

*“Ideas, Interests and Foreign Aid”*¹, Maurits Van der Veen

The book “Ideas, Interests and Foreign Aid” of A. Maurits Van der Veen is the 120th title published in the Cambridge Studies in International Relations series. The series, edited by Christian Reus-Smit and Nicholas J. Wheeler, represents a joint endeavor by Cambridge University Press and the British International Studies Association (BISA). The author is a Dutch researcher who received his MA degree in computer science at Stanford and his PhD in government studies at Harvard. He is currently assistant professor at the Government Department, College of William & Mary in Virginia. Van der Veen’s research interests include European integration, humanitarianism, human rights and identity politics.²

The book opens with the question “Why do countries give foreign aid?” and a quote from Rudyard Kipling’s famous poem “The White Man’s Burden,” which addresses the issue of imperialism and colonialism from a perspective of Western (supposedly) noble obligation to bring civilization and reduce poverty in the colonized countries. Departing from this polemic overture, Van der Veen points out that every developed industrial nation has a program of foreign aid which is officially aimed at economic development and poverty reduction in poor countries, yet researchers have so far been unable to give satisfactory explanation about the specific reasons why donor countries increase or reduce financial transfers to recipient countries at a given point in time. Due to the fact that foreign aid can have a multitude of uses and purposes for a country’s foreign policy, the author compares foreign aid to a Swiss knife. The argument he makes is that ideas (as implied in the title of the book) govern and direct decisions on foreign aid and shape its role in long-term foreign policies. In his critical analysis of current literature on foreign aid, Van der Veen argues that researchers have so far failed to look at all aspects and possible reasons for foreign aid, as well as at the close link between foreign aid and creation of foreign policy. In his answer to

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2 http://www.wm.edu/as/government/faculty/directory/vanderveen_m.php

the introductory question, the author analyzes four cases (Belgium, Italy, Norway and the Netherlands) in a time frame of 50 years, from 1950 to 2000. He chose this period because official aid statistics begin with 1950, while 2000 was the year when the Millennium Development Goals were adopted by the United Nations. Also, the author explains that through his choice of cases he wanted to increase variation among cases, while at the same time controlling potential intervening variables.

In the second chapter the author asks why countries with a similar structural background make very different foreign policy choices which are, in turn, linked with different approaches to foreign aid. Further, Van der Veen states that it is generally assumed that foreign policy is shaped by rational actors and refers to three fundamental variables – actors, the preferences held by these actors and the constraints which shape the maneuvering space for the fulfillment of their preferences. The author then shows the different emphases major theoretical schools of international relations have placed on these three variables. According to neorealism, the preferences of states as the only important actors are completely determined by the constraints placed on them by the anarchical nature of the international system. Liberalism argues that preferences are shaped by choices made through interactions or by sub-state actors within a society and the state itself, while the international constraints are less important for choices of foreign policy. Yet, Van der Veen points out that both the realist and the liberal approaches see preferences as stable and predominantly view them as material categories, such as power, wealth and security. Therefore, he introduces a third approach – the constructivist approach – which takes into account beliefs and perceptions that can change over time in a given society and therefore profoundly impact its choice of foreign policy. The author further states that key values of national identity influence foreign policy. He introduces the concept of frames which organizes pieces of information and gives rise to a specific national discourse around which foreign policy is built. When applied to foreign aid frames can be divided in seven categories – security, power, wealth, indirect self-interest, prestige, obligation and humanitarianism. For each of the categories Van der Veen offers distinct hypotheses – for example, a security-oriented frame should be correlated with high military expenditure, while donor states that seek prestige try to surpass the international quality standards for aid in order to stand out among their peer nations.

Chapter 3 presents a debate on the content of aid and its patterns of distribution. In this chapter the author presents the methodology used for measurement of different frames which dominate foreign aid in Belgium, Italy, Norway and the Netherlands. The main source of information about frames used for decision-making and policy shaping are parliamentary debates on development assistance. Van der Veen codes these debates using content analysis, rather than discourse analysis. The author also claims that the information about the importance of specific frames used in debates on foreign aid in the four cases can be used to make predictions about future foreign aid patterns in these countries.

In Chapter 4, the author explores the reasons for differences in frame strength (as seen in the previous chapter). First, he shows how the four countries developed their initial positions on foreign aid just after the experience of World War II and the beginning of the process of decolonization. Then the author depicts the consolidation of foreign aid policies in 1960s and 1970s and finally analyzes the discourse on aid in the 1980s and 1990s.

Chapter 5 focuses on aid administration and the quality of implementation of aid policies. The author places emphasis on historic development and change of aid administration. Further, when examining aid quality Van der Veen looks at two aspects – tied aid and multilateral aid. Tied aid means that the recipient country has to buy products from the donor country in order to receive aid. This largely increases costs for the recipient country. Aid channeled through multilateral organizations is considered of higher quality because it is less influenced by concealed motives of the individual donor country.

In the sixth chapter Van der Veen focuses on aid volume and the competition between donor countries regarding amount of aid expenditures. He points out that aid levels of OECD countries have shown great variations over time, measured as percentage of GNP. The author shows that international comparisons of aid levels have great influence on aid policies because countries feel compelled to keep up with their peers. In the four cases studies the author shows that Belgian aid was kept around OECD averages and was often used to correct imbalances in other government departments; Italians had low levels of aid expenditures, yet

did not want to be “embarrassed” on the international level; the Dutch managed to set new international standards and therefore gained a good reputation; the Norwegians focused on matching and outperforming other Western nations.

In Chapter 7 the choice of recipient countries is discussed. This is especially interesting when aid funds of a donor country are spread among many recipient countries. The author shows geographic patterns of aid flows which reflect specific frames which govern foreign aid policy, such as post-colonial obligations in the Belgian case and the wish to gain reputation and a leading position in humanitarianism in the Norwegian case.

In the final, eighth chapter Van der Veen points out that foreign aid policies are a result of multiple goals, motivations, interests and values which collectively contribute to perceived national interests of donor countries and change over time in response to internal and external political, economic and cultural impulses. The author also shows that frames can be a useful tool of analysis not just for foreign aid, but also for other policy areas, both regarding foreign policy and domestic issues. The appendix to the book includes three parts – an explanation of codes used to categorize parliamentary debates, some quotes of parliamentary debates on aid which further exemplify the coding of frames, as well as an overview of datasets on aid flows, based chiefly on the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC).

This book is a great source of information on various aspects of foreign aid and its relation to broader foreign policy. It is also a very good example of a longitudinal comparative analysis of a few cases along the Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) of comparative politics. Van der Veen's book can be recommended to researchers interested in foreign policy, foreign aid, humanitarianism and international development studies, but also to those academics seeking to further their knowledge on innovative methodology and research designs.

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