

China, the Global South and the post-American international order

by Eric Olander

8 December 2025



China Global South Project Editor-in-Chief Eric Olander presents the 2025 Mitchell Oration at the Australasian AID Conference
Photo Credit: Alexandra Orme

This article is an abbreviated version of the 2025 Mitchell Oration delivered at the Australasian AID Conference. [View the livestream.](#)

I'm going to take a much stronger point of view than I think you've heard here over the past couple of days.

The world doesn't exist as we know it anymore. It's over. What you have learned up until now is over.

These shifts in aid are, in my view, structural. USAID is not coming back in any meaningful form. The American taxpayer doesn't want it or believe in it. In Europe, we're seeing a downgrade of aid, with thousands of FCDO (the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office) staff losing their jobs. There's a shift in Europe and Asia towards buying more guns, and you cannot have guns and butter at the same time. Those who say that when Donald Trump leaves power everything will return to normal are mistaken, because the American Congress will remain as divided as ever. The Western aid system is — I don't want to say collapsing — but it is restructuring to a point where we won't recognise it. We have to start our thinking over again.

This has raised the question: is China going to fill the void? We've seen so many articles suggesting the Chinese are rushing in to take over from USAID. This taps into a fear that China wants to become the global hegemonic power to replace the United States. But that's a misreading of what China wants to do. There is no evidence whatsoever in the literature. The Chinese themselves will say it: they do not want to provide global public goods. They don't want to patrol the South Atlantic or ensure global security for oil. They certainly do not want to replace the West in the foreign aid system. That concern is absolutely misplaced.

Here are four reasons why China won't replace the West in aid. First, aid is not a

cultural imperative in China. Much of our aid system is built on a Judeo-Christian mindset of helping the poor and saving people around the world. The Chinese just don't have that tradition. That's not to say they're not charitable people, but the way they express charity through policy doesn't really exist within the Chinese political system.

Second, they lack the infrastructure. One of the most amazing things about USAID was its massive infrastructure for moving grain from Nebraska to warehouses, then shipping it around the world and distributing it through partner agencies. China doesn't have anything like that network of consultants, agencies, people on the ground and relationships.

Third, China's economy is not what it was ten years ago. It's mired in massive domestic debt and property deflation. Youth unemployment in many parts runs at 20 to 40%. They don't have the cash to pump US\$11 billion of aid into Africa every year, even if they wanted to.

Fourth, foreign aid in China is just as unpopular as it is in the United States, Europe, and probably Australia. At the [2018 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation](#) in Beijing, when a US\$60 billion aid package was announced, people flooded WeChat, furious about giving money to Africans. Within hours, censors wiped the discussion clean. The conversation about aid in China is now censored. There's not a lot of political will to spend billions on foreign aid.

But the Chinese aren't standing still. After USAID went down, we saw headlines of Chinese announcements of very targeted, strategic deployments in particular places. When the US pulled out of demining in Cambodia, the Chinese came in with a US\$4.4 million donation. Same with the Africa CDC, [a US\\$4 million contribution](#). These are targeted, usually low-dollar amounts that are high profile and serve political objectives.

Then came the Mandalay earthquake, a milestone in many ways. Myanmar, already on its knees from civil war and insurgency, was hit by a near 8.0-magnitude earthquake just as USAID was being closed. Normally, the United States would mount a major response to a disaster like this. Every major international disaster of the past 20 to 30 years has seen American involvement. But not this time.

The Chinese response was extraordinary. Within 24 hours, they deployed Y-20 cargo planes, comparable to America's C-130s, carrying large amounts of resources. The media imagery projected a clear message: China has arrived as a major power that can respond quickly in a way only the US once could. They deployed Chinese drones with heat-seeking technology to look under rubble for

survivors. Teams came from Chongqing, Hong Kong, Shanghai and Shenzhen. This was an Asian response to an Asian crisis, giving us a glimpse of what the post-American order is starting to look like.

Behind these humanitarian responses, an architecture is taking shape. The United States has effectively quit the United Nations. Marco Rubio said in his confirmation hearing that they don't believe the liberal international order suits the United States anymore. Take him at his word. Once you break these things, it's very hard to go back.

China, meanwhile, loves the UN. It's the largest peacekeeping contributor among the P5, the second-largest financial supporter, and four out of 15 UN agencies are run by Chinese nationals. But, importantly, they're not trying to replace or overthrow the system. As one Chinese scholar put it, they want to make more room for China to move and manoeuvre, but not necessarily to displace the existing international order.

What we're seeing is Xi Jinping's architecture of the "Community of Shared Destiny for Mankind", built around five new governance initiatives covering development, security, civilisation, governance and AI.

The Global Development Initiative, launched in 2021 with 70 foreign ministers in attendance, is tied to the Sustainable Development Goals. The [Global Security Initiative](#) offers an alternative to NATO. The [Global Civilisation Initiative](#) seeks to redefine human rights away from universal values toward sovereign determination.

Will developing countries take all this seriously? Yes, in a pragmatic way. They're smart. They'll sign up, but don't interpret their participation as buying into everything Chinese. At worst, they get a free trip to China. At best, they ingratiate themselves with a P5 Security Council member who might help them elsewhere. None of the countries I study in the Global South want to emulate China or its political system. They're being selective.

Here's the critical point for the West: the Chinese have a vision for the future. Ask the Americans, British or Australians what they tell partners about the future, and they have nothing. The institutions they built are falling apart. They struggle to articulate a forward-looking vision.

When a Chinese ambassador sits down with a foreign minister, he has the Belt and Road Initiative, the BRICS' New Development Bank and five new governance initiatives. The rules-based international order, meanwhile, is backward-looking. Countries in Vietnam, Africa or Latin America see it as preserving a system that didn't serve them well. They look at Gaza and say the rules weren't enforced. They

look at Russia and say the same. The Chinese pick up on this and say, “We want to include you.”

This is the architecture of an emerging post-American order. Myanmar was a first peek at it. I don’t think it will be the last.

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Eric Olander is the co-founder and Editor-in-Chief of the China Global South Project. The independent, non-partisan media initiative is dedicated to exploring every facet of China’s engagement in the world and produces the [China-Global South Podcast](#).

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