

# Chinese Aid in Southeast Asia before the Belt and Road Initiative: Solidarity or Business as Usual?

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## **Abstract**

This article analyzes the nature of China-aided and -funded projects before the One Belt, One Road in three Southeast Asian countries whose relations with Beijing vary: a “sibling” (Cambodia), a “friend” (Myanmar), and a “partner” (Philippines). It argues that although China claims its aid is different from that of traditional donors, framing it as a case of South-South Cooperation, the study shows the detrimental motives and effects of these projects on the three Southeast Asian countries. Using six case studies and echoing other critiques, the author explores how China’s aid is motivated not by solidarity under South-South Cooperation, but by a constant search for sources (funds from debt) and resources (natural resources) for business interests as a market-economy. Although the case studies preceded the launch of China’s One Belt One Road Initiative (OBOR) in 2013 which was eventually renamed into Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2016, the study provides historical, albeit recent, precedents/antecedents to China’s current development cooperation strategies when it became the world’s second largest economy. Overall, the study demonstrates that although China’s aid has differed in some aspects from that of traditional donors, it has developed relationships between Cambodia, Myanmar, and the Philippines which cannot be considered genuine South-South Cooperation.

Keywords: South-South Cooperation, Southeast Asia-China relations, development cooperation, BRI, One Belt One Road