

IR Theory in Practice Case Study: China's WTO Accession, 2001

From reading Chapter 6 of The Globalization of World Politics (7e.), you should now be familiar with the basic tenets of Realist International Relations theory. You are advised to consult these crucial chapters if you have not done so already as their contents will not be repeated here. In addition, you may find Chapters 16 and 28 useful for this case study.

Where you see bracketed chapter references, for example (see Ch.4), this refers to the relevant chapter in The Globalization of World Politics (7e.).

Section 1

Realist IR Theory and China's WTO Accession

The purpose of this section is to suggest ways in which the insights you will have learnt from Chapter 6 of The Globalization of World Politics (7e.) illustrate important aspects of China's accession to the WTO from a Realist perspective. By no means can the following be an exhaustive survey of the possible ways Realist international theory might help you think about the case.

In this case study we will briefly focus on: **1) the debate over the "rise of China"** and **2) the role of international institutions and great power relations.**

1) The "Rise of China"

Since the 1990's, the community of China scholars and policymakers – predominantly those in the United States – have been engaged in a debate over the consequences of the so-called "rise of China" as a great power. Some analysts, following realist theories about power transitions, suggest that as China's power grows, conflict between the PRC and the currently hegemonic United States is inevitable. Other analysts, however, are more optimistic that potential conflict can be avoided (for a range of opinions about China's rise, see the essays in Brown 2000; see also Roy 1996).

Box 1.1: John Mearsheimer on the Rise of China

China cannot rise peacefully, and if it continues its dramatic economic growth over the next few decades, the United States and China are likely to engage in an intense security competition with considerable potential for war. Most of China's neighbours, including India, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Russia and Vietnam, will likely join with the United States to contain China's power.

Brzezinski and Mearsheimer, 2005

Eventually, these scholars predict, the shift in power between the United States and China will produce new alliances and a high probability of conflict between the two countries. Some patterns of Chinese economic interaction, however, run counter to these realist predictions:

Box 1.2: Chinese Economic Interaction and Balance of Power

If China were balancing against the United States because of the change in polarity, one should also see China trying to reduce its economic dependence on the United States. If a state perceives that the relative gains of economic interaction may be used to develop the military power of potential adversaries, then it has an interest in reducing its trade with these adversaries and in diversifying its economic linkages with more strategically reliable partners.... China's dependence on US marks has increased, not decreased, since 1991."
Johnston, quoted in Kim, 1998, p. 65-6.

Johnston further notes that US-China trade does not display the negative correlation between trade dependence and military expenditures that one would expect under neorealist predictions (Ibid). And for its own part, China appears to be attempting to deliberately manage US perceptions of its rise. In 2003, Chinese leaders began using the term "peaceful rise" or "peaceful development" to refer to their foreign and economic policy.

Box 1.3: Wen Jiabao on China's "Peaceful Rise"

[China's rise] will not come at the cost of any other country, will not stand in the way of any other country, nor pose a threat to any other country.

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, quoted in Pan, 2006

Elements of the 'peaceful rise' policy have included settling border disputes, increasing economic relations, and joining multilateral economic organizations – such as the WTO – with an eye toward creating a favourable international environment for China's continued economic development. It remains to be seen whether these conflict-mitigation mechanisms will mitigate realist predictions about the potential for conflict.

2) Great Power Relations and International Institutions

Realist theory accords great prominence in its analysis to the relationships between great powers. Realists believe that the international environment is fundamentally anarchic and driven by self-help, in which international institutions cannot provide security. Thus, while liberal or institutionalist theory sees international institutions as capable of changing the interests of the states that participate in them, realists tend to believe that institutions are only effective when the interests of the great powers participating in them align with each other and with the goals of the organization. Many scholars of Chinese foreign policy believe that China still views the world in these realist terms.

Box 1.4: China's View of the International Environment

[For the People's Republic of China], the world is, in the main, a threatening place where security and material interests are best preserved through self-help or unilateral security.

Alastair Iain Johnston, quoted in Economy, 2001, p. 234

Discussion question

What are the implications of the realist interpretation of Chinese foreign and economic policy?

In answering this question, emphasizing the relations between great powers, realists might note that the largest obstacle to China's WTO accession was US reluctance to compromise the terms of the American-led global economic order. The 1999 US-China bilateral agreement, therefore, was the key enabler of China's WTO accession (Pearson, 2001, p. 337). Additionally, economic development, participation in institutions, and acceptance of interdependence are all viewed by Chinese leaders as a tool for strengthening the national economy (Johnston, quoted in Moore and Yang, 2001, p. 225). Adjustments made by China to accord with WTO regulations, therefore, stem not from internalization of global cooperation and free market norms, but from a pragmatic desire to avoid punishment by the global hegemon, the United States (Economy, p. 240).

Realist theory also generally maintains that states will participate in international institutions only when participation brings relative as well as absolute gains (or, at least, does not provide other states with relative gains that will disadvantage China). Elizabeth Economy notes that in two cases – conventions on ozone depletion and climate change – China insists on regimes that do not hinder economic development or infringe on sovereignty, but which also do not allow advanced industrial countries to increase their technological and economic advantages any more (Economy, 2001 p. 251). Although the WTO is often considered primarily in light of the absolute economic gains provided by accession, China's insistence that Taiwan not be allowed to join before Beijing (Feeney, 1998, p. 257), which delayed the accession of both parties could be read instead as an example of the prioritization of relative gains.

Section 2

Liberal IR Theory and China's WTO Accession

The purpose of this section is to suggest ways in which the insights you will have learnt from Chapter 7 of The Globalization of World Politics (7e.) illustrate important aspects of the China's WTO accession from a Liberal perspective. In addition to this section, therefore, you should consult the Realist, Constructivist, and Marxist and Post-colonial theory sections of the case study for important alternatives, and should be aware that the following can by no means serve as an exhaustive survey of the possible ways Liberal international theory might help you think about the case.

In this case, we will focus briefly on: **1) the liberal belief in the benefits of free trade, and 2) the importance of multilateral institutions, particularly in the economic realm.**

1) Interdependence and Free Trade

A liberal analysis of China's accession to the WTO would focus on the links between trade openness, development, and cooperative international relations, particularly in a globalized environment. As Chapter 7 noted, since the nineteenth century many liberal theorists have argued that trade creates mutual gains for all countries involved; globalization has increased the opportunity cost of non-participation and created incentives for economic openness (Frieden and Rogowski, in Keohane and Milner, 1996). The 'harmony of interests' shared by all countries in preserving these gains will dampen conflict and make for a more peaceful world.

Box 2.1: Liberal theory and Chinese behaviour

As long as China's leaders view security at least partially in terms of sustained economic growth, Beijing will be inclined to maintain positive relations with as many countries as possible in order to take full advantage of the benefits that accrue from wider participation in the world economy.

Moore and Yang, 2001, p. 226

In 2005, former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski espoused a similar belief, writing that the need to sustain economic growth would exert a moderating effect on Chinese foreign policy (Brzezinski and Mearsheimer, 2005). The mitigating effect of free trade and democracy on international conflict is a hallmark of the liberal tradition of political theory. It is this belief that has led many liberal analysts of China's WTO accession to repeatedly stress the mutual gains to be realized in China's accession (Rumbaugh and Blancher, 2004: p. 12).

Box 2.2: The Benefits of Commerce: US-China Business Council

Neither side will benefit from protectionist measures, and those of us who support trade and investment must continue to speak to policymakers and the general public in both countries about the benefits of trade and investment to our respective economies. At the same time, we must demonstrate that dialogue and engagement can successfully resolve problems, so that protectionist measures can be avoided.

Frisbie, 2006

The benefits of economic participation are particularly pronounced in an age of marked economic globalization. In addition to offering China mutual gains based in economic interdependence, however, many liberal theorists – and those in favour of liberalization within China itself - also suggest that China's WTO accession will make the country's international relationships more peaceful by promoting the development of a more liberal domestic system of governance inside China.

Box 2.3: Liberalizing China

Liberals also came to see WTO membership as a way to achieve their domestic reform agenda. Particularly in the second half of the [1990s], they recognized that China's membership would allow them to use WTO rules as leverage to press for further trade reforms against recalcitrant local governments and foreign trade corporations.

Pearson, 2001, p. 360, fn. 45

2) Multilateral (economic) Institutions and liberal theory

The more recent variant of liberal theory, neoliberal institutionalism, focuses on the role of international economic institutions in shaping China's relations with its international environment. As Elizabeth Economy notes, China's participation in international organizations increased from 21 in 1977 to 52 in 1997 (Lampton, 2001, p. 230).

Box 2.4: China's participation in international institutions

International regimes and the process of establishing international regimes may influence the manner in which a participant formulates foreign policy. Such influence is important for several reasons: the transmission of new ideas and knowledge from the international community can contribute to the learning process and to changes in behavioural norms by domestic actors, the requirement of the regime may result in the proliferation of new domestic actors or the establishment of new bureaucratic linkages that will influence policy outcomes, and regimes often provide training opportunities, financial transfers, and technological advances that enable policy change.

Elizabeth Economy, 2001, p. 236

Liberal theorists argue that international institutions are important because they enable countries to realize untapped potential mutual gains (see Section 1 on interdependence). They do so by creating iterated (rather than one-time) patterns of interaction, enabling countries to share information, and making the cost of defection from commitments known; in sum, this lowers transaction costs and reinforces reciprocal behaviour. Neoliberal thinkers, therefore, point to the role of the WTO and its predecessor (the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, GATT) as an "international regime [created] to facilitate trade among its members by developing rules on reciprocity, non-discrimination, and transparency and by sponsoring periodic multilateral trade negotiations" (Feeney, 1998, p. 255).

China, which has expanded its participation in international trade since the 1970's, first indicated interest in joining GATT in 1986 (Robinson, 1998, p. 204). In doing so, it has accepted the neoliberal "Washington consensus" model of growth rather than adhering to the state-led "East Asian development model" of economic growth (Moore, 2002, p. 305, 311). Liberal theorists see China's willingness to accede to WTO restrictions for the sake of long-term economic gains, as well as the apparent normative acceptance of neoliberal economic ideology, as support for their theories.

Section 3

Social Constructivist Theory and China's WTO Accession

The purpose of this section is to suggest ways in which the insights you will have learnt from Chapter 9 of The Globalization of World Politics (7e) illustrate important aspects of China's WTO accession from constructivist theoretical perspectives. As with the previous section, by no means can the following be an exhaustive survey of the possible ways social constructivism might help you think about China's accession.

In this case, we will briefly focus on: **1) the social construction of the "China threat,"** and **2) debates over China's changing identity.**

1) Constructing the "China Threat"

Constructivists maintain that social norms and identities matter; they shape and constrain state behaviour. Constructivists investigate the socially constructed context of threats, challenging the dominant realist approach, which holds that ideas, norms and culture have little or no independent effect on military threats (which for realists is determined by a straightforward assessment of opponents' material power capabilities and intentions). Constructivists suggest that identities and norms influence how interests come to be defined.

Noting a strong correlation between social identification and threat perception, constructivists posit that the attribution to China of a negative "Other" identity explains the presence and persistence of fear of China and perceived potential for conflict. Indeed, many Chinese officials argue that the "China threat" is an unfairly prejudiced conception of the country's interests, based not only on an inaccurate representation of the country's material capabilities but a prejudiced idea of its interests and intentions; indeed, an impugning of its "international character" (Deng, in Johnston and Ross, p. 186).

Box 3.1: Chinese Identity and the 'China Threat'

What do you see? A cuddly panda, or a menacing dragon?

Peter Hayes Gries, in Johnston and Ross, p. 309

According to social psychology, in-group identification and positivity lead to inter-group competition and conflict only when comparisons between the in-group and out-group are zero-sum (Gries in Johnston and Ross, p. 313). Thus, when China's progress is seen to come at America's expense, perceptions of the 'China threat' are heightened. When America and China are seen as having a joint interest in an issue, however, the relationship is perceived as more cooperative. In that light, Washington's call for China to behave as a "responsible stakeholder" in the international environment through mechanisms such as WTO participation shows its concern with the effect of – and its direct appeal to – aspects of Chinese identity that stress caution and cooperation (Zoellick).

2) Debating Changes in China's Identity

In contrast to realists, who argue that material factors (such as economic and military power) are the most important determinates of foreign policy, constructivists argue that ideas, norms, and culture play an independent role in shaping perceptions and outcomes. Ideas can transform world politics in far-reaching ways, including by shaping the identity and interests of states. Identity and normative expectations structure social interaction at the international level.

Thus, constructivist explanations of China's participation in the WTO see WTO participation as one facet representing the recent evolution in China's identity and the conception of its relationship with the outside world. This is not to suggest that normative considerations were completely absent beforehand; Alastair Iain Johnston notes that China's adherence to the norm of sovereignty "provides more insights into Chinese foreign policy than any tendency to balance power in the neorealist sense" (Johnston in Kim, p. 73). Rather, however, the normative structures guiding Chinese foreign policy have shifted from ones stressing protection of Chinese sovereignty from incursion to one stressing China's image as a responsible leader in world politics.

Chinese officials have stressed that one major benefit of China's WTO membership is that it may help to dispel notions of the "China threat," replacing it with a "China opportunity" theory and bolstering the image of the country (Deng in Johnston and Kim, p. 201).

Box 3.2: Evolutions in Chinese Identity

[Over the 1980's and 1990's,] the traditional sovereign-centric, autonomous major power identity... has been uneasily linked to a newer identity as a responsible major power, one whose status is measured in part by participation in institutions that increasingly regulate state behaviour.

Alastair Iain Johnston in Kim, p. 77

Thus, scholars note that, "contemporary Chinese foreign policy has countered its negative reputation through both rhetorical and substantial commitments to building a cooperative, responsible image in the international society" (Deng in Johnston and Ross, p. 187). Concretely, some believe that China held off devaluing its Yuan during Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 in large part in order to demonstrate its role as a "'responsible' economic power" (Pearson p. 344).

Constructivist scholars concur that behaviour has changed, but are not unanimous in their conception of the extent to which China's participation reflects a fundamental change in identity. On the one hand exists the view that China underwent a paradigm shift during the post-1976 Reform Era. Sceptics, however, stress that despite increased participation, Chinese attitudes remain ambivalent (Economy, p. 232).

Box 3.3: China's Perception of International Institutions (I)

In the late 1970s and early 1980s there was just such a genuine adoption of ideas on the part of reformers in the Chinese leadership responsible for foreign economic policy. This change in outlook, which was significant enough to warrant the label 'paradigm shift,' went far beyond China's WTO accession. It involved the basic acceptance of comparative advantage as a 'global law' rather than a tool of capitalism and the concomitant acceptance of trade and markets as legitimate and beneficial for China's development...

Margaret Pearson, p. 354

Box 3.4: China's perception of International Institutions (II)

Chinese elites are suspicious of many multilateral organizations, including those devoted to economic, environmental, non-proliferation, and regional security issues. In most cases, China joins such organizations to avoid losing face and influence... Chinese analysts often view international organizations and their universal norms as fronts for other powers.

Thomas Christensen, p. 37

Section 4

Marxist and Post-colonial Theory and China's WTO Accession

In addition to this section you should consult the Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism sections of the case study for important alternatives to the theories discussed here. The purpose of this section is to suggest ways in which the insights you will have learnt from Chapters 8 and 11 of The Globalization of World Politics (7e.) illustrate important aspects of China's accession to the WTO from Marxist and alternative theoretical perspectives. As with the previous section, by no means can the following be an exhaustive survey of the possible ways alternative theories might help you think about the accession process.

We will briefly focus on **1) the influence of colonial history on Chinese foreign policy,** and **2) China's wariness of global capitalism as an unjust and exploitative enforcement of Western interest.**

1) China's Colonial History and Sovereignty

A theorist viewing Chinese foreign policy through a post-colonial lens might stress that its actions are based, more than any other guiding principle, on the defence of sovereignty - for the People's Republic of China and more generally (Johnston in Kim, pp. 72-3; see also Carlson). This emphasis on defending China from foreign incursion has roots in China's recent historical past.

Box 4.1: China's Colonial History

The beliefs and attitudes of the informal Chinese ideology tend to be similar to those of the formal ideology, especially with regard to China's sense of victimization at the hands of the imperialist powers.

Sutter, p. 184

Resistance to foreign occupation was a key component in the struggle for legitimacy between the Guomindang or Nationalist Party, and the Chinese Communist Party. In 1949, Mao Zedong famously stood in Tiananmen Square and proclaimed, "China has stood up," a phrase repeated much more recently, when then-president Jiang Zemin visited Harvard University.

Box 4.2: "China Has Stood Up"

Our ancestors always regarded the spirit of maintaining independence as the foundation of a nation. China has all along maintained its cultural tradition without letup in the history of several thousand years. In modern times, the frequent bullying and humiliation by imperialist powers once weakened China. However, after 100 years of struggle, China has stood up again as a giant.

Jiang Zemin, 1997

In economic terms, this ideology, called a "mercantilist strain of economic nationalism" was "most concerned to see the control of China's economy remain in Chinese hands.... not be trampled on the way it was perceived to have been after the Opium Wars of the nineteenth century." Within China, therefore, opponents of accession often framed their arguments in the traditional terms of uncompromised sovereignty, suggesting that certain protocols of accession would open China to foreign exploitation and destabilization (Pearson, p. 359, 363).

2) China's Perception of Global Capitalism

A view of China's WTO accession informed by critical and Marxist theory might focus on the ways in which China's accession was driven by exploitative pressure from more powerful commercial actors. Chinese policymakers expressed concern after China's GATT accession proposal was rejected in 1994 that the United States was waiting for the launch of the WTO to impose more stringent rules on China (Pearson, p. 342).

Box 4.3: WTO Accession and Chinese Vulnerability

".... Bilateral U.S. trade actions on market access issues, intellectual property rights, prison labour exports, and textile fraud. Indeed, it is precisely this kind of interdependence that China arguably fears most. From the formerly annual debate over American renewal of China's most-favoured-nation status (now called normal trade relations) to Washington's influence over Beijing's accession to the WTO, vulnerability to policy influence by great powers such as the United States and the European Union has long been a major concern of Chinese leaders."

Moore and Yang, p. 195

Many Marxist readings of China's accession would also focus on the extent to which the U.S. government has facilitated the PRC's accession to help further American corporate interests. This is partly because the relationship between private corporations and state policy is evolving and accordingly less ambiguous under China's continually marketizing economy; although some companies remain state-owned enterprises, the government has in many cases divested and business interests have not formed the same organized domestic lobbying groups as exert influence in the United States.

Box 4.4: Relationship between U.S. government and business interests

"U.S. stakeholders were significantly more satisfied with China's WTO performance in 2004 than in the previous two years... the Administration is fully committed to working with China to ensure that the benefits of China's WTO membership are realized by U.S. workers, businessmen, farmers, service providers, and consumers."

United States Trade Representative, 2004 Report, pp. 4,8

There is no doubt that elements of the United States government see themselves as acting to promote US business interests overseas, or at least to allow an environment in which those businesses can compete in what the US perceives is a fair environment. Pearson, however, notes that part of China's economic reforms begun in the 1970s included "acceptance of comparative advantage as a 'global law' rather than a tool of capitalism" (p. 354). In July 2004, the United States and four other WTO members objected to the PRC's policy of applying a value-added tax on imported semi-conductor makers. It remains to be seen how future adjudications will go and how these will be perceived by Chinese policymakers.

Web links

<http://www.chinabusinessreview.com/ten-years-of-wto-membership/>

A review of ten years of WTO membership by US-China Business Council (USCBC) President John Frisbie, with commentary on benefits, challenges, and the next ten years.

www.wto.org/English/thewto_e/countries_e/china_e.htm

Part of the WTO website, this page contains information on China's participation in the organization, including the process of accession.

<http://english.mofcom.gov.cn/>

The website of the Chinese Ministry of Commerce's Department of WTO Affairs.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/1548866.stm>

BBC News story on the China entering the WTO, from September 2001.

www.cid.harvard.edu/cidtrade/issues/accessions.html

This website by Harvard's Center for International Development provides an overview of the WTO accession process.

www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/11/20011111-1.html

Text of President Bush's remarks upon China and Taiwan's accession to the WTO in November 2001.

www.uscc.gov/

The US-China Economic and Security Review Commission has held hearings on China's participation in the WTO and US-China trade relations.

<https://www.uschina.org/china-hub>

The US-China Business Council has a webpage with information on China's participation in the WTO, with a focus on US corporate activities in China.

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