

Brothers in Arms: Chinese Aid to the Khmer Rouge, 1975–1979, by Andrew Mertha. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014. xvi +175 pp. US\$29.95 (hardcover).

China's waxing foreign aid has been the subject of much scrutiny. Scholars and policy-makers have sought to divine the motives behind Chinese aid, its economic impact, and the clout that it confers on Beijing. Most studies of Chinese aid hover analytically at the interstate level, examining China's broad strategic interests, investment patterns and practices. Relatively few plunge into the workings of the Chinese bureaucracies that administer assistance and the host-state institutions that receive it. As Andrew Mertha demonstrates in *Brothers in Arms*, these bureaucratic interactions are crucial to the success or failure of individual projects and the overall influence that China derives from its aid. He does so through a skillful analysis of China's relations with one of its key Cold War "client states"—Pol Pot's Democratic Kampuchea (DK).

The China–DK partnership merits careful study, both because it foreshadows important dynamics in China's contemporary foreign relations and because it pertains to some of modern history's most egregious violations in human rights. To shed light on China's role during that tragic period and to illustrate how bureaucracies affect aid relationships more generally, Mertha delves into the institutional dynamics of Chinese aid to the Pol Pot regime. Developing a detailed historical account of the relationship is no mean feat, as the relationship between the regimes has long been shrouded in official secrecy. Mertha draws from diverse sources, including interviews with former Chinese and Cambodian officials, extant DK documents and findings of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, a criminal tribunal established by the United Nations and Cambodian government to try a number of former DK officials.

Mertha finds that, despite the Pol Pot regime's weakness and vulnerability, China's extensive military, technical and economic aid "bought precious little" policy influence. This leads to his main research question: why did China fail to exert more leverage over its much weaker Khmer Rouge partners? The answer, he argues, lies in bureaucratic politics—namely "bureaucratic fragmentation in China combined with an institutional matrix in Cambodia either strong enough to resist Chinese demands or too weak to act on them" (p. 9). In the military domain, DK institutions were sturdy enough to repel unwanted Chinese influence, while infrastructure projects were doomed by the frailty of DK's implementing agencies and the fragmentation of their Chinese counterparts. China exerted effective influence only in commerce, which functioned largely beyond the stifling grasp of DK domestic politics.

This argument is fresh, and challenges conventional explanations for China's limited influence over the DK regime—that Chinese leaders were constrained by the non-interference norm and feared alienating their Kampuchean allies, who

might reject aid and render both states more vulnerable to Soviet and Vietnamese predation. These factors did contribute to China's hesitancy about pressuring Khmer Rouge leaders, but Mertha rightly stresses that they tell us little about China's capacity to exert influence at the project level, and do not account for the variation of Chinese influence across different policy domains. He contends, convincingly, that a "bureaucratic-institutional analysis" focused on "the policy execution front" (p. 10) can help to fill these explanatory gaps.

Mertha maps the relevant Khmer Rouge and Chinese bureaucracies, showing first the "parochial totalitarianism" (p. 20) of the DK regime—an ersatz blend of Pol Pot's centralized power, rigidly compartmentalized formal structures and fluid lines of authority that created some room for lower-level administrative discretion, before systematic purges stifled any appetite for risk. Chinese aid workers also functioned within cells, largely confined to their flats and work-sites, focusing on technical missions, and reporting through embassy channels to a maze of ministry offices in Beijing. Day-to-day interactions between Chinese and Cambodians featured regular translation headaches and "little sense of socialist brotherhood" (p. 76). Both sides kept their heads down while laboring under watchful eyes. When Chinese expatriates sought to help the beleaguered Cambodians, they did "what very little they could" (p. 58) by passing spare cigarettes or writing favorable work reports, not by asking bold questions or challenging DK policies beyond their narrow technical purviews. These factors help to explain the limits of Chinese influence in the field.

One might expect Chinese officials to have exerted influence at higher levels, but Mertha's first two case studies show alternative reasons why that did not come to pass. In the military domain, Chinese arms, training and technical support were not enough to surmount a "political and bureaucratic stalemate" (p. 78). "In this policy area the two sides were evenly matched with regard to the respective institutions involved", leaving China "unable to influence" DK military policy (p. 78) when the two states' interests diverged. Most notably, DK leaders rejected China's push to build a military airfield in northwest Cambodia, far from Vietnam and arguably less provocative. Senior DK leaders instead decided to build the airfield at Krang Leav in the country's center. The involvement of Pol Pot, Defense Minister Son Sen and the DK Standing Committee in key military decisions makes it difficult to isolate bureaucratic-level and leadership-level factors, but the case clearly demonstrates the difficulty of exerting influence in domains in which the host-country institution has a strong domestic power base. This is a lesson relevant to many of China's contemporary engagements. Interestingly, Mertha notes that, since the DK military division in charge of the airfield was strong and highly centralized, from a technical standpoint the project is "a rare instance in which a major Chinese assistance project in DK was an unqualified success" (p. 97). This suggests another important lesson: China may face a trade-off in foreign aid, as the counterpart bureaucracies best able to carry out projects may be among those best able to resist policy influence from Beijing.

Mertha next examines “one of the most spectacular failures of Chinese assistance to Democratic Kampuchea” (p. 98), the effort to repair and upgrade the petroleum refinery at the port of Kampong Som. This superb case study draws together detailed documentary and interview-based evidence to show that, even where high-level policy goals were aligned and DK institutions were weak, China was unable to exert effective influence, due to DK incapacity and Chinese fragmentation. Mertha shows Chinese technicians and officials struggling to obtain basic resources, presenting Cambodian colleagues with concerns, hearing ineffectual platitudes in response which probably “left the Chinese rolling their eyes” (p. 75). Advice was routinely lost in translation, and Cambodian officials were routinely lost in internal party purges. Long after the project began, Chinese officials still did not know “who [was] in charge” of the refinery on the Cambodian side (p. 109). Frustration also mounted over poor staff quality and organization on the Chinese side, with some officials lamenting, “We have no clue what is going on and what we have to do” (p. 115). As Mertha argues, this was a “perfect storm in which all of the institutional weaknesses of the two regimes collided and reinforced one another” (p. 116). These awkward, eye-rolling interactions highlight the intended hint of irony in the title *Brothers in Arms*.

The final case study shows a rare case of effective policy influence regarding the DK Ministry of Commerce, which China was able to “colonize” both structurally and procedurally “in ways unimaginable in the case of military assistance” (p. 120). Mertha demonstrates how China’s main economic ministries exerted influence in a DK institution less rigidly controlled by the DK Standing Committee and somewhat more removed from Kampuchean domestic politics. This influence was most evident in DK trade policy and the establishment of the Ren Fun Company Limited in Hong Kong, a vehicle for facilitating DK trade with foreign partners. The case suggests that China can exert meaningful influence through aid if the host-state leadership is not obstructive, if the counterpart bureaucracy is neither too strong nor too weak, and if China’s own administrative agencies are up to the task. This is a demanding set of conditions, especially since Chinese bureaucracies remain highly fragmented—the subject of the book’s conclusion.

Studies on China’s contemporary foreign relations have shown the continuing challenges that Beijing faces in converting its aid into effective policy influence, both across different bilateral relationships and across various policy domains. *Brothers in Arms* draws our attention to an important part of the explanation, helping to illuminate one of China’s important historical relationships in the process. This excellent book merits careful reading.

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