The Political Economy of Sino-American Relations

A Greater China Perspective

Edited by Y.Y. Kueh with the assistance of Brian Bridges



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Introduction

In the 1980s the Asia-Pacific region was the world's fastest growing region economically and its record to date in the 1990s, despite occasional hiccups in some countries, suggests that that status will be maintained in this decade as well. The impressive growth rates of recent years are founded both on heightened flows of trade and investment within the region and on an everbroadening range of commercial contacts with external trading partners. Both have taken place within an increasingly congenial regional political context, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union which has brought about a basically favourable power realignment on a global scale.

Within this overall pattern of Asia-Pacific economic dynamism, one aspect which has attracted particular attention in recent years has been the intensification of trade and investment linkages between mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan; so much so that observers have come to talk of 'Greater China' as a way of characterizing this new phenomenon.* Although it was the decision of the Chinese government in the late 1970s to adopt 'opendoor' policies for economic modernization which acted as the trigger, the private sector in Hong Kong and Taiwan have been quick to see the commercial potential of ventures in and with China. While it is true that political sensitivities (most notably between China and Taiwan) have not been completely eliminated, economic logic has remained a powerful driving force behind this integration between the three economies.

Individually, the three Chinese economies are in any case important players in global trade and investment relations. China, Hong Kong and Taiwan have been occupying in recent years the eleventh to thirteenth positions amongst the world's trading nations; and China has now become one of the world's largest recipient countries of foreign direct investment (FDI), second only to the United States, while Hong Kong has assumed the status of the fourth largest FDI supplier in the world. With the emergence of 'Greater China', however, external trading partners are increasingly being faced with the need

^{*} Throughout this study, the term, mainland China, the Chinese Mainland, China and the People's Republic of China are used interchangeably; and 'Greater China' is used as an economic concept to capture the precipitous increase in economic interaction and integration between the three Chinese economies since 1979.

to carry out business activities and construct trade policies which take account of the complex set of economic linkages between the three economies. This means that they are no longer able to deal with one economy in isolation from the others. Clearly for all three economies, the United States figures as one of their most important external partners. This volume therefore endeavours to examine in detail, both from the perspective of the 'Greater China' economies as well as from the side of the Americans, many of the complexities of the Sino-American relationship.

The end of the Cold War profoundly affected the pattern of international relations and led to assessments that the preoccupation of the previous half century with geopolitics and security would be replaced by enhanced concern about economic, social and environmental issues. However, in reality as the 1990s have progressed, it has also become clear that economic issues are still closely linked with political questions. This means that any discussion of the economic dimensions of the Sino-American relationship needs to be set against the broader background of Sino-American political relations.

As one of America's leading China watchers, Harry Harding, demonstrates in the opening chapter, there has been a range of troublesome political issues which have plagued Sino-American relations in the 1990s - some of these date back a long way, others are new on the agenda. The conference from which this edited volume derives was itself held at a time when relations between the United States and China were particularly tense in the aftermath of the visit to the United States by President Lee Teng-hui of Taiwan. Tensions actually heightened even further in the spring of 1996 at the time of Taiwan's presidential elections with Chinese military activity near Taiwan being counterbalanced by US naval deployments. However, as Harding argues, despite these problems, there are a number of internal and international factors which still provide durability and resilience to the relationship. Indeed, there are signs, in the second half of 1996, that some measure of stability is being restored to the Sino-American relationship. Thus, although there inevitably will exist a blend of divergent and convergent interests in the relationship, the prospects for cooperation are once again becoming more favourable.

While Harding's analysis primarily covers post-Cold War policies and perceptions on both sides, the chapter by Radha Sinha, an Indian scholar now based in Japan, sets the current Sino-American relationship against a much longer historical and intellectual background. He notes various stages in the development of Sino-American relations over the past century and a half, from US imperialism (albeit a moralistic one), through benign neglect to the *rapprochement* of the 1970s. He characterizes the present period as one of constructive dialogue and argues for patience, caution and reduced reliance on rhetoric in developing the Sino-American relationship.

While not losing sight of the important political context, the other chapters of the volume concentrate on key aspects of the economic interactions between the various economies. The starting point has to be the profound changes which have taken place in the Chinese economy since the late 1970s. Based on his long-time observation of the Chinese economy, Robert Dernberger offers a thoughtful assessment of the pattern of economic reforms in China over nearly two decades. He sees a considerable — and relatively successful transformation of the Chinese economy, but notes that some key issues, particularly in the banking and legal systems, will be difficult challenges for the new post-Deng Xiaoping leadership. Turning to how these changes have had and are having an impact on relations with the United States, Dernberger anticipates a slowdown in Chinese trade and investment growth, but argues that China will inevitably play an ever larger role in the Asian economy; as such, US businessmen will not want to miss out on the commercial opportunities on offer.

Two other overview chapters approach the Sino-American relationship from the perspective of the other components of 'Greater China': Taiwan and Hong Kong. The senior Taiwanese economist Tzong-shian Yu compares the state of economic relations between Taiwan and the United States with that of mainland China with the United States. He argues that for both Taiwan and China the United States will remain an important export market, but that by contrast with the 1980s it is now China rather than Taiwan which will be running large — and controversial — trade surpluses. But he also notes that with the burgeoning of economic ties between Taiwan and mainland China, any US trade policy measures taken against China will have an impact not just on Taiwanese investment in China but also on industrial growth in Taiwan itself.

Hong Kong, even more closely linked with China, is bound to be most profoundly affected by any major US-China trade disputes. The chapter by Y.Y. Kueh and Thomas Voon clearly brings to light, in quantitative terms, the pivotal role Hong Kong plays in facilitating two-way US-China trade, and hence the enormous economic importance to Hong Kong of a favourable Sino-American political relationship. Of particular interest is the rigorous analysis made to reconcile the long-standing conflicting US versus China claims over trade deficits against each other. Kueh and Voon show that by an absolutely overwhelming proportion, the discrepancy can be explained away by Hong Kong's imputed earnings from export processing commissioned to the Chinese hinterland which by American reckoning are, however, treated grossly as Chinese exports to the United States. Kueh and Voon also conclude that the exaggerated US trade deficit claims against China appear to assume a political overtone, given that, by contrast, similar, persistent and massive US trade deficits *vis-à-vis* Japan, and South Korea and Taiwan as well, have never really inspired the American government to any serious trade disputes with these established political allies.

The chapter by Kui-yin Cheung takes a closer look at the Hong Kong-China trade links by focusing specifically on the role that fluctuating exchange rates have played in affecting two-way trade flows including, in particular, the all-important 'outward processing' trade initiated from Hong Kong. Against the background of his findings, Cheung argues that, as part of China's bid to join the new World Trade Organization (successor to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade), reform of its foreign exchange system, in particular the movement towards full convertibility of the renminbi, are essential. He also remains optimistic that Hong Kong's rediscovered role as an entrepôt and gateway to China for foreign, including American, companies will continue for the foreseeable future.

Of course, investment activities are closely intertwined with trading relationships and two chapters address these linkages. Leonard Cheng, a Hong Kong specialist on China's investment issues, takes a detailed look at the record of US companies investing in China and highlights some of the areas where there have been disagreements between China and the United States. Some of the disputes, he argues, are really about the speed of Chinese economic reform, but he does note some aspects, such as industrial policy, where standpoints differ more widely. Nonetheless, like Dernberger, he feels that US companies will want to continue to invest and be active in the China market.

Taiwanese scholar Chin Chung examines in detail the nature and function of FDI from both Taiwan and Hong Kong in the Chinese mainland in light of available international experience. She compares how the associated relocating of export-oriented manufacturing activities has been brought to bear on both the relative shares of the Chinese Trio in the US and Japanese markets (in favour of the Chinese Mainland), and the industrial structure of Taiwan, as well as that of Hong Kong. She argues that, for reasons of a lack of 'firmspecific assets' on the part of the investing firms, increased FDI outflows to the Mainland tend to result in a 'hollowing-out' of the manufacturing sector. While, however, the vacuum left in Hong Kong can be rapidly filled by the bourgeoning service economy taking advantage of the booming China reexport trade, Taiwan, because of both political and geographical constraints, however, should look for ways of replenishing lost capital and entrepreneurship, if it wants to make up foregone chances for industrial upgrading and restructuring.

A crucial issue which still hangs over China's economic and trading relationship with the United States and the world at large obviously concerns China's resumption of membership of the GATT/WTO. Given that the potential impact is expected to be enormous, Hong Kong trade specialist Yun-wing Sung discusses, in his chapter, specifically how it may bring about drastic changes in China's own economic system and economic stability, and hence in its commodity and services trade relationship with the outside world on the one hand, and, on the other, how it may further help to enhance economic integration between the 'Socialist' (China) and 'Capitalist' (Hong Kong and Taiwan) parts of China. Sung argues that an economically integrated 'Greater China' will inevitably continue to be outward-oriented, relying on the United States as the largest export market and Japan as the largest supplier of capital goods and technology - a conviction shared indeed by Kueh and Voon as well. Of particular analytical interest in Sung's chapter is the attempt made to disentangle the intriguing trade relationship between the Chinese Mainland and Taiwan. He contends that despite the official ban by the Taiwanese government, 'direct trade' has already been flourishing, by way of 'nominal' transhipment via Hong Kong, by Taiwan exporters in a frenzy to cash in on both emerging Chinese consumerism and the heightened export-oriented FDI demand for input equipment and materials. Thus, as Sung argues, the advent of a WTO status may not make too much difference in this respect.

Needless to say, the Sino-American economic relationship is also affected by, and in turn has an impact on, economic relationships between other economic powers in the Asia-Pacific region. Clearly, Japan, by the very size of its economy and its own intense trading and investment relationships with both China and the United States, cannot be ignored. One of Japan's leading scholars on the Chinese economy, Hiromi Yamamoto, carefully charts the growing trade, aid and investment links between Japan and China and sets them in the context of Japan's gradual shift away from reliance on the United States as its major trading partner to the booming Asia-Pacific economies. He also detects a tendency in the 1990s for Japan to slowly move away from following the US lead in relations with China, suggesting that in future the dynamics of the Sino-Japanese economic — and political — relationship will be less influenced by the state of US-Japan and US-China relations.

Of course, Japan and the United States are competitors not just in the China market but also in the smaller markets of Hong Kong and Taiwan. Kaicheong Lei uses an econometric analysis to examine the exact state of this competition in these two latter markets. He demonstrates that, although the Japanese and US combined shares of these two markets has been slowly declining over the past two decades in the face of new competitors, Japan's share of both markets remains larger than the US share and indeed in the more sophisticated Hong Kong market, its lead over the United States is growing.

An Australia-based specialist in Chinese economic studies, Joseph Chai, adopts a different perspective, taking as his starting point the debate within Australia about the likely trade-diverting and trade-creating effects for Australia of Sino-American contention. He concludes that even if the United States feels it necessary to balance its trade with China by increasing exports to China this would not necessarily mean greater competition with Australian commodities, such as agricultural products, in the China market.

While scholars and government officials do still argue about the differing methods of computation and consequently differing projections of the size of the Chinese economy and its future role in world trade, even under conservative calculations it is clear that China has become one of the world's major economies. How can the international economic system adjust to the emergence of this new economic power and the associated 'Greater China'? The final chapter in the volume, by the American international trade specialist Marcus Noland, tries to speculate on the changing role of China in the international economy. He argues that the sheer size of China, its sustained rapid growth and the still incomplete nature of reform there means that integrating it into the international economic order will be at times both problematic and painful for other states, including the United States. As such he feels that China should be encouraged to join actively in bodies such as the WTO and APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation), to make it prepared to assume obligations while receiving benefits from these groupings.

There is no doubt that with China being increasingly assimilated into the world system of market economies and free trade, by way of economic reform, trade decentralization and enhanced trade and investment relations, any major economic and trading decision-making by the Chinese government is bound to be increasingly subject to the dictates of universally established rules and procedures, and customs governing multilateral or bilateral relations. The continuous concessions made by the Chinese government in recent years in response to US requirements for compliance with intellectual property rights and for opening up the market (in terms of the market access agreement) are a good case in point.

At the same time, the Chinese domestic system of production, investment and trading can be expected to be closely woven into the global system of labour division, industrial specialization and trade exchange. Any readjustments made in trading and investment policies on the part of the Chinese government, will then likely become increasingly constrained and hence marginal in extent, within the global context of private enterprises, decentralized trading autonomy, banking, financial and investment liberalization, and competition. Thus, if global economic interdependence continues to increase, it will be more difficult for China, or any other major country, to disturb the world economic order.

Of course, in the case of Sino-American economic relations, as in the case of other important relationships, international trade and investment cannot be entirely free of political influence. Issues such as Taiwan, Tibet, arms sales, nuclear non-proliferation and human rights, coupled with a growing perception by the US government of China as a 'threat' to South-east Asia and the world at large, do cast a shadow over normal economic exchanges. Geopolitics and regional security considerations apart, clearly differences of value imperatives, over human rights for example, which set the Chinese belief in the rights of existence and development against the American belief in individual freedom and democracy, do threaten to spill over into the economic arena, despite the delinking by the Clinton administration of annual most-favoured-nation (MFN) renewal from the human rights issue.

Taking a longer-term perspective, political change can perhaps be seen as a function of economic development, and just as Taiwan has changed politically in recent years with its economic growth, so too change may even come to China in the twenty-first century. However, the situation with mainland China is clearly dissimilar by virtue of its sheer size and its highly diversified and complex economic and social structure. The stark contrasts between the coastal and interior provinces, in terms of economic disparity, as well as the longstanding industry-agriculture dichotomy, have ever since the communist takeover in 1949, compelled the Chinese leadership to regard a certain degree of political centralism as necessary to hold together the fabric of the state. In fiscal terms this clearly implies forced transfer from the relatively richer eastern to the poorer western regions - a basic policy which has gained greater currency in recent deliberations over the current five-year plan. Equally, if not even more forcefully, there has been a consistent draining of resources, ironically conversely from the poor agricultural sector to the relatively rich urban industrial sector, as part of the forced-draft industrialization for catching up with the Western industrial powers. Both types of forced transfers clearly presuppose centralized political control one way or the other, necessarily implying forced savings and pervasive suppression of consumption and consumer choice, and, by extension, deprivation of individual freedom and consumer voting American-style.

Our short introduction does not intend to digress into domestic Chinese politics and economics, but these few points about the fundamentals should be sufficient to highlight the very sources and rationale underlying the enormous gap between the Chinese and the Americans in their respective value perceptions and moral standards.

Is the gap between the Chinese and the Americans really unbridgeable? In terms of value imperatives, it is quite unlikely to be bridged in the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, with China emerging as a major geopolitical factor and, even more rapidly, becoming a global economic power, *realpolitik* would certainly lend substance to Harding's argument that in the coming years China and the United States would be neither friend nor foe.

On a positive note, trade and investment relations between the United States and China, or more importantly indeed between the United States and 'Greater China' at large, have accumulated to a scale these days that was unthinkable fifteen years ago. Although in a way China may be economically more dependent on the United States than vice versa, it is safe to assume that neither country would really be prepared to risk the potentially wide-ranging negative consequences of rocking the 'economic' boat. There is therefore a real element of truth in Harding's contention that the enhanced economic interdependence between the two countries, especially since the early 1990s, must be seen as an important factor in providing some durability and resilience to Sino-American relations. Therefore, as President Clinton begins his second term of office, there are signs that the tensions of the 1995–96 period can be put behind us and that a new more productive phase in Sino-American relations can begin.

Y.Y. Kueh and Brian Bridges March 1997

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