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Different Regions, Different Reasons? Comparing Chinese land-consuming outward investments in Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

Research indicates that key parameters of “land grabbing” differ across regions (e.g., ILC 2012) – particularly in view of who invests and/or when the bulk of investments occurred. At the same time, my review of the “land grab” literature since 2008 reveals that hardly any comparative assessments of “land grabbing” from a home country perspective exist that study whether and/or in which way and why “land grabs” of a single investor country differ across regions. This paper assesses and compares the main empirical characteristics of Chinese land acquisitions in Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa since 2000 from a home country perspective. It addresses two questions: Firstly, the paper comparatively assesses the main empirical characteristics of how these investments occur, regarding the sectoral composition, actor constellations, timelines, and the role of land in both regions. On this basis, secondly, it studies whether and in which way China applies different rationales and strategies in these two regions, comparing significant ideologies, foreign policies, political economies, and institutions that have been identified during the assessment to play a role in how and why they take these “land grabs” occur. The data collection and assessment will be done by way of systematic process tracing and a comparative research design focusing on the two target regions from a home country perspective. This approach allows me to identify similarities and differences between Chinese regional “grabs”; as well as deliberate on the geopolitical dimension of Chinese land-consuming outward FDI more broadly.

1 Introduction

Research indicates that key parameters of "land grabbing" differ across regions (e.g., ILC 2012) – particularly in view of who invests and/or when the bulk of investments occurred. At the same time, a review of the "land grab" literature since 2008 reveals that hardly any comparative assessments of "land grabbing" from a home country perspective exist that study whether and/or in which way and why "land grabs" of a single investor country differ across regions.

This paper compares the main empirical characteristics of Chinese land-consuming investments (more than 100ha) in Southeast Asia (SEA) and Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) since 2000 from a home country perspective. It addresses two questions: what are the main empirical characteristics of how these investments occur in SEA and SSA, regarding the sectoral composition, actor constellations, and timelines? And in which way do Chinese land-consuming investments reveal different rationales and strategies in these two regions, comparing significant ideologies, foreign policies, political economies, and institutions?

The findings suggest that in both regions, Chinese investments identified as "land grabs" in the literature consume large areas of land in their operations, however, are not necessarily about the acquisition of land itself. At the same time, the context of Chinese investments in African and Southeast Asian (SEA) countries differs due to the factor of geographic proximity and old-style land grab concerns in the form of Asian disputes over territory (e.g., South China Sea) in SEA.[1]

From the home country perspective, land-consuming investments in both regions are embedded in similarly principled approaches towards foreign relations (e.g., One China Policy) and part of an overriding rhetoric of peaceful development and mutual benefit.[2] Moreover, they are often supported by a comparable constellation of bilateral agreements and multilateral diplomacy initiatives. While Chinese activities in SSA are part of strategies of establishing a "new strategic partnership"[3], land-consuming investments in SEA are often embedded in strategies towards furthering sub-regional integration that trace back to the Asian crisis in the late 1990s and have become more pronounced since 2000. Nevertheless, several of those land-consuming investments listed as "land grabs" in SSA also trace far back in time, and basically are concerned with the rehabilitation of intergovernmental cooperation projects implemented during the 1970s (or earlier).

Thus, the differences that exist between both regions are subtle, and relate to the difference of history, legacy, and proximity. Overall, land-consuming investments in both regions are framed by the Chinese government as a way to access and expand export markets, diversify the supply of resources, and internationalize Chinese business operations. More in detail, existing "land deal" databases (Land Matrix, Grain, case studies) as well as bilateral agreements document and/or foresee Chinese land-consuming investments (that could potentially become "land grabbing" activities) in a range of different sectors, from mining, farming, infrastructure development, and tourism. Similarly, the complexity of actors and purposes of such land-consuming investments does not allow putting forward any single story to explain what is happening in either region.

The data on which this assessment is based has been collected through desk review and systematic process tracing. This approach allows me to identify and compare core traits of Chinese regional "grabs;" as well as (to a certain degree) deliberate on the geopolitical dimension of Chinese land-consuming outward FDI more broadly, whereas geopolitics is understood as the spatial dimension of Chinese foreign policy as well as national development strategy and discourse. However, given the poor situation of data, it is not possible to derive comparative conclusions about core regional differences of "land grab" projects, for instance, regarding their sectoral distribution (see

[1] Archaya 2003; Johnson 2014.
[2] State Council 2014; Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) website (PRC).
[3] State Council 2014.

Section 2). Thus, this paper constitutes is a first draft that will need refinement in its comparative discussion of the empirical evidence in the context of research about China's globalization, as well as in view of the political economy of foreign policy within China.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 briefly outlines terminological choices and methodological limits of this research. Section 3 compares core empirical characteristics of Chinese land-consuming OFDI in Africa and SEA, assessing investor legacies and actual trade and investment volumes, as well as actor constellations, institutions, investment purposes, timelines, and sectoral priorities. The literature in the list of references is the basis upon which these rather general statements about core empirical characteristics are being based. Section 4 will then compare regional parameters that these investments are part of, focusing on push and pull factors, such as relevant foreign policies, official rationalizations, as well as host and home country institutions. Finally, Section 5 deliberates in which way Chinese actors pursue different strategies in different regions, and why this could be classified as geopolitical.

2 What is a land grab? Terminological choices and methodological limits

This section briefly outlines the challenges of a comparison of Chinese land-consuming investments of two regions, and how I addressed them. Firstly, the terminological ambiguity that characterizes the "land grab" debate has been difficult in studying and analyzing of what seems to be happening. In the following, this paper will primarily use the term "land-consuming FDI" to refer to listed "land grab" projects of over 100 hectares in scale. Other terms will be identified by quotation marks, inserted to acknowledge the diversity of terms characteristic of the contemporary debate.

At no point does the use of the investment terminology imply that the assessment and explanation follows the normative statements of many policy makers and/or theoretical discussions about investment and FDI. Rather, the term land-consuming investment reflects the empirical finding of this and previous research that Chinese investments mentioned in the "land grab" debate are not only about the acquisition of land or agricultural production, nor are they necessarily aiming to produce for export. In both regions, Chinese land-consuming projects listed as "land grabs" in existing "land deal" databases (Land Matrix, Grain) occur due to investments in all sectors and industries of a host country. Moreover, under the contemporary operative economic paradigm that is embedded in domestic and international institutions, as well as programs of economic governance, these undertakings are framed and treated as investment (FDI).

Largely, these investments have commercial opportunities as a primary driver. However, since they consume large areas of land in their operations, the experience of those using that particular piece of land requested by the investor might well be described as "land grab" – contributing to experiences of dispossession, displacement, the concentration of ownership of land, and/or – in the case of contract farming – the unequal distribution of benefits derived from its use, like carrying the full risk of operations but only captivating a small share of the profits made. From a broader perspective, the question whether large-scale land consuming investments represent a development opportunity or an instance of land grabbing (IIED/FAO/IFAD 2009), seems misplaced. Instead, as has been argued by many authors, it is more fruitful to ask what kind of development those instances of "land grabbing" represent, i.e. studying the political economy of development of which they form a part .[4]

Another challenge that this comparative research on Chinese "land grabbing" is confronted with refers to what we (can) actually know of what is happening – namely, the situation of data. Overall, as mentioned in the introduction, this paper acknowledges that no complete list of total hectares by sector

[4] White et al. 2012; Borras et al. 2011; Edelman et al. 2013; Franco et al. 2013.

and/or country could be found – nor does it seem likely or even feasible for such a list to exist in the future, due to terminological inconsistencies of what constitutes a "land grab," the lack of administrative data by states and companies, and/or the constant changes during a project's lifecycle. Consequently, the figures of, and information about the phenomenon of "grabbed land" by Chinese investors in different regions are (at best) a proxy for commercial pressure on land, and they vary greatly across databases and reports. Oya's (2013) methodological critique of the "land grab" literature warrants surrendering to the illusion of scientific rigour as a means to solve the problem of a lack of reliable data. In a context, where the available data is very limited, this might perpetuate selection biases present in the existing databases,- particularly, if the research aimed to discuss the empirical findings about specific instances of "land grabbing" from a broader perspective, as this paper wishes to do.

To avoid the resultant "false precision,"[5] this paper will abstain from using Land Matrix and other "land deal" data for aggregate comparison of the scale of Chinese land-consuming investments in the two regions under study. Instead, the comparative analysis is composed of an evaluation of core empirical characteristics of how these investments occur, that have been derived from extensive desk review of case studies of Chinese land-consuming investments in SEA and SSA, and where possible, verified on the basis of triangulated project data. Broader comparisons about the scale (and significance) of each region's economic interaction with China (from the perspective of China) will draw on official data about aid, investment, and trade flows. Clearly, these figures do not tell anything about Chinese land-consuming FDI projects as such; yet, they contribute to a better understanding of the broader trends in Chinese-SEA and Chinese-SSA relations of which land-consuming investment projects listed as "land grabs" form a part.

3 Not one single story - Empirical characteristics Chinese land-consuming investments in SSA and SEA

The empirical evidence of how Chinese land-consuming investments occur, as well as the listing of different types of Chinese "land deals" (Land Matrix, Grain, case studies) highlight that there is no straightforward story to be told that could explain why these investments occur or how these occur in all their multiple facets. Therefore, the following overview of core empirical characteristics of Chinese land-consuming investments in SEA and SSA will later be discussed under consideration of the broader developmental context of the home country (and, to the degree necessary: host countries) in which they are embedded in.

A major finding of the empirical summary of Chinese land-consuming investments in both regions is that they are strikingly similar regarding actor constellations, long-term timelines, and institutional drivers. This means that dissimilarities are gradations related to the particular countries involved. It also means that the home country context and political economy of development plays a significant role in China's foreign economic relations in general, and land-consuming investments in particular, explaining how they occur with regard to the actors, sectors, and interests involved.

At the same time, the emerging empirical evidence suggests that the initial narrative according to which Chinese land-consuming investments are for food security back home,[6] or that the primary driver was the international food price crisis in 2007/2008 does not capture the diversity of interests, timelines, sectors, and actors involved in both regions.[7] Take the example of timelines: In both regions, several of the projects mentioned in the "land grab" literature trace far back, some to the 1960s, when,

[5] Oya 2013.
[6] See, for instance, Magdoff 2013.
[7] Goetz 2015a.

under the influence of the Cold War, China's foreign policies or cooperation projects with several countries (e.g., Sino Iko Cam in Cameroon; ZTE in the DRC).[8] Others, particularly in SEA, trace back to the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s (see below).

In many cases, significant events seem to be specific to the host and home country involved, - because they resulted in reforms of the regulatory framework and a re-conceptualization of capital exports/imports in general, and FDI in particular, and thus allow for these investments to occur how they do and at the scale they do. For instance, the Asian crisis led to a focus on sub-regional integration and modernization in SEA countries and China, and projects that are part of related development programs have been listed as "land grabs," - such as infrastructure development for the establishment of economic corridors and/or special economic zones. At the same time, several countries in SEA have adopted a very liberal trade and FDI regulation in response to the oil crisis in the 1980s. Consequently, FDI and export-oriented development strategies of which land-consuming investments form a part, feature prominently in countries like Indonesia for more than four decades – setting these countries apart "from the more inward-looking Korean and Japanese development strategies."[9] This characteristic also constitutes a major difference compared to many countries in SSA, which began liberalizing their economies only in the 1990s (often forced upon them by donors); and which have just begun to introduce more aggressive investment promotion strategies since 2000.[10] At the same time, both regions are characterized by a land crisis that such land-consuming investments tend to aggravate, while the promotion of these investments is itself often a part of this crisis.[11] This means that Chinese "land grabbing" in SSA and SEA occurs in countries with a political economy of land governance characterized by highly unequal ownership structures, high socio-economic inequality, and discriminatory legislation.[12]

From the Chinese perspective, home country reforms towards the promotion of overseas investments have been related to a number of events, such as the country's opening in the 1980s, its rising dependency on external resources for sustained growth (which led to a strategy to diversify supply), the Asian crisis and the related search for regional integration (SEA) and markets overseas (SSA).[13] Most recently, the access to the WTO in 2001 led to a promotion of the internationalization of business operations to remain competitive in the face of high foreign competition, and in view of the increasingly stern environmental and social costs of the country's development trajectory that have been taken on by the government with the intention to upgrade the economy.[14]

The widely cited 2008 financial, food, and energy crises had an ambiguous impact on Chinese overseas investments. On the one hand, the 2008 financial crisis (similar to the Asian crisis over a decade earlier) allowed some companies to 'go out' and get 'cheap bargains,' profiting from price sensitivity and declining asset prices. At the same time, the global economic crisis presented a challenge for potential Chinese investors.[15] In 2009, the total value of approved non-financial OFDI projects declined by nearly two thirds (USD 3.7 billion) from the value of the previous year (USD 10 billion); however, it has since been recovering.[16] Moreover, the rising external energy dependency has been a government concern since the mid-1990s. Thus, Chinese overseas investments in this sector are not a recent phenomenon, and home country measures introduced to diversify supplies trace back to

[8] Putzel and Kabuyaya 2011, 34; Brautigam and Zhang 2013.
[9] Parker 1993.
[10] Parker 1993; Goetz 2015b.
[11] Colchester and Chao 2011; Chao 2015; Boamah 2014; Chigara 2012.
[12] Home 2012; Borras and McKinley 2006; GTZ (Laos) 2009; Quizon 2013; The Economist (26 October 2013).
[13] Goetz 2015a.
[14] Jiang 2009; He 2002; Chinese Government 2006; Chinese Government 2011.
[15] Rosen and Hanemann 2009.
[16] Rosen and Hanemann 2009.

the 1990s.[17] Finally, at the time of the 2008 food crisis, China was largely food self-sufficient.[18] However, since then, the Chinese government has introduced supporting policies and funding for investments in natural resources (incl. agriculture) overseas (not specific to any regional investment), which might have repercussion regarding sectoral priorities of Chinese overseas investments in the years to come.[19] Already today, the empirical evidence (in the form of case studies or official documentation) shows the rising interest of the Chinese government and Chinese companies to invest in natural resources, particularly agricultural production and mining.[20]

As of 2015, it appears that Chinese land-consuming investments go into different sectors, and are composed of a variety of projects, from infrastructure development, to mining, manufacturing, in addition to agricultural production. However, the priorities seem slightly different: while both regions are perceived as export markets by the Chinese government and companies, the initial investment priority in SSA was on diversifying access to energy & mineral supplies (not necessarily for export back home), and increasingly, to open new markets;[21] whereas in SEA, the focus seems to be on large-scale agriculture (e.g. rubber plantations) and primary commodity supply development, as well as infrastructure projects for sub-regional trade integration – in addition to exports markets.[22]

In view of actors and institutions, the process tracing of land-consuming investment projects in both regions shows that these involve a variety of actors of both the home and the host country, such as private entrepreneurs, state-owned companies (often from the provincial and municipal level), government officials, embassy personnel, ministries, parliaments, financial actors; while being funded by a number of different sources, in the form of national banks (host countries), company headquarters, policy banks (Chinese or multilateral), and – in some cases – stock markets (via Hong Kong). This underlines the above statement that a diversity of interests is at play in Chinese land-consuming investments in SEA and SSA, rather than any single actor group or rationale.

In this context, it is also far from straightforward, whether pull or push factors are primary drivers of land-consuming investments. It appears that the investments serve the interest of key actors in the political economy of China and host countries, in the form of landed elites, bureaucrats, and industry.[23] From the viewpoint of push factors, Chinese commercial diplomacy promoting land-consuming investments in both regions has increased significantly since 2000, due to the above mentioned regulatory reforms that have led to a supportive institutional framework promoting overseas investment; as well as due to significant changes in the country's political economy since the late 1980s, such as the rise of bureaucratic entrepreneurs that are interested in profitable investments, together with changes in the corporate governance structure.[24] Moreover, several reports mention land-consuming investments that occur upon request by the host countries (e.g., investment promotion agencies; governments).[25]

[17] Wilkes and Huang 2011.
[18] FAO 2009.
[19] MOFCOM 2011.
[20] See, for instance, evidence about Chinese bilateral agreements with the Philippines on the MOFA website; Jilin Fuhua Agricultural Science and Technology Development Ltd.'s post on the website of the Chinese Association for International Understanding (http://www.cafiu.org.cn/english/NewsInfo.asp?NewsId=1577); Bagayaua (17 October 2007).
[21] Goetz 2015a.
[22] This statement is based on bilateral agreement statements and multilateral development initiatives mentioned on the MOFA website under the rubrics Asia, Africa, FOCAC, ASEAN-China.
[23] Colchester and Chao 2011; Borras and Franco 2011; Boamah 2014; Cheng 2001; Yu 2008.
[24] Xue and Han 2010; Quizon 2013; Loewen 2012; Dwyer 2015; Feng 2009; and Yu 2008; Cheng 2001; Woetzel (8 July 2008).
[25] Ekman 2011; Global Witness 2014; Bagayaua (17 October 2007); Borras and Franco 2011; Lavers 2012; Cheng 2001.

Finally, the strong presence of mainstream economics[26] as a guiding ideology seems another crucial component (pull and push factor) in explaining the rise and scale of such land-consuming investments. This economic framework prevails in Chinese (foreign) economic policy as well as land-consuming investment rationales at the project level; it is at the core of institutional arrangements of international economic governance; and (officially) informs host country rationalizations of foreign direct investments as a source of capital to realize national development objectives. As a guiding ideology embedded in official documentation, the framework embraces foreign investments as an important policy tool to realize domestic development ambitions; and supports the notion that Chinese-African and Chinese-Southeast Asian cooperation is mutually beneficial ("win-win") – framing foreign direct investments as a technical management issue (rather than contentious instances of control grabbing).[27]

4 Different regions, different reasons? Comparing regional parameters of Chinese land-consuming OFDI in Africa and SEA

The complexity of core (f)actors that characterize Chinese land-consuming investments in both regions means that it is important to learn more about the broader context that these land-consuming investments are part of – namely, regional legacies, foreign policies, and institutions. The following section reviews core parameters that build the context against which land-consuming investments happen, and that (to different degrees) influence how and explain why they occur.

The findings suggest that the broad similarities regarding Chinese land-consuming investments in both regions can be explained by the shared home country's political economy and development trajectory. The home country context explains the diversity of actors and interests involved (to the degree that agents involved in "land deals" act against the interest of the central government); the multiple strategic outlooks on resources, markets, economic upgrading, and political alliances; or the similarities regarding the institutional and ideological embeddedness of these large-scale projects that are a function of Chinese reform processes since the late 1980s, while reflecting (ongoing) processes of regional and international economic integration since the late 1990s.

At the same time, the similarity of investment processes in the host country contexts is striking. Many of these investments aggravate existing land crises, yet are officially welcomed by respective governments which subscribe to economic liberalization and IFDI-driven export-orientation of their economies as a way to growth and development - to the extent of providing subsidies to large-scale operations to replace existing land uses (and thereby users).[28] Also, the (foreseeable) huge land demands of modern development prescriptions (e.g., large-scale infrastructure, agriculture) that are noticeable in statements made by Chinese actors (public and private), host governments, and relevant institutions (e.g., ASEAN, FOCAC) seem to be a central component driving land-consuming investments and related changes in land use, cover, access, and ownership in both regions.[29]

Core differences between Chinese land-consuming investments in SSA and SEA seem to be largely related to the factor of geographic proximity – a factor that matters in view of the issue of territorial land struggles, the existence of migrant networks that allow Chinese enterprises to associate and enter foreign markets more easily, the degree to which provincial support and policies are present in land-consuming activities with "land grab" effects (e.g., Yunnan government promoting rubber

[26] This paper follows the assessment and definition of mainstream economics provided by Lavoie (2014).
[27] Sornarajah (2010).
[28] E.g., Chao 2015; GTZ (Laos) 2009.
[29] GTZ 2009 (laos); Lu 2015; Wolford et al. 2013; Quizon 2013; Loewen 2012; Colchester and Chao 2011; Chao 2015; Oliveira and Schneider 2014.

plantation in Laos[30]); and the projects' export-orientation to the home country (long distances making it cost inefficient).[31]

Regional perceptions and recent trends of Chinese economic presence

Regional perceptions about the rising economic presence of China of which land-consuming investments form a part differ. Chinese relations with SEA countries are often characterized as a balancing act from the viewpoint of the neighboring countries, meaning that host governments engage with China, and at the same time try to strengthen their partnerships with other regional or extra-regional actors and institutions to reduce the dependency on China – as the examples of ASEAN's admission of Myanmar in 1997, or several countries' active diplomatic ties with the US highlight.[32]

China has a long history of political influence seeking and cultural dominance in SEA, and regional migration has led to a significant presence of ethnic Chinese in the neighboring countries over time.[33] In the past two decades, the country's military buildup, "blue water ambitions", and its status as a major expanding economy attracted the attention of its SEA neighbors – with ambiguous effects.[34] On the one hand, the Chinese government's focus on regional stability during the Asian financial crisis (1997-1999) gained the country the reputation as a "good neighbor" – due to its timely provision of bilaterally negotiated financial support packages to conflicted neighboring countries, the refusal to devalue its currency (going against G7 recommendations), as well as the call for regionally negotiated financial management strategies (which deviated from IMF's multilateral recommendations).[35] Also, its promotion of regional economic integration (e.g., China-ASEAN summits since 1997; preferential trade policies) built trust in the country's relations with its neighbors. On the other hand, ongoing (old style) territorial land grab struggles in the region (e.g., South China Sea), and diplomatic tensions with Taiwan, Japan, and other countries considered US allies, undermine the reputation that China has managed to build. [36]

Unlike the focus on balancing, the relatively new and rising interest by China (and other emerging economies) in SSA is often framed by African governments (and literature about South-South cooperation) as a way to (re-)gain policy space and deliberate outside OECD development preferences, - reducing the dependency on international institutions and "traditional" partners (e.g., OECD, IMF).[37] The diversity of investors and donors has reinstated "strategies of evasion" from conditionalities attached to development finance.[38] Such strategies were common during the Cold war among governments heavily dependent on donor funding, and had temporarily lessened after 1990, as a result of the greater focus on aid coordination.

In both regions, Chinese trade, investment, and aid flows intensified significantly over the past two decades, picking up speed in 2000. Importantly, land-consuming investments are not only embedded in this broader trend, but they are also a significant part of it.[39] Take the example of the "land deal" databases (e.g., GRAIN, Land Matrix) that list a number of Chinese-African and Chinese-Southeast Asian aid and economic cooperation projects as "land grabs" – be it in the form of agricultural demonstration centers, Special Economic Zones, or infrastructure construction – along

[30] Lu 2015.
[31] Brautigam 2009.
[32] Archaya 2003; Johnson 2014.
[33] Brunjes et al. 2013.
[34] Acharya 2003, 13; Parker 1993.
[35] Kirton (1999); Archaya 2003.
[36] Archaya 2003; Johnson 2014.
[37] Idun-Arkhurst and Laing 2007; Hackenesch 2013; Fraser and Whitfield 2008.
[38] Fraser and Whitfield 2008.
[39] Goetz 2015a.

with other land-consuming investments.[40]

In the case of SSA, the region has become the major recipient of Chinese foreign assistance funds (51.8%, compared to 30.5% that go to Asia) since 2000, while China has become an increasingly important investor country as well as export market for multiple African countries.[41] The trade patterns appear to be highly asymmetric: China imports primary commodities relevant for its economy (e.g., energy, minerals, cotton), while its exports to African countries consist largely of value added products (e.g., machinery, food, chemicals).[42] Regarding general investment trends, mining and manufacturing projects made up (together) 51% of Chinese outward foreign direct investments in Africa in 2010, followed by construction (15.8%) and finance (13.9%). This share refers back to the home country's industrial make-up with a strong manufacturing base, and a policy orientation that promotes diversifying the supply of resources and creating new markets for sustained growth back home. Investments in agriculture only amounted to 3.1% of total Chinese direct investments in 2009 (measured by value) and have not been a priority of the Chinese government (albeit this might be changing),[43] but largely occurred following requests by the host country governments.[44]

Clearly, these figures represent general investment trends, and do not tell anything about land-consuming investments; yet, in the absence of better data, they can be seen as an indication that the strong focus on agricultural investments in "land deal" databases might not be representative of what is going on, and that is it necessary to also account for the more traditional land take problems in the "land grab" debate, in the form of large-scale developmental projects outside of agricultural production (which however impact on the access to and availability of land for agriculture – such as mining, infrastructure construction, industry).[45] At the same time, several "land deals" listed as "land grabs" that I investigated in the case of SSA turned out to be a function of developmental ambitions by home and host countries alike, while those engaging in agricultural production where hardly ever intended for export back home – largely, because the distance rendered this option economically unviable.[46] Overall, it seems fair to say that the most common feature of land-consuming investment projects has been their profit orientation and focus on wealth generated from land-consuming operations on a particular piece of land.

While Africa has gained importance in China's investment ambitions of which land-consuming foreign direct investments form a part, it is noteworthy that by regional comparison, the continent still only ranks fifth as a target destination.[47] Asia receives the majority share of Chinese outward direct investments, with "China's investment in south-east Asia (…) growing at a double-digit speed annually," primarily directed towards Indonesia, Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore.[48] Regarding SEA, trade and investment is expected to increase further from 2015 onwards, once SEA turns into an economic zone including Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines and Brunei.[49] Concerning the quality of these intensified economic relations, Chinese trade with countries from SEA shows similar asymmetric qualities as in the case of SSA.[50]

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[40] State Council 2014; Brautigam and Zhang 2013.
[41] Figures cover the geographical distribution of china's foreign assistance funds during 2012-2012. See Brunjes et al. 2013.
[42] See UNCTAD figures; and CAITEC (2010), 3.
[43] State council 2010
[44] Alden (2007); Brautigam (2009).
[45] Zoomers 2010.
[46] Brautigam 2009.
[47] State Council 2010.
[48] Hodal (22 March 2012).
[49] Hodal (22 March 2012).
[50] Brunjes et al. 2013, 2; UNCTAD.

Similar to China's rising presence in SSA, the rise in trade and investment with China has been accompanied by a rise in aid. When considering the many forms of financial assistance that are classified as aid by the Chinese government (that do not meet the OECD definition of ODA), including low-interest loans and trade and investment privileges, China has become one of the major bilateral donors to the region since 2000.[51] In SEA, for instance, Chinese policy banks are providing funding (e.g., loans, grants, ODA) for large-scale projects known for their land-consuming and conflict-prone character, such as infrastructure development (ports, roads) to mining, hydropower, particularly in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam and the Philippine.[52] Several of these projects are mentioned in the "land grab" literature, some of which were suspended due to protests on the ground - such as the US$3.6 billion Myitsone hydro-electric dam project in Myanmar that has led to a holdup of most new major investment projects in Myanmar (relying on financial services from China); or the USD 430 million heavy North Rail project in the Philippines.[53] Also, bilateral economic agreements foresee large-scale agricultural projects,[54] and/or the construction of so-called economic corridors, linking countries in the region, that will be driving socio-economic change and potentially displace people.[55] Importantly, the initial plans of those projects often trace back in time. For instance, the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor that would be "[c]overing 9 percent of the global landmass," was first discussed in 1999, under the impression of the Asian crisis, with a strong emphasis on land-consuming infrastructure investments to facilitate and grow so-called complementary trade in the region.[56] In SSA, the Jonken Farm, the Chipata Cotton Company, or the Chong Qing Seed Corporation are examples of projects mentioned in the "land deal" databases, that were either part of an economic cooperation agreement and/or received funding by a Chinese policy bank in support of development ambitions of the host and home country – in the form of modernization of agriculture, food security (SSA), and internationalization of business operations (China).[57]

Foreign (economic) policy and official rationalizations

An assessment by Johnson et al. (2014: 25) suggests that overall, China's foreign policy is in transition from keeping a low profile (under Deng Xiaoping) to become more visible. For instance, China has increasingly engaged in multilateral diplomacy since the late 1990s, in the form of regional institutions (e.g., ASEAN-China, FOCAC) or international organizations (e.g., UN, WTO). The favored approach has been described as "flexible multilateralism" – namely, the approach to adapt to the situation of different regions when engaging with these, while using avenues of multilateral diplomacy as a way to promote multipolarity in international organization.[58]

[51] McCartan (17 December 2008); Kalathil 2012.
[52] Hodal (22 March 2012); Brunjes et al. 2013, 17.
[53] Watts (4 October 2011); see a list of Chinese investors under Burma Rivers Network (http://burmariversnetwork.org/index.php/investors/chinese); Sun (19 February 2014). **T**orregoza (22 August 2014);Kalathil 2012.
[54] Bagayaua (17 October 2007); statements about bilateral agreements on MOFA website.
[55]See MOFA website on Myanmar relations (http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zzjg_663340/yzs_663350/gjlb_663354/2747_663498/); Manthorpe (7 August 2014); Pasick (25 July 2014).
[56]Xu (16 November 2014). From a Chinese official perspective, complementary trade means that China exports added value products to and imports resources from its partner countries.
[57] See Goetz 2015b, 422-423.
[58] Wang 2005. This does however not mean to say that the principle of non-interference or "non-value based Chinese assistance" that often comes up in debates about Chinese foreign relations, particular its presence in Africa, describes those relations with a lower factor of geographical proximity adequately. While China does not impose democratic reforms, it definitely affects partnering countries' politics in various other ways. For instance,

More in detail, the Chinese administration of foreign economic relations features two different departments that are overseeing Chinese activities in Asia and Africa. In both regions, commercial diplomacy has increased significantly (since the late 1990s). From an institutional viewpoint, the increasing degree of institutionalization of China's relations with SSA and SEA (since the late 1990s) is impressive, particularly in comparison to other emerging economies' foreign economic relations.[59] However, it is important to note that from a home country perspective, China's foreign economic strategies are often incoherent, poorly coordinated, with sub-state actors acting against central government's interests.[60] Therefore, it remains crucial to acknowledge the diversity of actors and interests at play in Chinese land-consuming investments in both regions, and to admit the oftentimes contingent nature of events that such investment projects can be part of (rather than a long-term plan).[61] As mentioned above, the beginning of China's (post-1990) regional economic strategies in SEA and SSA traces back to responses by the government to the Asian financial crisis (1997-1999) – driven by the government's focus on reinstating growth and fostering trade in SEA; and/or its search for new overseas markets as well as resource supplies (e.g., energy) outside of Asia, in the case of SSA.[62] Another "contingent" event featuring prominently in regional "land grabbing" dynamics is, for instance, the decision to provide subsidies for plantations to replace the heroin production in the golden triangle area.[63]

Regarding China's foreign economic relations with countries from SSA, Lu Shaye, Director-General of the Department of African Affairs in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has repeatedly made statements in international media, describing the driver for, and nature of Chinese-African relations as a search for export markets (value added products) and resources by the Chinese side; and for investments and export markets (resources) by the African counterparts: "It's all about each taking what he needs."[64] Clearly, the strong focus on diversifying the supply of resources (energy, minerals), internationalization of business operations, and market creation is reflected in Chinese land-consuming investments in Africa – regarding their sectoral diversity, purpose, mode of operation, or their timelines.[65] From a policy perspective, the 2006 whitepaper titled "China's Africa policy" offers a detailed account of activities to realize Chinese-African cooperation.[66] In the political realm, these include enhanced governmental cooperation at all levels of government, cooperation in international affairs, and Chinese representation of African interests in the international realm. Objectives in the economic field are to stimulate trade, facilitate investment, enhance agricultural cooperation, boost infrastructure projects, and foster "resource cooperation."[67]

In comparison, China's presence in Asia has received less attention by media, and the framing of Asian relations by Kong Xuanyou, the Director-General of the Department of Asian Affairs is less upfront – however, seems to pursue a similar agenda regarding markets, internationalization, resources,

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the "One China" principle that remains central to China's foreign policy in Asia also plays a central role in China's Africa policy. It is a prerequisite for diplomatic relations, and has led most African governments to stall their diplomatic relations with Taiwan since the end of the Cold War out of strategic considerations. While Taiwan still maintained diplomatic relations with 10 African countries in 1997, this number was reduced to four by 2008. In other instances, the Chinese government tried to deliver weapons to the ruling party during elections – again, interfering in host country politics (e.g., Zimbabwe). Idun-Arkhurst and Laing 2007; Large and Chie 2008, 8; Dugger and Barboza (2008).

[59] Sauvant et al. 2010; Wang 2005.
[60] Johnston et al. 2014, 26; and Chen and Jian 2009.
[61] Goetz 2015a; Wang 2005.
[62] Wilkes and Huang 2011; Xue and Han 2010.
[63] Dwyer 2015.
[64] Gouraud (18 October 2011).
[65] Goetz 2015a.
[66] MOFA 2006.
[67] MOFA 2006.

and upgrading in Asia in general.[68] Conflicting messages are conveyed regarding China's strategy in SEA: on the one hand, national development goals are said to have a greater priority than ambitions of China becoming an international power.[69] On the other hand, great power diplomacy rhetoric has begun to take hold in Chinese diplomatic circles in the recent leadership transition. Reportedly, Xi Jinping noted in a study session of the Politburo in July 2013 that maritime issues would be crucial for China's "state sovereignty, national security, and development interests" – a point of concern for neighboring countries.[70] Moreover, the country promotes the establishment of a "maritime silk road," namely the strengthening of the ASEAN free trade area through large-scale investments in infrastructure and the regional development of primary commodity supply and exports markets for Chinese value added products (under the term trade complementarity).[71] Many of the particular infrastructure projects that are being discussed bilaterally and/or multilaterally (ASEAN summits) have their origins in the Asian crisis (1997-1999), and have been reinvigorated during the 2007/2008 financial crisis that impacted regional export markets.[72]

According to official rhetoric, the emphasis is on "promoting practical cooperation with ASEAN" in the form of economic and technical assistance: "China has assisted the construction of a large number of industrial and agricultural production and infrastructure projects, which have played a booting role in economic development of ASEAN countries."[73] Since 2010, the government has cooperated with ASEAN countries in setting up 20 experimental stations to increase seed productivity, covering a total of 1 million ha; build three agricultural technological demonstration centers, and set up cross-border monitoring stations (disease prevention). In addition, the 2014 whitepaper on foreign aid mentions multiple multilateral cooperation projects it has contributed to, financially, in both regions – at least one of which seems to have appeared in "land deal" listings as "land grab" project.[74]

Overall, land-consuming investments in both regions are embedded in a mutual benefit/win-win narrative, according to which all partners involved shall benefit from economic cooperation – including China in its endeavor to "build a moderately prosperous society (…) and realizing the Chinese dream of national prosperity and renewal, and happiness of the people."[75] Moreover, the country continues to focus on agricultural development and trade in its framing of South-South economic development, with a self-perception as a provider of technology, innovation and efficiency, and reliable market for primary commodity producers.[76]

Institutional support

Home and host country institutions are important to understand the realization of such broad foreign policy statements and strategies, and their relation with land-consuming investments. On the one hand, the political reform process in China has prepared the conditions for the investments to occur at the scale they do, and it explains the diversity of actors and interests involved, as well as the overriding profit orientation.

In both regions, Chinese domestic reform processes since the late 1980s, and particular the "go global" policy framework promoting overseas investments since 2000, explain the significant rise of

[68] See MOFA website (e.g. http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zzjg_663340/yzs_663350/)
[69] Johnston et al. 2014, 16-17.
[70] Johnston et al. 2014, 45-47.
[71] Johnston et al. 2014, 25. State Council 2014.
[72] State Council 2014; MOFA website ("Department of Asian Affairs").
[73] State Council 2014; Brautigam 2010, 31-33; InSouth.org 2014.
[74] State Council 2014; Brautigam 2010, 31-33; InSouth.org 2014.
[75] State Council 2014; MOFA 2006; State Council 2005.
[76] State Council 2014; MOFA 2006; State Council 2005.

overseas investments that land-consuming investment largely are a part of.[77] At the same time, the institutionalization of regional relations has occurred in the form of bilateral agreements and multilateral initiatives. Regarding SEA, the first ASEAN-China summit took place in 1997; regarding SSA, the first Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) summit occurred in 2000. In both cases, the multilateral approach to foreign economic diplomacy has provided a platform to negotiate medium-term economic cooperation between China and countries of the respective region. Similar summits are in place today for Latin America and other regions.

Over time, both ASEAN-China and FOCAC have broadened the scope of cooperation, from purely economic contents, such as preferential trade policy with SEA and SSA, and economic cooperation projects, to questions of peace & security. According to the recent whitepaper on foreign aid by the State Council (2014), China aims to expand the WTO trade in both regions, facilitating integration through infrastructure development and capacity building measures.

At the same time, evidence suggests that also sub-state actors have institutionalized their relations with SSA and SEA – often in the form of provincial governments conducting regular diplomacy missions with partnering countries overseas (e.g., inter-provincial cooperation between Gaza Province (Mozambique) and Hubei Province)[78]- or in the form of subsidy regimes (e.g., Northern Myanmar's and Laos' poppy replacement through the promotion of agribusiness and rubber plantations).[79]

In addition, it appears that China's regional foreign economic policies (push factors) have been complemented by institutional pull factors aiming to attract Chinese land-consuming investments. As of 2014, most partnering countries of both regions have national development plans in place that put an emphasis on foreign capital attraction and liberalization, and reflect a neoclassic outlook on development, characterized by the preference of private ownership of means of production, the promotion of minimum state intervention in sectoral governance, and the reduction of socio-economic development to issues of efficiency and productivity.[80] This means, more broadly, that the ideological contestation of foreign investment by the recipient governments, which existed in the past, has largely disappeared.[81] Table 1 shows that most countries in Asia and SSA have adopted a very liberal legal framework (as of 2010) that allows close to full foreign equity ownership in the agricultural, mining, or forestry sectors – i.e. those sectors that make up the largest share of reported land grabs.[82] Several African governments as well as Asian governments have created investment promotion agencies and introduced favorable policies to attract investors, in the form of long lease terms, tax exemptions, and the promise of low labor costs – conditions that feature prominently in both regions' Chinese land-consuming investments.[83]

[77] Bernasconi-Osterwalder et al. 201; Xue and Han 2010, 310-320.
[78] Jansson 2009; Chichava (2013), 2, 9-10.
[79] Dwyer 2015; Kramer and Woods (2012).
[80] Kotz 2002; personal communication with staff from the WB Inspection Panel, November 2011; Borras and Franco 2011; Chao 2015.
[81] Moss et al. 2004, 1; Kotz 2002; WB 2010.
[82] WB 2010.
[83] Global Witness 2014; Dietrich-O'Connor 2011; and Ministry of Energy, Republic of Ghana 2010. 20; Quizon 2013; Chao 2015.

Table 1 - Statutory Restrictions on Foreign Ownership of Equity across Regions and Sections (100 = full foreign ownership allowed, WB 2010)

Region/Economy	Mining, oil and gas	Agriculture and forestry	Light manufacturing	Telecom	Electricity	Banking	Insurance	Transport	Media	Construction, tourism and retail	Health care & waste management
East Asia and Pacific	78.4	82.9	86.8	64.9	75.8	76.1	80.9	66.0	36.1	93.4	84.1
South Asia	88.0	90.0	96.3	94.8	94.3	87.2	75.4	79.8	68.0	96.7	100.0
Latin America and Caribbean	91.0	96.4	100.0	94.5	82.5	96.4	96.4	80.8	73.1	100.0	96.4
Eastern Europe and Central Asia	96.2	97.5	98.5	96.2	96.4	100.0	94.9	84.0	73.1	100.0	100.0
Sub-Saharan Africa	95.2	97.6	98.6	84.1	90.5	84.7	87.3	86.6	69.9	97.6	100.0
High-income OECD	100.0	100.0	93.8	89.9	88.0	97.1	100.0	69.2	73.3	100.0	91.7
Middle East and North Africa	78.8	100.0	95.0	84.0	68.5	82.0	92.0	63.2	70.0	94.9	90.0

Who benefits?

Research suggests that many host governments have not always acted in the best interest of their countries.[84] In both regions, land-consuming investments by China (and others, including nationals of that country) are often part of host government strategies of development. In their facilitation, several factors play a prominent role – modern development prescriptions regarding rural development that associate large-scale agricultural production with progress; land reforms; and changes in foreign investment law (e.g., Myanmar);[85] often along with changes in company law, such as the privatization of state-owned companies into private companies as a way to increase productivity, as well as an entry point for foreign investors. The government of Laos, for instance, offered 30 percent of land area as concessions to foreign investors – with unclear benefits for the population and environment.[86] And the Myanmar government currently promotes agricultural liberalization, and reconfigures land into wasteland concessions available for private and foreign investment, while putting in place a favorable investment regime.[87] At the same time, poor mapping and administrative turf wars are obstacles to establishing more sustainable investment strategies on the ground.[88]

A case in point for the potentially limited benefits gained from such projects are also those infrastructure provisions by China to African countries that have been labelled in the literature as white elephant projects, - namely projects that reflect the interests of African officials rather than the

[84] Wolford et al. 2014; Oliveira and Schneider 2014; Parker 1993; Borras and Franco 2011; Colchester and Chao 2011.
[85] Global Witness 2014.
[86] The Economist (26 October 2013).
[87] Global Witness 2014.
[88] Global Witness 2014; Dwyer 2015; Neef et al. 2013.

immediate needs of the respective populations.[89] Available information on Chinese foreign aid suggests that so-called landmark architectural projects, conference halls, cultural venues and sport stadiums amount to 182 of a total of 670 completed public facility projects worldwide.[90] They have been provided as complete projects that are supervised and realized by the Chinese companies, with the help of Chinese financial resources in the form of grants or interest-free loans. Regardless of the (potentially) broader benefit of such infrastructure projects, their great scale regarding the amount of debt (e.g., loans), as well as land take make them particularly conflict-prone in the particular host country context. In SEA, similar issues are observable and projects negotiated (e.g., Vientiane's That Luang Special Economic Zone [91]).

Also from a home country perspective, it is often unclear who actually benefits from these land-consuming investments that reflect a broader political economy of development. In practice, a significant share of large-scale "land deals" negotiated with authoritarian regimes have been suspended (e.g., Philippines, Myanmar, DRC) or never took off the ground.[92] Basically, the risk attached to such land-consuming investments remains a great source of uncertainty regarding their success (in the form of completion and profit). In those cases where these investments are successfully implemented, it still is not clear who benefits, due to poor worker conditions, unclear utility for the greater public, and oftentimes dramatic impact on the environment.[93] Moreover, while trade has increased, and resource supplies been diversified, at the same time, it remains to be seen whether the loans will be settled in the long-term, while capital invested overseas remains unavailable for investment back home.

5 Similar but different? Land-consuming investments in the context of flexible multilateral strategies

The above assessment constitutes a first draft, suggesting a variety of issues that matter in view of Chinese land-consuming investments in each of the two regions, and for their comparison. On a broader level of analysis, the available empirical evidence about Chinese activities in both regions suggests that they do not differ greatly – relying on similar institutional settings, applying similar strategies and principles in their foreign economic relations, operationalizing most projects on a for-profit basis – while being made up of a great complexity of actors and interests. Moreover, in both regions, foreign economic relations are characterized by "flexible multilateralism", i.e. adjusting potential cooperation and investments to the particular economic constitution and requests of partnering countries.

This broader similarity also applies when considering the role of host countries in land-consuming investment activities. Most countries' governments welcome Chinese land-consuming investment – even if they might perceive the growing dependency on China as a major trading and investment partner differently (e.g., balancing, policy space). Dissimilar from previous eras, foreign direct investment is currently being treated as a technical issue and framed as another source of capital that can be used (next to development finance, and tax revenues) to meet national development ambitions. This is highlighted by the example of a ranking official of the Philippines' Department of Agriculture, explaining why the government had decided to lease a large area of agricultural land to China's Jilin Fuhua Agricultural Science and Technology Development company (now suspended):

[89] Watson 2015.
[90] State Council 2014..
[91] The Economist (26 October 2013). McCartain (17 December 2008).
[92] E.g., Bagayaua (17 October 2007).DRC
[93] Baah and Jauch 2009; Watson 2014; GTZ (Laos) 2009; Kenney-Lazar 2012; Lang 2001; Rao 2011.

"Would you rather let a million hectares of agricultural land remain undeveloped due to lack of capital or lease them to a foreign company?"[94] Main regional differences, then, seem related to the factor of proximity, which influences the purpose of land-consuming investments (e.g., for export back home), the sectoral focus (e.g., agriculture in SEA), as well as their volume (due to better established entry points in the neighboring countries), and the question of "old style" land grab disputes (SEA).

In view of the geopolitical dimension of Chinese land-consuming outward FDI, understood as the spatial dimension of Chinese foreign policy as well as national development strategy and discourse, clearly, these land-consuming investments are part of national ambitions that factor in other countries' land to meet the interest of key actors of that particular political economy of development (e.g., bureaucrats, industry) in resources, exports markets, international economic integration, and political alliances. In its relations with countries from either region, the Chinese government frames China as a source of technology, innovation, and efficiency, whereas the others are largely perceived as primary commodity suppliers (often for regional or world markets), and – increasingly – as interesting partners for "manufacturing cooperation" where Chinese companies can outsource part of their operations, to profit from cheap labor, while reducing pollution at home.[95]

Against this background, it seems notable that narratives according to which Chinese overseas investments are intended for food or energy security back home (e.g., "offshore farming") oversimplify the operationalization of related geopolitical considerations, partially because they approach issues of resource scarcity from a very traditional perspective on territory. Yet, in a world with international resources markets and mainstream economics as guiding ideology informing regulatory frameworks and investor rationales, this viewpoint needs to be expanded. Today, territory (and its resources) can be accessed indirectly via markets. This explains why a significant part of Chinese investments does not go into land-consuming projects, but focuses on developing and restructuring markets, for instance, by establishing Chinese (majority share) trading companies, internationalizing the Chinese financial institutions, or investing in core economic fundamentals in the host countries (e.g., infrastructure).[96] Moreover, my research on Chinese land-consuming investments in SSA found that most Chinese land-consuming projects produce for regional or international markets rather than for export back home, and –in the case of energy – repatriate the profit made to buy the commodity on the international market for use back home.

This means that the international context is crucial for understanding the Chinese foreign policy concept of "peaceful development" that aims to differentiate China's geopolitical interests and expansion from the fierce history of the North. In practice, China is profiting from an international economic system that allows countries and societies to expand their consumption and production patterns beyond their sovereign borders without waging war. Instead, its land-consuming overseas investments are rationalized within a "win-win" narrative and are part of a technical regime of international economic governance that regulates how they should take place but does not query their legitimacy, such as the WTO or BITs. Therefore, the institutions and strategies that have supported realization of its geopolitical strategies are fairly similar to those of the OECD countries.

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[95] MOFA 2006; Chinese Government 2011; State Council 2012.
[96] E.g., Oliveira and Schneider 2014.

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