

Viktor Jakupec • Max Kelly and • John McKay

# Foreign Aid in a World in Crisis: Shifting Geopolitics in the Neoliberal Era

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“The world is in crisis, or more accurately crises” (p. 1) is the opening sentence of the recent work titled “Foreign Aid in a World in Crisis: Shifting Geopolitics in the Neoliberal Era” as part of Routledge Explorations in Development Studies series. The opening sentence of the book immediately strikes the reader as well as offering important clues about the theoretical and conceptual lens through which the Jakupec, Kelly, and McKay see the foreign aid architecture. Jakupec and Kelly have previously made valuable contributions to the foreign aid literature through compelling works which critically examine the practical (e.g.,

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aid for trade<sup>1</sup>), procedural (e.g., the transformation of neoliberalism<sup>2</sup>), and crisis-related (e.g., Covid-19 and rising nationalism<sup>3</sup>) dimensions of the foreign aid architecture. Accordingly, this book not only serves to update, reinterpret, and holistically reassess the debates presented in their earlier works, but also—given the current international context—advances a timely and significant core claim: “foreground(ing) the geopoliticisation of foreign aid, as ‘hard power’ and beyond, thus questioning its relevance in its current constellation.” In doing so, it engages with foreign aid architecture from a realist theoretical perspective, contributing to a significant gap in literature. Although the book’s relatively modest length (120 p.) and its—perhaps overly—extensive engagement with debates from the authors’ previous works may disappoint more advanced readers, what most distinguishes the volume is the authors’ attempt to contribute to the dialogue between two concepts that have not been sufficiently examined in relation to one another: geopolitics and development.

The book consists of six chapters. In the first chapter, the message is clear: “the relationship between aid, development and geostrategic influence is therefore clearly apparent, but equally complex” (p. 3). The authors argue that a new form of “world order(s)” is emerging, grounding their claim in the empirical observation that multiple crises are converging into a broader “polycrisis,” including climate change, armed conflicts, the Covid-19 pandemic, economic recessions, energy shortages, and migration. The first chapter thus serves as an introduction by which the reader is acquainted with the political economy perspective and the concepts such as polycrisis and permacrisis. In the remaining pages of the chapter, the authors draw attention to the ways in which modern international development architecture has evolved within the post-World War II liberal international order. The effects of systemic power shifts and emerging fragmented orders are underlined as the underlying dynamic shaping divergent development performance across the Global North and the Global South. The

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1 See Viktor Jakupc & Max Kelly (Eds.), *Assessing the Impact of Foreign Aid: Value for Money and Aid for Trade* (Academic Press, 2015).

2 See. Viktor Jakupc, Max Kelly & Jonathan Makwira (Eds.), *Rethinking Multilateralism in Foreign Aid: Beyond the Neoliberal Hegemony* (Routledge, 2020).

3 See. Viktor Jakupc, Max Kelly & Michael de Percy (eds.), *COVID-19 and Foreign Aid: Nationalism and Global Development in a New World Order* (Routledge, 2022).

most significant contribution of this chapter lies in its careful attention to the effects of shifting power relations on both the understanding and practice of development cooperation.

In the second chapter, the account of how neoliberalism —market liberalization, privatization, and globalization— has historically shaped the idea and practice of foreign aid since the 1980s provides the foundation for the notion of emerging new world order(s) put forward in the first chapter. Highlighting the inherent relationship between current foreign aid architecture and the practices of traditional Western donors, i.e., the conditionality principle, this chapter offers the reader a rigorous critique of neoliberalism's influence on foreign aid allocation, as well as de-hegemonization of neoliberalism. However, despite engaging with structural mechanisms of international development – especially by drawing on well-known arguments from Dependency School and post-development theory - the authors do not add sufficient substantial and theoretical evidence to mechanisms of “non-death of neoliberalism” (p. 31). Still the reader might find convincing the appraisal of rising alternatives to neoliberalism from institutional (e.g. China-led New Development Bank, the Belt and Road Initiative, and Beijing Consensus) and political-theoretical (such as illiberalism, populism, and post-neoliberalism) perspectives.

The authors highlight two main crises of the 21st century: the GFC and the Covid-19 pandemic – as well as the Russo-Ukraine war – in the process of possible de-hegemonization of neoliberalism. For a huge amount of foreign aid has been, and will be, required after these crises. The emergence of non-Western rising powers as alternative donors in this competitive context therefore would require re-theorization of aid as part of an ideological and institutional order beyond as a neutral policy tool. However, the chapter gives insufficient attention to how emerging donors might reinterpret neoliberal aid norms, which merits further consideration given the diverging aid modalities within the Global South.

The systemic transformation observed through the lens of polycrisis constitutes the central theme of the third chapter. The authors ask the question of how the current global system of governance can be reformed in the face of polycrisis. This chapter stands out from the others as it offers more concrete and empirically grounded discussions about threats against global

peace, development, and stability. The authors' focus on various crises and disruptive conditions—such as the Global Financial Crisis, the global pandemic, destabilizing developments in the Middle East, the Russia–Ukraine War, U.S.–China rivalry, and the multidimensional negative impacts of the climate crisis—provides a highly useful perspective for understanding the current disorder and uncertainty in global economics and politics.

Then, the authors turn to a critical question of what will follow neoliberalism—“will it be right-wing populism or vapid cosmopolitanism?” (p. 56). To the authors, a more robust alternative – empowerment of the state to provide stronger social protection, not only against economic disruptions but also in response to security crises – might be contemplated. And building on similar arguments advanced by the prominent scholar Mark Duffield, the authors identify the elimination of underdevelopment and poverty as indispensable parameters shaping the future forms of development which, they argue will increasingly hinge on conflict resolution and social reconstruction given the expanding competition in international system.

The fourth chapter operationalizes the developmental lens outlined by the authors to offer a critical appraisal of the existing foreign aid regime, questioning its relevance to developmental needs and priorities of recipient countries. The authors draw particular attention to increasingly growing tensions between humanitarian principles, development goals and security concerns as the main source of disruption within the foreign aid architecture. The war in Ukraine serves as a critical illustrative case, offering significant insights into these tensions: the prolonged war has drawn a substantial sum of resources from the Western traditional donors at the expense of non-Ukraine crises. Despite serving as a solid proof of geostrategic concerns preceding over the developmental dimension of the flows of foreign aid, the critique offered by the authors remains under-theorized – which is also acknowledged by the authors as well (p. 69). More importantly, the analysis of the emerging donors focuses exclusively on China, limiting the scope of insights as to the heterogeneity within the Global South.

test through examination of the geopolitical underpinnings of various donors' aid policies toward Africa and the South Pacific. In this regard, the fifth chapter constitutes the most original part of the book, as it seeks to contribute to the dialogue between two concepts that have not been sufficiently examined in relation to one another: geopolitics and development. Reinterpreting the historical transformation of foreign aid, the authors find striking similarities between the current era and the Cold War period in terms of states' approaches to foreign aid. And the particularly powerful conclusion of the chapter "aid is now in the process of being weaponised" (p. 94) sounds convincing given the global strategic rivalry between the United States and China. It is quite significant that the analysis in this chapter is not confined to traditional donors, also paying attention to the implications of current trends in aid distribution for the development trajectories of Global South countries—an approach that significantly enriches the book's analytical depth.

The concluding chapter reiterates the central theme of the book – "the world is progressing towards a permanent state of geopolitical crises which has all the hallmarks of becoming the new normal" (p. 97). The argument here builds upon the perspective that disruptions (e.g., Russo-Ukraine War) and the emerging world order(s) (e.g. China's increasingly expansionist foreign policy orientation) differ substantially from the previous crisis situations. However, the analysis does not fully address critical questions such as whether China actually seeks to establish a new world order, to what extent it perceives the existing order as inadequate, or in which dimensions it envisions change. Instead, the authors briefly refer to some of the recurring themes frequently emphasized in Euro-centric literature—such as China's expanding investment and trade relations and its post-2010 institutional initiatives in the financial domain. This approach reflects a broader tendency observable throughout the book: an emphasis on Euro-centric perspectives that tend to overlook the agency of non-Western actors.

Overall, "Foreign Aid in a World in Crisis" offers not only a convincing portrayal of the dynamics of uncertainty and instability that characterize the contemporary international system but also a comprehensive interpretation of how these dynamics shape a key policy instrument such as foreign aid. Although the book's central thesis—that multiple geopolitical crises and disruptive conditions have

led major donors to weaponize foreign aid—may not be entirely unprecedented from a historical perspective, its distinctive contribution lies in the authors' effort to foster a dialogue between the fields of geopolitics and development studies. In this regard, the book represents a valuable and much-needed attempt to refine and update existing theoretical approaches that have often proved insufficient or disengaged in interpreting the uncertainties regarding foreign aid architecture.