecostal Church in Latin America – can find a service tailored to nearly every life situation and question: On Mondays, services for success; on Tuesdays, services for healing; on Wednesdays, Bible study; on Thursdays, services for love; and on Fridays, services for exorcisms – several times a day across the entire region. This business model has earned



More complex than one might think: Brazil's former president Jair Bolsonaro could and can count on the support of Evangelical groups. However, it would be simplistic to label them as staunch supporters of one particular political tendency. Photo: © Sandro Pereira, Fotoarena, Imago.

the Igreja Universal the mocking nickname supermarket de fe – that is, the “supermarket of faith”.<sup>16</sup>

### *Growth as an indicator of success*

At the heart of this context is a functional shift towards a “growth ethos”: The numerical expansion of congregations is not only seen as a sign of divine blessing, but also becomes a measure of legitimacy and success in itself. Moreover, mission in this context becomes an end in itself. This situation is institutionally reflected in so-called megachurches – that is, in places of worship that regularly attract several thousand attendees and that visibly project a new form of self-confidence.<sup>17</sup> Examples include Fraternidad Cristiana in Guatemala City (15,000 weekly attendees), Rey de Reyes in Buenos Aires (30,000), and Centro Familiar de Adoración in Asunción (4,000).<sup>18</sup> This new self-image is most dramatically embodied in the Templo de Salomão, which was inaugurated in São Paulo in 2014 and was built by the IURD. Modelled on the biblical Temple of Solomon – though greatly exceeding the latter’s original dimensions – it can accommodate up to 10,000 worshippers. In its monumental architecture and theatrical staging, the temple serves as a symbol of late modern sacrality – one that fuses religious belonging with economic success and cultural capital.<sup>19</sup>

**If believers remain poor,  
this is interpreted as sign  
of their lack of faith.**

### *Prosperity over asceticism*

The development of the so-called prosperity gospel (“prosperity of health and wealth”) – which lies at the heart of the neo-Pentecostal message – reflects the expectation of symbolic and material advancement among its followers. Theologically, this development also marks a shift in focus away from guilt, asceticism, and the Cross – which have traditionally been central to both Evangelical

and Pentecostal belief – and towards salvation and blessing.<sup>20</sup> These typically neo-Pentecostal notions of poverty and wealth have become particularly influential in Latin America over recent decades. While in his analysis *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*<sup>21</sup>, Max Weber identified diligence, discipline, and asceticism as central drivers of capitalist development in the Protestant societies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with work being understood as a divinely ordained calling, the prosperity gospel reverses this logic, with wealth becoming a visible sign of divine favour and a direct consequence of faith – an indicator of spiritual strength and blessing. Unlike liberation theology, in which poverty has at times been romanticized, neo-Pentecostal groups promise to overcome poverty. To put it more pointedly: While the Catholic Church opted for the poor, the poor opted for the neo-Pentecostals. The first to achieve financial success is often the pastor – a fact that is seen not as a contradiction, but rather as confirmation of divine blessing and as a model to aspire to. Wealth is thus regarded as proof of a living faith. The individual believer is by no means just a passive object of religious manipulation; rather, the act of giving – that is, of making donations – creates a moment of agency. Those who give, act deliberately in so doing, in a sense investing in their own (financial) blessing. Belief in wealth as a divine promise often becomes a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, with hope and action reinforcing each other. At the same time, many believers who have for years given what little they had to the Church remain poor – a situation often interpreted as a sign of their lack of faith – while their pastors become millionaires. The tension between spiritual empowerment and economic exploitation is an inescapable part of the neo-Pentecostal movement’s ambivalent nature.

### **Achieving the Kingdom of God on earth**

While classical Pentecostal congregations in the 1970s were largely socially marginalized, practised their faith in isolated parallel worlds, and tended to be apolitical, neo-Pentecostal groups have actively called for political representation, even going on to reshape the political landscape



of their region. This transformation is best understood as a response to a mutually reinforcing set of social, theological, and political changes.

## **The world beyond the Church was no longer to be shunned, but to be redeemed and liberated.**

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Firstly, as outlined above, neo-Pentecostal groups have undergone a process of upward social mobility. This new sense of confidence has translated into a political will to shape society. Secondly, the import of both a new interpretation of the “Kingdom of God”<sup>22</sup> and a revised eschatology (i.e. the doctrine of “last things”) provided the theological framework for a radical redefinition of the relationship between Church and world. For generations, Evangelicals in Latin America had expected the imminent Second Coming of Christ and the end of days, effectively placing them in a kind of waiting room of history.<sup>23</sup> Following Jesus’ words “My kingdom is not of this world”<sup>24</sup>, this pessimistic eschatology led to a withdrawal from political life. Indeed, why change the world if it is about to end? However, this expectation of an imminent end was gradually abandoned in the 1990s, when neo-Pentecostal groups instead began to view the coming of the Kingdom of God as a historical and political process – one that required active participation and influence (a shift from pre-millennialism to post-millennialism<sup>25</sup>). This more positive view of the future elevated political engagement in elections and civic involvement to the status of a geo-spiritual mission – that is, of a “cosmic struggle” to conquer and claim spiritual territory.<sup>26</sup> The world beyond the Church was no longer to be shunned, but to be redeemed and liberated.<sup>27</sup> A prime example of this new vision can be found in the book *Plano de Poder* (“Plan of Power”) by Edir Macedo, founder and bishop of the IURD. In it, Macedo sets out the political ambitions of his Church, drawing selectively on the Old Testament and formulating the gradual conquest of

the (Brazilian) presidential palace as a strategic goal. “Pastors became politicians – and believers became citizens.”<sup>28</sup> Thirdly, these social and theological shifts of the 1980s coincided in many Latin American countries with a period of political opening after decades of military dictatorships – a process that made the political participation of new actors such as neo-Pentecostal groups possible in the first place. In Guatemala, for example, the final years of the dictatorship bore witness to the rise of Evangelical figures to national leadership, including the military ruler General Efraín Ríos Montt and later the democratically elected Jorge Serrano Elías.<sup>29</sup>

### **Latin America’s winding paths to modernity**

Secularization – the universal master narrative of religion’s declining social role in the process of modernization<sup>30</sup> – appears unconvincing in the Latin American context. Rather than confirming this pattern, the (neo-)Pentecostal growth trajectory should be understood as part of the region’s own distinct path to modernity. In fact, developments on two of the three levels of secularization identified by Charles Taylor run counter to this theory.<sup>31</sup>

#### *A moral agenda at the centre*

Firstly, at the subjective-individual level – as already outlined – the shift from Catholicism to Evangelical, Pentecostal, and neo-Pentecostal groups has led to a heightened sense of religious identity. Once taken for granted, faith has now been redefined as a conscious personal decision. Nominal Catholics often become highly devout Evangelicals whose religious identity shapes a person’s everyday life, partner choices, and worldview. As Evangelicals see themselves as the “light and salt of the Earth” and belief can no longer be assumed to be self-evident, the key marker of distinction from surrounding culture is often found in matters of religious ethics. Topics grouped under the term “moral agenda” – such as abortion, homosexuality, sex education, and so-called gender ideology – have gained political significance and have become key issues in terms of how individuals vote. The result is that

Evangelicals often take on the role of culture warriors.

## **Evangelical groups in Latin America have repeatedly failed to establish themselves as a cohesive political bloc.**

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### *Religion in the public sphere*

Secondly, at the societal level – where secularization is understood to be the erosion of religious content in different areas of society and its retreat into the private sphere – Latin America has in fact seen a marked resurgence of religion in both politics and society. The growth of (neo-) Pentecostalism and its increasing engagement with the world since the 1990s has translated into a powerful public presence. Whether in the form of garage churches in poor neighbourhoods, sleek glass buildings, or the replica of Solomon's Temple in São Paulo, Evangelical churches are a visible part of the urban landscape in countries such as Brazil. However, the expansion of these churches is not only numerical: As explicitly Evangelical actors, they have also gained considerable social relevance.<sup>32</sup> With powerful radio and television networks, mass events, universities, and cultural productions such as TV series and films alongside highly visible public worship, these actors permeate every aspect of public life. The convergence of religion, economics, and politics is best embodied by Edir Macedo: One of Brazil's wealthiest men and owner of RecordTV, the country's second-largest broadcaster, Macedo acts as a religious entrepreneur with significant political influence. While he initially supported Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff, RecordTV became a key amplifier of Bolsonaro's presidential campaign in 2018. However, Macedo had no qualms about later moving back into the Lula camp. By the same token, politicians deliberately seek proximity to Evangelical groups and stage public religious practices to align themselves with Evangelical discourse. Brazil once again offers particularly striking examples: In May 2016, the

Catholic Jair Bolsonaro was publicly baptized in the River Jordan by Everaldo Pereira.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, due to their internal diversity, Evangelical groups in Latin America have repeatedly failed to establish themselves as a cohesive political bloc, with confessionally aligned party projects having regularly collapsed. Instead, Evangelical groups tend to mobilize around specific issues that serve as identity markers,<sup>34</sup> as can be seen in Colombia, where religiously charged criticism of gender identity provisions played a significant role in the failure of the referendum on the peace agreement between the government and the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia).<sup>35</sup> Although Evangelical groups tend to mobilize primarily around socio-political issues and generally lean towards more conservative positions, centre-left actors have also succeeded in attracting significant Evangelical constituencies. For instance, in 2018, the Mexican Evangelical party Partido Encuentro Social formed an electoral alliance with the left-wing MORENA (Movimiento Regeneración Nacional), thereby allowing "Evangelical votes" to benefit leftist candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador.<sup>36</sup> Evangelical groups and actors are therefore politically flexible and do not cast confessional votes. If anything, Evangelical voting behaviour is better described as being values-driven.

### *Religion in the plural*

Thirdly, secularization is not understood simply as a decline in the significance of religion, but rather as an "expansion of options" – a phenomenon that can indeed be observed in Latin America. In this sense, the Catholic Church – with its uniform devotional practices, unequivocal doctrines, and socially dominant worldview – is gradually losing its monopoly.<sup>37</sup> This is by no means a rupture with a previously homogeneous religious order: Indeed, the region has always been shaped by ongoing syncretism, blending Catholic traditions with Indigenous and African influences. In this new religious landscape, (neo-)Pentecostal groups have proved especially adaptable. Thanks to their decentralized structures, their proximity to everyday realities, and their organizational focus on charismatic individuals, these groups

are able to offer individualized, context-sensitive forms of religious engagement. In Latin America's increasingly socially segmented societies, (neo-)Pentecostal groups have thus succeeded in providing tailored spiritual and social responses to different milieux.

Modernity in Latin America appears to be defined not by religion's retreat, but rather by a constant dovetailing of the sacred and the secular both by religious differentiation and by the adaptation of faith to the conditions of late modern capitalist life. The Evangelical growth story thus stands as a counterpoint to the Eurocentric master narrative of secularization in modernity. If, however, modernity is understood in the plural, Latin America may be seen as an example of a parallel modernity in which religion has retained its relevance. The (neo-)Pentecostal groups described here in particular have created functional and adaptable expressions of faith for many people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and these expressions have also taken visible political form. Indeed, the emergence of Evangelical actors in the political arenas of the continent reflects a social reality that has already taken shape and that signals the need for the democratic integration of these groups. Contrary to some portrayals, these groups cannot be clearly placed on a single point of the political spectrum, for they have demonstrated a flexible and diverse political presence. That said, the merging of political and religious discourse and practice also harbours the risk of a new kind of intransigence. The separation of religion and politics is undoubtedly a key achievement of modernity that has helped to foster social peace. As the present article has shown, the infusion of religion into political debate has often rendered Evangelical groups vulnerable to polarizing actors, thereby drawing them into divisive culture wars. Even so, the alarmist tone that is sometimes adopted by commentators warning of the "Evangelicals" is exaggerated. Indeed, precisely because of their internal diversity, the direct political impact of these groups remains limited.

— translated from German —

- 1 Othering refers to the process of constructing certain groups as "the others", thereby setting them apart from an imagined "us". These "others" are typically seen not as equals, but as alien or threatening.
- 2 This use of the term "late modernity" (Spätmoderne) follows Andreas Reckwitz, who distinguishes the period from the earlier period of industrial modernity and views the former as beginning in approximately the 1970s. In contrast to "postmodernity", the term "late modernity" emphasises the lines of continuity within modernity.
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