

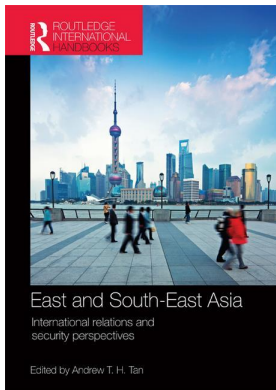
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## **East and South-East Asia International relations and security perspectives**

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### **The false promise of economic interdependence**

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# The false promise of economic interdependence

## Chinese foreign policy in North-East Asia

*Nicholas Khoo*

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### Introduction

When Deng Xiaoping initiated the People's Republic of China's economic reforms in late 1978, few would have predicted the spectacular success that followed. China is now regularly referred to with terms such as 'global trade power' (Naughton 2007: 377) and concepts that rely heavily on economic indices, such as 'soft power' (Kurlantzick 2007). Indeed, recent research on international perceptions of China's role in world politics has found that it is in the economic sphere where Chinese influence is perceived as being strongest (Holyk 2011: 223, 246). China's seemingly inexorable economic rise is such that analysts now seriously debate whether the 21st century will see it overtaking the USA (Beckley 2011/12). Given the importance that economic factors play in China's foreign relations, it is illuminating to review the empirical record against the expectations of a particular international relations (IR) theory that highlights the role of these factors in its analysis—namely, economic interdependence theory. In broad terms, the theory leads us to expect a causal relationship between increased economic interdependence and a reduction of conflict in bilateral relations.<sup>1</sup> How consistent are the expectations of economic interdependence theory with the reality of China's relations with its North-East Asian neighbours? To state the conclusions of this study at the outset, this study finds that the role of economic factors in Chinese foreign policy is less influential in reducing conflict than posited by economic interdependence theorists. Ultimately, economic factors in China's foreign policy are subordinate to wider political dynamics.

### Economic interdependence and liberal international relations theory

Economic interdependence theory has its roots in the work of Adam Smith (1723–90) and David Ricardo (1772–1823). The founding fathers of liberal trade theory, Smith and Ricardo sought to demonstrate through rigorous argument that it is in the interests of states to dispense with mercantilism, in favour of *laissez faire* trade (Appleyard and Field 1995: 19–40). Their respective introduction of the concepts of absolute and comparative advantage were a

revolution in economic thinking. While the theory had a strong influence during the 19th century, the turbulence of the subsequent century, seen in the Great Depression and two World Wars, led to a decline in its influence (Blainey 1988: 18–32). This did not last long. By the late 1970s the expansion of world trade reinvigorated academic interest in the theory. Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye's *Power and Interdependence* brought economic interdependence back to the fore (Keohane and Nye 1977). In the 1980s Richard Rosecrance expanded economic interdependence studies through his analysis of the emergence of a new phenomenon in the international system, trading states (Rosecrance 1986). Interestingly enough, all three states analysed in this chapter are cited by Rosecrance as important examples of trading states (Rosecrance 1986: 260, 265). In 2001, Bruce Russett and John O'Neal focused attention on the role of economic interdependence, both independently and in conjunction with democracy and international institutions in reducing conflict between states (Russett and O'Neal 2001). More recently, Erik Gartzke has added to this literature via the concept of a capitalist peace (Gartzke 2007).

### **Economic interdependence revisited: China's experience**

The works discussed above highlight the robust development of the research programme on economic interdependence. It is therefore not surprising that economic interdependence theory has had an important impact on the area studies literature relating to China's international behaviour in the post-Cold War era. David Shambaugh has identified expanded economic relations between China and its Asian neighbours as one of the four pillars of a more activist and successful foreign policy (Shambaugh 2004/05: 72). He catalogues an impressive level of deepening economic interdependence between China and the Asian region, particularly since 1997. A robust trend is noted of 'growing interdependence and cooperation among both states and non-state actors—with China increasingly at the center of this activity' (Shambaugh 2004/05: 65). Copious and detailed figures of China's economic interdependence with both Asia as a region and individual states are cited. The figures are impressive. If anything, these have grown since Shambaugh's study, which was published in 2005 and relied on figures available for the year 2003. In 2003 trade between China and the entire Asian region amounted to US \$495 billion (Shambaugh 2004/05: 83). By 2010 Chinese trade with its top six Asian trading partners alone was worth \$867 billion (USChina.org 2012). In 2003, six of China's top trading partners were from the Asia-Pacific region (Ministry of Commerce 2003: table). By 2010 this number had increased to eight (USChina.org 2012: table 7). Other analysts have also contributed to the literature. David Zweig and Wing Thye Woo have separately analysed China's international relations through the concept of a trading nation (Zweig 2010; Woo 2006). More recent research on China's foreign policy, published in 2012, finds further support for the economic interdependence thesis (Mason 2012). Paralleling Gartzke's analysis, Erich Weede has discussed China's rise in the context of the emergence of an extended period of capitalist peace for Asia (Weede 2010). Weede's analysis has led him to conclude that 'from an international trade perspective, all of East Asia has recently become a Chinese sphere of influence' (Weede 2010: 209).

### **Economic interdependence and China's relations with Japan, South Korea and Taiwan**

How consistent are the expectations of the research cited above with the empirical evidence of China's foreign policy in North-East Asia? An appropriate first step in answering this question is to assess whether a high level of economic interdependence is in existence. In terms of the trade data, China has an increasingly deep relationship with Japan, the Republic of Korea (South

Korea) and Taiwan.<sup>2</sup> Official Chinese government figures for 2010 indicate that Japan is China's second largest trading partner, with a figure of US \$297.8 billion. South Korea is China's fourth largest trading partner at \$207.2 billion. Taiwan is China's fifth largest trading partner with \$145.4 billion (USChina.org 2012: table 7). This trend is a stable one. In the period 1997–2003, the three actors occupied near identical positions in China's international trading relationships. Japan was China's top trading partner with an average of \$101.9 billion. Taiwan was fourth at \$44.6 billion. South Korea was fifth with \$44.1 billion (Pei and Shen 2005: 3). Perhaps even more significant is the fact that China is now the number one trading partner for Seoul, Tokyo and Taipei. China was South Korea's (South Korean Customs Service n.d.) and Taiwan's (Republic of China Directorate of Statistics 2012) number one trading partner for 2011. It was Japan's number one trading partner for 2010 (Japan Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 2010). So, by any reasonable measure, a state of high economic interdependence can be said to exist. What is the effect of such high levels of economic interdependence on bilateral political relations? Does it point toward a reduction in conflict, as economic interdependence theory would lead us to expect (Mansfield and Pollins 2003: 16–17)? To answer this question, we shall examine China's respective relations with Japan, Taiwan and South Korea. A narrative-type approach will be adopted, with public opinion polling data introduced at appropriate points to support the analysis.

### Sino-Japanese relations

The positive spill-over effect of economic ties on Sino-Japanese relations is much weaker than expected by economic interdependence theory. Despite deep economic interdependence, the general tenor of political relations has been conflictual, with escalation of conflict not uncommon. The Chinese continue to rank Japan as one of their principal security concerns (Pillsbury 2000: 107–53). As will be discussed further below, Japan is often the target of choice for Chinese nationalism (Reilly 2012; He 2008). Neither do the Japanese appear to hold a particularly positive view of their Chinese neighbours. Since the 1980s, and particularly over the last decade or so, Japanese opinion polling data has displayed increasing concerns of China. One study found that between 1985 and 2001 the percentage of Japanese respondents who considered China 'friendly' fell from 75.4% to 47.5%. Strikingly, 48.1% of those surveyed in 2001 felt that China was 'unfriendly' (Yang 2003: 306). This finding is consistent with other research for the period (Rozman 2002).

No doubt, these feelings reflected at least in part the heightened tensions in the region following the incident in 2001 when a US EP-3 reconnaissance aircraft collided with a Chinese military aircraft, resulting in the death of a Chinese pilot and a prolonged diplomatic stand-off. A further series of incidents over 2004–05 led to a spike in conflict and a deterioration in Japanese opinion of China, reflected in the 2006 PEW Survey on Asian reactions to China's rise (PEW Global Research Center 2006). During the Asian Cup soccer finals that were held in China in summer 2004, the Japanese team was subjected to sustained abuse and vitriol as it played its matches in various parts of China. The full-scale rioting by disgruntled Chinese soccer fans following the Japanese team's victory over China in the Asian Cup final in August 2004 appalled many in Japan. Shortly after that, in November 2004, tensions spiked further over the probing by a Chinese submarine in areas of dispute between Japan and China, and subsequent dispatch of Chinese drilling teams to inspect for oil and gas deposits in the vicinity. In late March 2005 a grassroots campaign in China protesting at Japan's efforts to secure a permanent seat on the United Nations (UN) Security Council garnered an estimated 22 million signatures (Kahn 2005a). Soon after this, a wave of anti-Japanese demonstrations, which the Chinese

government did little to stop and arguably tacitly encouraged, targeted Japanese businesses and government offices in Beijing, Shanghai and southern China. Understandably, Tokyo lodged a formal protest with China concerning these demonstrations and requested an apology, which was rejected by Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing, causing relations to deteriorate further (Kahn 2005b). Then, Beijing effectively halted the anti-Japanese protests (Kahn 2005c).

Given the foregoing developments, it is not particularly surprising that despite dense Sino-Japanese economic ties, both sides hold negative perceptions of the other. The 2006 PEW global survey reached a finding where ‘roughly seven-in-ten Japanese expressed an unfavourable view of China’, and that ‘anxiety about the growing strength of China’s military is nearly universal in Japan’ (PEW Global Research Center 2006: 1). Japanese respondents considered China to be a greater threat ‘than any other country’, even above the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea) (PEW Global Research Center 2006: 4). Those surveyed were ‘roughly divided between those who consider China the biggest threat (39%) and those who feel that North Korea (35%) presents the greatest danger to their country’ (PEW Global Research Center 2006: 4). The report also revealed that at 93% of all respondents surveyed, the number of Japanese who had fears of China’s growing military power outranked that of both India (63%) and Russia (76%) (PEW Global Research Center 2006: 1). Most Japanese considered ‘China a serious problem’ and ‘in both countries, relatively few say the other is not much of a problem’ (PEW Global Research Center 2006: 3). Rather disturbingly, 82% of Japanese surveyed viewed Chinese as nationalistic, and 50% of Japanese felt that Chinese were violent (PEW Global Research Center 2006: 4). The survey reported that only 16% of respondents in China, and 15% in Japan felt that the other was not much of a problem (PEW Global Research Center 2006: 4). More recent survey data from Yomuri Shimbun/Gallup are broadly consistent with the above-mentioned figures. In a December 2009 opinion poll, 64% of Japanese respondents believed that China would become a military threat to Japan (Yomuri Shimbun/Gallup 2009a). A November 2009 poll found that while 62% of Japanese believed that ‘Japan has walked the path of a peace loving nation since World War Two over 60 Years ago’ (Yomuri Shimbun/Gallup 2009b), only 18% of Chinese surveyed expressed agreement with that opinion (Yomuri Shimbun/Gallup 2009b). Rather disturbingly, asked to choose from a menu of words to describe their perception of China as a country, the most common words chosen by Japanese respondents, at 56%, was that of ‘military expansion’ (Yomuri Shimbun/Gallup 2009b).

Elite opinion in Japan largely parallels public opinion. A 2009 study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, DC, surveyed policy elites in Japan and eight other Asia-Pacific states (Gill *et al.* 2009). When asked to respond to the question ‘which country poses the greatest threat to peace and stability in the next 10 Years?’ a full 51% of Japanese respondents expressed the view that China was a threat, while 24% held that view of North Korea (Gill *et al.* 2009: 7). Thus, the survey concluded that ‘both Japanese and Korean elites are more worried about China as a threat to peace in 10 years than they are about North Korea’ (Gill *et al.* 2009: 7). The empirical evidence covered in the narrative suggests that notwithstanding very high levels of economic interdependence, fairly high levels of conflict and negative mutual imaging have been in evidence (Samuels 2007: 200–8).

### Sino-Taiwanese relations

As in the Sino-Japanese relationship, the political effects of strong trade links have not inoculated the Sino-Taiwanese relationship from (sometimes severe) political conflict. As Chinese scholar Wang Jisi notes, even when ‘economic and trade links are expanding, Taiwan remains a major source of unease (for the Chinese)’ (Wang 2005: 44). Scott Kastner’s study into the role

of economic interdependence in the Sino-Taiwanese relationship is very cautious about over-emphasizing the effect of economic interdependence in mitigating Sino-Taiwanese conflict (Kastner 2006). This view is well-founded.

The inability of economic interdependence to prevent outright conflict is disturbingly well demonstrated in this case by the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1995–96, when the USA was required to mobilize the Seventh Fleet to prevent an escalation of the dispute. In this respect, while China's willingness to use force against Taiwan during the crisis of 1995–96 may have achieved some temporary deterrent effect on a formal declaration of Taiwanese independence, it nevertheless gave a strong stimulus to the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) presidential candidate Chen Shui-bian, who was elected in 2000 on a platform of developing a unique and democratic Taiwanese identity (Buruma 1996). China's subsequent unremitting hostility in large part assisted Chen in securing re-election in 2004. The 2005 Anti-Secession Law (ASL) passed by the Chinese National People's Congress codified the threat or actual use of force should Taiwan cross some vague and unspecified line, which Beijing reserves the exclusive right to determine (You 2006). The passage of the ASL also led to a reversal in Chen's plunging popularity which was manifest in the poor performance of his governing coalition in the December 2004 elections. In response to the ASL, hundreds of thousands of Taiwanese responded by engaging in street protests, and a spike in Chen's popularity occurred.

There is strong evidence from Taiwanese public opinion surveys on cross-Strait relations that despite increasing levels of economic interdependence, the Taiwanese polity has retained a strong sense of Beijing's hostility toward it. A 2003 study found that in the preceding decade, the number of Taiwanese with negative perceptions of bilateral relations had trebled, with a concomitant decline in perception of 'friendliness' across the Strait (Chao 2003: 290). Data from Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council recorded Taiwanese perceptions of Beijing's hostility toward the Taiwan government at 79.4% in December 2004 (Mainland Affairs Council 2004). The aforementioned 2005 enactment of the Chinese ASL solidified negative Taiwanese sentiments toward the Mainland. A Taiwan Think Tank poll conducted in the wake of the Law's passage found (unsurprisingly) that 79.6% of the Taiwanese survey respondents did not approve of the Law (Taiwan Think Tank 2008). This corroborates an earlier survey in 2007, in which 85% of respondents agreed with the statement that 'China's efforts to exclude Taiwan from world bodies will affect two-way relations' (Angus Reid 2007). Significantly, 64% of respondents also believed Beijing should be held accountable for worsening bilateral relations with Taiwan, with 60% agreeing that it was 'better not to harbour any illusions with Beijing, since China was unlikely to compromise over Taiwan's sovereignty' (Angus Reid 2007). The Taiwan Think Tank survey asked 1,068 randomly selected Taiwan residents questions concerning China, the USA, Japan and South Korea. When asked which of the four governments 'is the least friendly to Taiwan?', 51% of Taiwan residents identified the Chinese government as 'least friendly' (Taiwan Think Tank 2008). The overall picture of Taiwanese reactions to China is not unexpected. Despite high levels of economic interdependence, to the extent that Taiwanese want to preserve Taiwan's existence as an independent entity, they have real fears. These fears have resonance in actual developments in Sino-Taiwanese relations during the 1995–2010 period. Thus, even during the present time of relative regional stability, Taiwanese perceptions of Beijing's hostility toward the Taiwan government remain very high, at 43.4% in April 2010 (Mainland Affairs Council 2010).

### **Sino-South Korean relations**

Since normalization of relations in 1992, economic interdependence has flourished between Seoul and Beijing. By 2004 China was South Korea's "three No. 1s": its largest trading

partner, its largest export market, and its largest trade surplus source' (Kim 2005: 130). Nevertheless, a Rand Corporation study has observed that 'growing concerns and anxieties about Chinese economic policymaking and diplomacy show that the honeymoon in Chinese–South Korean relations is decidedly over' (Medeiros *et al.* 2008: xix). Indeed, over the last decade, Sino–Korean tensions over a full range of issues ranging from trade, to human rights, to China's close relations with North Korea, and the Korguryo issue (Gries 2005), have served to dampen positive attitudes on the part of the general South Korean public and elite toward China (Chung 2009: 214–17).

When asked to rate Chinese influence as 'favourable, or unfavourable', a BBC survey revealed that in 2004 South Koreans were divided in their perceptions of China (49% positive, 47% negative) (BBC World Service 2005). In 2006, 58% viewed China negatively, while 40% viewed China positively (BBC World Service 2006). A 2007 Chicago Council World Opinion survey corroborates this trend, showing that 61% of South Koreans do not trust China to act responsibly in the world (Chicago Council on Foreign Relations 2007). Turning from the general public to South Korean elites, polling data from the aforementioned 2009 CSIS survey detected higher levels of threat perception in South Korea toward China than even North Korea. The report found that none of the 150 Korean elites was concerned about Japan as a 'threat to stability in the next 10 years' (Gill *et al.* 2009: 7). Instead, China ranked as the greatest threat to stability for 56% of South Korean elites (Gill *et al.* 2009: 7). The CSIS report is consistent with a 2006 study by Jae Ho Chung who found that the 'South Korean policy elite ... preferring to remain within the U.S.-aligned structure', are 'more likely to fear that the rise of China would be destabilizing' (Chung 2007: 100). These views appear to be quite robust. A 1999 study by Chung also found that a majority of elite interviewees 'chose China as potentially most threatening', and that all interviewees regarded the US–South Korean relationship as 'absolutely necessary' in light of this (Chung 1999: 24).

There has been a clear rise in South Korean elite and public concern that China has either implicitly or explicitly enabled North Korean belligerence since 2009. In particular, China's failure to condemn both the unprovoked North Korean sinking of the South Korean military vessel, the *Choenán*, on 26 March 2010, and the 23 November attack on Yeonpyeong Island in South Korea has seriously affected its standing in South Korea (Pomfret 2010). Territorial disputes between Seoul and Beijing in 2011–12 have further exacerbated negative relations (Page 2012; Song 2012). The combination of uncertainties over aspects of China's future domestic development and foreign policy suggest that as in the Japan and Taiwan case, South Korea will 'seek to maintain good relations with China on the basis of—rather than instead of—a continued close alliance with the United States' (Medeiros *et al.* 2008: xvii). Indeed, the 2009 CSIS report survey data show much greater South Korean support for the USA over China. Some 94% of South Korean respondents said that the USA would be 'the greatest force for peace in 10 years' (Gill *et al.* 2009: 6). Only 6% of South Koreans felt that China would play that role (Gill *et al.* 2009: 6). In summary, as with the Japanese and Taiwanese cases, conflict has been very much in evidence despite high levels of economic interdependence.

## Conclusion

By and large, the theoretical and area studies research has favourably assessed the influence of economic interdependence in international relations and China's foreign policy. The empirical analysis presented in this chapter suggests a circumspect stance toward this research, and its suggestion of the transforming effect of economic interdependence on China's foreign policy. Despite dense and high levels of economic interdependence, this chapter has shown that

friction, and at times intense conflict, has clearly characterized China's relations with its North-East Asian neighbours. In the final analysis, economic interdependence theory offers a partial, apolitical and economic-centric view of Chinese foreign policy. Does the foregoing therefore mean that economic interdependence is to be actively discouraged in regional states' policy toward China? No. Other than offensive realists like John Mearsheimer, who see trade as empowering China, few analysts (including most realists) would systematically and deliberately reduce economic interdependence with China (Mearsheimer 2001: 402). What this chapter does suggest is the limits of economic interdependence as a mechanism in alleviating conflict in bilateral relations. Ironically, one of the forefathers of contemporary economic liberalism would have been attuned to the analysis presented in this chapter. Adam Smith, a free-trader by conviction, was nevertheless nuanced and qualified in his policy recommendations, as seen in his support of the British Empire's Navigation Acts (Earle 1986: 223–24). The evidence presented here suggests that contemporary advocates of economic interdependence would do well to take their cue from Smith and also qualify their views.

## Notes

- 1 The various mechanisms contained in variants of the theory point to economic ties operating as constraints; as a mode of transforming state goals; and as a signal of intentions and resolve.
- 2 It should be noted that I am examining trade interdependence. A full account of economic interdependence would also have to include an examination of relations in the sphere of finance.

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