Between Revisionism and Status Quo: China in International Regimes. China’s behaviour in the global trade, non-proliferation and environmental regimes.

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with China’s behaviour in international regimes. It uses relevant regime theory to explore the opposing concepts of China as a status quo or a revisionist power in three regimes focused on three different issue areas. It argues that China’s behaviour varies greatly according to the issue area concerned and will try to account for and examine why. It suggests that China is no longer a wholly revisionist power and has come to embrace a more status quo orientated approach, particularly in the global trade regime, where it has come to see the benefits of international cooperation. However its behaviour is still led by realism specifically concerns with its own security and it continues to take a strict interpretation of its sovereignty. China seems to want to work within the status quo but it remains primarily concerned with equality and fairness in the international system and is unwilling to accept commitments and norms, which disadvantage or restrict it.

Keywords: China, International Order, International Regimes, Regime Theory, Global Trade, Non-Proliferation, Environment, Status quo, Revisionism, International Cooperation.
Introduction

In 1999, Gerald Segal famously asked the question ‘Does China Matter?’ (Segal 1999) Today this question seems no longer salient, China is clearly an increasingly prominent and important global power and more relevant questions are: What does China want? Is China intending to work within, or to implement change and reform, to the existing international system? Is China a threat or is its proclaimed ‘peaceful rise’ a reality? This paper seeks to address some of these new questions by looking at China’s interaction with international regimes, trying to determine the motivations behind its participation in them. As an increasingly powerful state China is an important player in international regimes and its cooperation is often considered a vital component for regimes to successfully address their issue areas.

From 1949 China was a closed and isolated nation, with few foreign relations and little contact with the outside world. Under Maoism, China’s International Relations were led by hard line realist thought. China took a strict definition of its sovereignty and believed in the role of the state as the key actor in International Relations above all other foreign policy considerations. (Lanteigne 2009: 58-60) Consequently, this prohibited China’s engagement with international regimes as, ‘participation in any international regimes, regardless of their size or function, entails a loss of sovereignty as well as the requisite transfer of information to the membership, costs which Beijing was unwilling to bear in the 1950s and 1960s.’ (Lanteigne 2009: 59) Consequently co-operation and interdependence were regarded negatively, according to the idea that ‘it created an atmosphere of both sensitivity and vulnerability to international actors and events which China, as a weak state, believed it could not withstand.’ (Lanteigne 2009: 60) Following the death of Mao, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, China began to change its ideological outlook and entered a period of reform in the late 1970s. These reforms allowed China to ‘open up’ to the outside world which it began to do, vigorously re-establishing relations with the West, and other countries, which it had previously shunned. Whilst the initial focus of this ‘opening up’ was on economic issues, as China began to re-integrate itself with the international economic system, it soon led it to open up to the international system as a whole, and to thus join the international regimes and organisations that make up that system. (Wang 2010: 204)

Since then China has played an increasingly important role in the international system as a member of nearly every major international organisation and multilateral treaty, along with a
number of regional multilateral institutions. China acts as ‘a good citizen in the United Nations and other global bodies, and has signed practically every International arms-control treaty.’ (Shirk 2007: 127). ‘Prior to ‘opening up’ in 1977 the People’s Republic had membership in just 21 international organisations. By 1996 this number had risen to 51.’ Figures for 2003 from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences state that ‘China had become a member of 298 international organisations…’ (Wang 2010: 204)

The increase in China’s participation in international affairs is indisputable, however there is much debate as to the motivations behind China’s increasing participation and questions regarding the depth of its commitment to the principles, norms and rules encapsulated within the system. Many scholars cite examples of China’s non-compliance and norm defiance as evidence that China is merely working within the existing system when it is of benefit to its national interest. However there is another argument that China is merely undergoing the gradual process of integrating itself into the existing system and learning how to act as a responsible and ‘normal’ power after thirty years of isolation. If the international system is taken to describe, ‘the most influential international organisations, transnational non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and countries in the world, which share common norms and goals in particular issue areas,’ this paper will be focusing on one aspect of China’s increasing participation in the international system; its expanding membership and participation in international regimes. (Wang 2010: 206)

The discussion will be predominantly based upon a normative approach. It will analyse the arguments drawn from various literature and secondary resources already written on the subject, within the theoretical framework of regime theory and the debate over whether China is a status quo or a revisionist power. It effectively seeks to provide an overview of China’s behaviour in three different regimes and will account for its behaviour in terms of regime theory, whilst developing its own arguments as to why and how China participates in international regimes. It will simultaneously assess China’s behaviour across three different regimes in terms of the debate as to whether China is a status quo or revisionist power.

This paper will firstly provide an overview and discussion of the different interpretations of whether China is a status quo or revisionist power and the relevant theories of international regimes, which can be applied to this question. These theories will provide an analytical framework, which will subsequently be used to analyse and interpret China’s behaviour in: the global trade regime, the international environmental regime and the nuclear non-
proliferation regime. These three regimes have been chosen as they are illustrative examples of China’s behaviour in regimes which focus on three key issue areas, the economic sphere, an issue of low politics; the environment; and military-security, an issue of high politics. These three case studies will be used to demonstrate both consistencies and differences in China’s behaviour, which will in turn be analysed in terms of relevant regime theory. Each case study will draw an overall conclusion as to whether China can be seen to be largely behaving as a status quo or revisionist power, within that regime. Finally this paper will draw a conclusion by comparing China’s behaviour in the different regimes and looking for common trends and issues which perhaps demonstrate what kind of power China can be seen to be and will perhaps be in the future.

Theoretical Framework

This section will provide an overview and analysis of the many different theories and ideas suggesting that China is a status quo or alternatively a revisionist power. It will also discuss the theories of international regimes, which are relevant in analysing and assessing China’s behaviour in the subsequent case studies, in the context of the two opposing ideas.

It is firstly important to establish a working definition of both a status quo and a revisionist power. A status quo power will be defined as a state, which seeks to work within the existing international system and not challenge the current order. For the purpose of this paper, in international regimes, a status quo power would be a cooperative state, which actively participates, complies with and absorbs the norms of the regime. The relevant strand of regime theory, which can be used to analyse China’s behaviour, and to determine if it falls within the definition of a status quo power, is neoliberal institutionalism. Neoliberal institutionalism, first advocated by scholars such as Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye (1989), suggests that authority in the international system is increasingly decentralised, with states becoming less concerned about their own power and security, which realists would alternatively regard as the key issues shaping state behaviour in International Relations. States have instead become more concerned with issues of economic growth and social security. They suggest that as a result of increased economic contacts between nation states, the ‘very nature of World Politics’ has changed. (pp.3) They assert that, ‘the world has become interdependent in economics, in communications, in human aspirations.’ (Keohane
and Nye 1989: 3) They suggest that this new interdependence, which they refer to as 'complex interdependence,' has changed the way states interact with one another. (Keohane and Nye 1989: 24) States are increasingly dependent on one another for the realisation of national goals. Rather than viewing other states as rivals and adversaries, they are increasingly seen as important partners in order to secure greater 'comfort and well-being for their home publics.' (Grieco 1990: 6) Therefore if a state is working within the status quo, by being an active and willing participant and working within the norms of international regimes towards mutual gains, it is acting in accordance with neoliberal institutionalist ideas of international cooperation.

A revisionist power would on the other hand, be described as a state primarily concerned with its own power and prestige above all other considerations, seeking to remodel the international system and order for its own benefit and in its own interests. This makes a revisionist power a staunchly realist one. Realism posits that states are the primary actors in the international system which is anarchic, referring to the fact that there is no higher power than the state i.e. no world government. This anarchy shapes and conditions state behaviour. Anarchy means that there are no guarantees of survival and no one to enforce states’ cooperation. Therefore states are preoccupied with their own survival, power and security, and as a result are inclined towards competition and conflict. (Grieco 1990: 4) As competitive power maximisers, states seek to match and exceed the powers of other states and achieve relative power gains over absolute gains. (Mearsheimer April 2006: pp.160) “Therefore, states recognize that the best way to survive in such a system is to be as powerful as possible relative to potential rivals.” (Mearsheimer April 2006: 160) In light of such characteristics, states often fail to cooperate with international regimes, even when they have common interests. Realism therefore, ‘presents a fundamentally pessimistic analysis of the prospects for international cooperation and the capabilities of international institutions.’ (Grieco 1990: 27) Therefore if a state’s behaviour is led by realism, it is likely to be uncooperative and largely unwilling to work within the norms of the regime, as it has little interest in achieving mutual gains through cooperation and more in advancing its own interests in relative terms.

There are, of course a number of middle of the road views regarding China’s behaviour in the international system. Such ideas can often be explained in terms of other factors, which feed into and shape state behaviour in international regimes. Social constructivist theories suggest
that culture, knowledge and ideas can play a part in shaping a state’s behaviour. In terms of states’ interaction with regimes, they suggest that there needs to be a mutual degree of understanding and shared knowledge to facilitate cooperation. (Wang 2010: 204-206) Social constructivists suggest that,

cooperation can not be completely explained without reference to ideology, the values of actors, the beliefs they hold about the interdependence of issues, and the knowledge available to them about how they can realize specific goals. (Haggard and Simmons 1987: 509-510)

According to this, knowledge and understanding of a particular issue is an important factor, which can facilitate or hinder cooperation. Haas (1992:3), suggested that ‘epistemic communities,’ could play a part in shaping state behaviour and interests instead or as well as the power and structural considerations stressed by realists. He defined such communities as ‘a network of professionals with recognised expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area.’

An important caveat is that this paper is not suggesting that China is either a wholly status quo or wholly revisionist power. Not being one does not mean to suggest that it is wholly the other. There is a huge amount of middle ground between the two and where it describes China as revisionist this paper is really suggesting that it is displaying revisionist tendencies and not upholding the status quo, but not that it is necessarily wholly revisionist. Revisionism in its extreme, i.e. seeking to overhaul the existing system, will be discussed, but generally revisionism will refer to any behaviour which goes against the status quo.

There is a body of thought that suggests that China is a wholly revisionist power, intending to subvert the existing international system. As a rising great power, scholars such as Mearsheimer suggest that it will eventually seek to lead the system, as ‘the ultimate goal of every great power is to maximise its share of world power and eventually dominate the system.’ (2006: 160) This suggests that whilst it is currently concentrating on its own development, once it has achieved this it will want a greater voice and a leading role in the international system.

Great powers do not merely strive to be the strongest great power, although that is a welcome outcome. Their ultimate aim is to be the hegemon—that is, the only great power in the system. (Mearsheimer 2006:160)
Christensen (1996), describes ‘China’s baseline realpolitik view of international politics,’ referring to China as a ‘high church of realpolitik in the post-Cold War world.’ (37) He suggests that Chinese theorists still see the world in terms of the realist paradigm of international relations and thus favour balance of power theories and the logics of power maximisation and expansion.

China’s 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. But Beijing does not allow these organizations to prevent it from pursuing its own economic and security interests. Chinese analysts often view international organizations and their universal norms as fronts for other powers. (Christensen 1996: 38)

Christensen is suggesting that whilst it is a member of such regimes and organisations, China is only doing so out of instrumental considerations, ‘to avoid losing face and influence,’ and that they have no real bearing on China’s behaviour. China participates merely to ensure its own needs and interests are adequately represented and that it is ascribed the necessary respect as an important global player. He also suggests that China’s cooperation with international regimes is limited to mere passive participation, as it will not allow cooperation to limit its ability to achieve its own objectives and will revert to revisionism if necessary to avoid costs. Finally the idea that China sees international regimes as ‘fronts for other powers,’ infers that China believes that these ‘other powers’ use international regimes, as a way to manipulate countries like China and enforce their own agendas and ideas on them. As a result China is wary of such regimes and reluctant to commit to cooperation, as it wishes to defend its autonomy and sovereignty against unwelcome western influence and imposition.

This idea of defending its own interests and autonomy can be developed independently and seen as revisionist, as it can be explained in terms of a branch of realist theory which refers to states as ‘defensive positionalists.’ (Greico 1990: 37-40) This is the idea that with no higher authority than states there is no way of enforcing or ensuring cooperation. Therefore states are constantly seeking to assure that partners do not cheat them. Grieco suggests that states’ concern with relative capabilities, over absolute gains, is about maintaining their own power and position, relative to others. ‘The fundamental goal of states in any relationship is not to attain the highest possible individual gain or payoff; instead it is to prevent others from
achieving advances in their relative capabilities.’ (Grieco 1990: 39) States consequently look at relationships and cooperation in terms of the potential impact on their relative capabilities. This therefore renders cooperation difficult as, ‘…a state will decline to join, will leave, or will sharply limit its commitment to a cooperative arrangement if it believes that gaps in otherwise mutually positive gains favour partners.’ (Grieco 1990: 10)

Iain Johnston (2003: 56) has contested the view that China is a revisionist power, suggesting not that it is a wholly status quo power, but that it ‘is more status quo–oriented relative to its past…’ He states that

Rather, to the extent that one can identify an international community on major
global issues, the PRC has become more integrated into and more cooperative
within international institutions than ever before. (Johnston 2003: pp.49)

Johnston recognises China’s increasing orientation towards the status quo, exemplified by its increased participation. However he points out that this does not necessarily render China a ‘benign or less violent actor in international politics than before.’ (2003: 56) Whilst China is working within the status quo more than ever before, he suggests that this does not mean that it will not revert to revisionism over the longer term. China’s primary interests remain unchanged, but as long as they can achieve them through cooperation and status quo maintenance, they are willing to do so, however China will perhaps become more revisionist if it stops being able to. (2003: 56)

Kim (2004), supports the argument of China as a status quo power stating that there is ‘no evidence of any unsettling revisionist or norm-defying behaviour, except where sovereignty-bound Taiwan issues are involved.’ (Kim 2004: 51) He draws a comparison between America’s behaviour in international regimes, as although China has faced a number of difficulties in certain regimes, unlike America they have never actually withdrawn from one once they have joined, or reneged on the signing of a treaty. An example being America’s abrogation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2002. This suggests that other countries have shown far more serious or blatant revisionist tendencies and that it is perhaps unfair or inaccurate to accuse China of revisionism, when its record is no worse, if not better than other states.
Kim (1992) suggested that China’s organisational behaviour can be seen to be based on what he describes as the ‘mini-maxi principle,’ which suggests that they seek to minimise risks involved and maximise the opportunities available to them (Kim quoted in Economy 2001: 232). Chan (2006) makes a similar point suggesting that China is willing to accept short term, disadvantage as, ‘in the long run, more gains are likely to accrue than losses.’ (Chan 2006: 89) These ideas demonstrate that China is willing to cooperate but that it does so as part of a careful calculation or weighing up of the potential benefits and losses and will only cooperate if they see the potential for more gains than losses.

Chinese scholars and the current government of Hu Jintao, are keen to promote the idea of China’s ‘peaceful rise,’ the concept designed to appease the Western perceived ‘China threat,’ associated with any discussion of China’s rise. (Shirk 2008: 108) It is the idea that China seeks to manage its rise and increasing power as a nation in the international system, in a positive, non-confrontational way. They wish to make it clear that China does not pose a threat to the current system and other nations within it. They are affirming that China is seeking to play by the rules and to be a constructive and compliant member of the international community, effectively a status quo power. (Shirk 2008: 109)

Scott quotes a Chinese scholar Ni Feng who suggests that,

China is repositioning itself from a revolutionary country that rejected the existing international regime to a responsible power within the system, China has switched to a different strategic paradigm, one that sees the world in cooperative rather than confrontational terms…the main thrust of Chinese diplomacy today is not to create a new international order, but to join the existing order. (Ni Feng in Scott 2007: 137)

The peaceful rise strategy supports the idea of China as a status quo power in its assertions of a peace loving China, looking to become a responsible member of the existing international community. China’s behaviour can be seen to confirm that it is following such a strategy. China is co-operating with international regimes, but more than this, it is beginning to actively participate and to use its voice in international affairs, going beyond mere adherence and demonstrating a willingness and desire to cooperate and engage with the existing international system, in line with neoliberalinstitutionalist ideas.

Chan (2008), suggests that China has moved away from its traditional realist outlook, which was markedly ‘state-centric and self-centred strategic realism,’ towards a ‘more liberal pragmatic Realpolitik in its foreign policy.’ (Chan 2008: 170) This indicates that China has
moved away from its relatively hard line, realist paradigm, as it has begun to see the potential benefit of deeper engagement and co-operation in world affairs. Essentially pragmatic concerns have come to outweigh the ideological paradigm, which dominated China’s foreign policy in the Maoist era. It has become clear to the Chinese leadership that they have more to gain from working within the existing system, and in cooperating with other states in that system, to work towards, ‘common grounds and solutions,’ which Chan describes as ‘win-win solutions that would be beneficial to all parties concerned,’ which demonstrates a clear neoliberal attitude to participating in international regimes. (2008: 170)

There is much quantifiable evidence to suggest that China is increasingly engaging with the international system and acting as a ‘responsible’ or ‘normal’ power within that system. What can however be questioned is ‘the degree of mutual acceptance and identification between China on the one hand and other major countries, international organisations, and transnational NGOs on the other.’ (Wang 2010: 206) This suggests that China is playing its part in the system, but it is unclear to what extent it is identifying with and absorbing the culture and norms of that system, which would make it a status quo power, in line with social constructivist theory. An important question therefore is does China internalise ‘ideas and practices’ or ‘adopt tactically just to advance its national interests.’ (Chan 2006: 207) Tactical adaptation would suggest that China is merely using regimes as a forum in which to advance its power and protect its national interests, which are realist notions, thus suggesting that China is not a status quo power but a revisionist one. This paper will seek to try and answer this question.

Examples of China’s non-compliance and resistance to certain treaties and obligations can be used to demonstrate its ‘threat’ to the current system and lack of resolve to comply with its norms and rules, regarding it as a revisionist power. However a far more persuasive argument suggests that it does sometimes fail to cooperate, but not because it is a revisionist power. Instead China’s unique position as a rising power in an international system dominated by international institutions and regimes, coupled with its own domestic problems and the realities of its status as a developing country, can sometimes create a clash between its own national interests and those of the international system. Patrick (2010), argues that such ‘emerging countries wrestle with conflicting identities.’ He suggests that they simultaneously ‘seek a louder voice in global affairs,’ whilst asserting their rights as developing countries, remaining ‘committed to alleviating poverty within their own borders. Thus, they resist
global initiatives that would hamper their domestic growth.’ (48) Chan (2006) supports this idea as he refers to China’s compliance in global affairs as ‘satisfactory to good given the difficulties that it faces in its economic, social and political transitions...’ Chan goes on to suggest that China’s level of compliance is ‘no worse’ than other developing countries at a similar stage of development. (2006: 206)

Lanteigne (2005) suggests that China has increasingly adopted a multilateral approach to foreign policy and is using this as a tool, to aid the advancement of its state power. He suggests that China is rising in a unique situation, which is very different to the great powers of the past; an international system dominated by international regimes and institutions. It is using engagement with these regimes and institutions to expand its power, and gain a greater voice and influence globally. (1-2) Basically China is taking a ‘path to greater power acquisition, via the international system.’ and institutions, as opposed to using hard power to expand its power and influence as the rising great powers of the past did. (1)

It can also be argued that by using the international system as a ‘path to great power,’ China is trying to avoid being seen as a threat and to limit the security dilemma created, by its growing power and influence for, other nations. This is undoubtedly an important consideration for the Chinese government, as if other countries perceive China as a threat, they might actively try to constrain and limit this power, or seek comparable power, in order to balance against that of China. Wang makes this point surmising that, ‘China’s multilateral diplomacy is mainly motivated by instrumental considerations. It is perceived as a more-effective and less-alarming way to advance China’s national interest and project China’s influence.’ (Wang 2005: 188) This suggests that engaging with the international system, is a way of advancing China’s power and interests without perturbing other nations. These ideas do suggest that China is seeking greater power and influence, but that it is working towards this within the existing system. Therefore in the future, perhaps, China is seeking to bring about change and play a greater role, but at present it is merely negotiating its rise by engaging with the current system and adhering as far as possible with its norms, meaning that it is not a revisionist power and for the time being at least, a status quo one.

These ideas and theories will now be applied to the three case studies seeking to assess China’s behaviour in each regime and ultimately to determine whether it acts as a status quo or revisionist power.
1. China’s behaviour in the global trade regime: working within the status quo.

China’s role and behaviour in the global trade regime will now be examined and it will be shown that within this regime it generally works within the status quo, as a cooperative power. In order to do this, it will look firstly at China’s accession to the World Trade Organisation (hereafter WTO), which forms the basis of the global trade regime. China joined the WTO in December 2001, after a long and somewhat difficult accession process spanning fifteen years. (Lanteigne 2005: 33) The section will show that China was willing to make significant sacrifices and changes in order to facilitate its accession. It will then look at China’s behaviour within the WTO since 2001, and show that it has acted in accordance with the norms of the regime and instituted the necessary reforms, sometimes at great cost to itself. It will suggest that whilst at times China may have questioned decisions and initiatives and given voice to the complaints and misgivings of the developing world, it has generally worked within the status quo and not pushed issues too far.

China’s changing attitude to economic cooperation.

China’s accession to the WTO was by no means a simple process and it required China to commit to a huge amount of change and reform in order to meet the requirements of WTO membership and adhere to the norms of the regime. Chan suggests that, ‘Never in the history of the world has a country committed so much to change, largely on a voluntary basis, as China has done to adhere to the rules of the World Trade Organisation.’ (2006: 79) There are numerous examples demonstrating the far reaching changes China committed to in order to become eligible to join the WTO. One such example is the fact that in order to bring itself into line with the rules and norms of the WTO, China needed to implement a large amount of new legislation and law reform exemplified by the fact that the government initiated an ‘extensive clean-up of its existing legal system.’ As a result since 2000, ‘30 ministries have cleaned up 2300 laws and regulations, decided to repeal 830 and proposed amendments to 325.’ (Yongtu 2002: 27) Chan suggests that China’s accession to the WTO can be seen to represent a ‘milestone in its global behaviour- from one based mainly on power and ideology to one based largely on commonly accepted rules.’ (Chan 2006: 80) This suggests that China’s accession to the WTO demonstrated a change in its attitude to international regimes, from a largely realist outlook to one more fitting with neoliberal ideas about regimes.
Compromising sovereignty and national interest

China’s motives for joining the WTO have been questioned, however it is problematic to argue that China is merely adapting tactically, joining the WTO out of realist preoccupations with relative gains and isolation avoidance. This is because China has been willing to accept what can be seen as somewhat harsh terms of admission, requiring it to compromise its sovereignty and putting it in a weakened position relative to other states. China would previously have been unwilling to accept such costs, in line with its resolute realist outlook on International Relations described by scholars such as Christensen. (1996: 37) These costs are exemplified by what Magarinos and Sercovich refer to as, ‘China’s key concessions.’ (2002: 10) Such concessions are extensive, however there are some, which stand out as particularly significant and potentially detrimental. These demonstrate China’s pliability and the fact that, 

Not only has China made sweeping concessions to the international community during its multilateral and bilateral negotiations, it has taken unprecedented steps to renegotiate the terms of its sovereignty. (Kent 2002: 355)

One such example comes in the ‘product-specific safeguards,’ agreement. This is designed to ‘counter market disruption from a possible surge of imports from China.’ Under this agreement there is a provision allowing ‘unilateral restrictions’ to be ‘imposed provided that prior consultation procedures fail.’ (Magarinos and Sercovich 2002: 13) Such measures are described as unprecedented, having never previously been applied to countries wishing to join the WTO and have the potential ‘to constrain China’s ability to increase world export market shares.’ (Magarinos and Sercovich 2002: 14) Consequently China can be seen to have accepted potentially detrimental terms of admission.

China also compromised its sovereignty by enforcing the ‘WTO Understanding,’ which requires ‘national judicial systems’ to ‘act in compliance with international treaty obligations and norms.’ This means that these international obligations and norms supersede ‘China’s own domestic judicial decisions and practices,’ demonstrating that it has compromised its sovereignty and accepted the norms of the regime in place of its own. (Kent 2007: 235)
Gains that outweigh loses

China’s decision to join the WTO can be seen to have reflected its ‘cost benefit analysis,’ deciding to accept the short term costs, with increased foreign competition and the negative impact on the country’s state owned enterprises being two examples, sacrificing some of its power and prestige, believing that these would be mitigated by longer term gains. (Kent 2007: 239) The longer term gains resulting from China’s accession are thought to be both in the economic and political realms. Membership will raise its GDP ‘by about 2 per cent, going by the most optimistic estimates.’ They also suggest that it will ‘expand its global reach for resources and markets; secure its place as a major power in the international community; and create a favourable environment for an eventual peaceful unification for Taiwan.’ (Ching and Ching 2003: 181) Essentially WTO membership offers opportunities, which offset, if not mitigate entirely the potential losses and risks involved. This demonstrates that ‘where it hopes to gain more, China is prepared to give more.’ (Kent 2007: 239) China can be seen to have come to realise that in order to meet its national goal of economic development and growth, it needs to work with other states as a status quo power, in line with previously discussed neoliberal ideas. By joining the WTO and making a number of sacrifices to do so, China was placing neoliberal concerns of economic growth and social security higher on the agenda than the realist preoccupations with power and prestige.

A measured approach to the WTO since 2001

China’s behaviour in the WTO since 2001 has been viewed differently by different scholars and interested parties, however this paper would argue that overall it has taken a measured approach to the WTO and worked within the acceptable norms of behaviour as a status quo power. Prior to China’s accession ‘the question was often raised in Washington and elsewhere, as to whether China would become a “revisionist power” in the WTO, attempting to change the rules and challenge the norm by which it operated.’ (Pearson 2003: 155) In 2005 the U.S Trade Representative Report to Congress, suggested that there were a number of areas where China was failing to meet its WTO obligations and commitments. It pointed to China’s failure to fully ‘embrace the key WTO principles of market access, non-discrimination and national treatment…’ (Kent 2007: 237) This could be used to argue that China is not acting as a status quo power in the regime, however it seems to be a misleading
and somewhat unfair depiction. China’s lack of compliance is not a deliberate contravention of the norms and agreements of the WTO, but can alternatively be explained in terms of its lack of capacity. Kent (2007) refers to the ‘breadth of China’s commitments,’ as compared to that of other developing countries, to demonstrate that perhaps the fact that it has committed to such far reaching change explains its inability to complete all the necessary measures to abide by all the rules at present. (238) Therefore China is not deliberately contravening its commitments and the norms. For example Chan refers to the ‘challenge’ of creating ‘a legal system compatible with the WTO,’ because of the basic nature of China’s existing legal system which may not be up to task and able to meet the ‘standard of responsibility of a normal state and to the compliance standard expected in international trade rules.’ (Chan 2006: 102)

China clearly wants to work within the norms of the WTO or it would surely not have committed to so much in its accession including reviews of its implementation and compliance such as the Transitional Review Mechanism, which supervises and reviews its behaviour. In spite of a number of problems China did in fact pass its annual TRM review in 2003 and given time its seems that it will try to make good on all of its commitments. (Kent 2007: 237) Pearson argues that China is acting in accordance with the rules, norms and principles of the global trade regime as a largely ‘cooperative’ power in the WTO and not looking for radical change, thus suggesting that it is acting as a status quo power. (2003: 155)

This suggests that China may at times offer resistance to certain measures or ideas, but that it does so within the bounds of acceptable behaviour.

**Working within the norms of acceptable behaviour**

China has faced criticism for its behaviour in the WTO, for example at the 2003 Cancun Ministerial Meeting. This meeting was marked by disputes between the developed and developing economy members, represented by the group of 22 (G-22), a coalition of emerging markets. China aligned itself with the G-22 and was one of the significant voices within the group along with Brazil and India. The meeting failed to make any real progress ending in deadlock between developed and developing countries over agriculture, specifically cotton trading, and a number of regulatory issues, the so called ‘Singapore issues’, which included regulation of investment, competition, trade facilitation and transparency.
Voices in the US regarded China’s alignment with the G-22 as negative and a demonstration that China would seek to bring about change and reshape the agenda of the WTO, in effect acting as a revisionist power as. (Pearson 2003: 155) However China did not lead the group and can actually be seen to have acted, as it had consistently indicated its intention to do, as ‘a bridge’ between developing and developed countries. (Pearson 2003: 158) China merely lent “its support” to the agenda and did not “lead or attempt, in rhetoric, to make the discussions more vituperative.” (Pearson 2003: 157) Pearson made the important point that China’s position at the meeting may not have aligned with that of the U.S. but that ‘we must be careful not to conflate the notion of “cooperative behaviour” with “adherence to the agenda of the United States.’ Consequently China did not contravene any norms of the organisation or act untowardly “…its actions were well within the scope of legitimate actions in the WTO- they did not breach dominant accepted norms.” (Pearson 2003: 158) China was actually praised by some for not going too far and using a “restrained approach in advocating developing area issues.” (Lanteigne 2005: 54) Lanteigne suggests that this demonstrated that China had ‘adjusted very quickly to its role within the WTO.’ (54) China can therefore be seen to be working within the norms of the regime to further both its own, and the interests of, developing countries. In this way it can be argued to be acting as a status quo power and not threatening the existing system.

**China as a ‘rising power’**

China’s role in the WTO can be described as a ‘bridge,’ between the developing and developed world due to its unique position as a ‘rising power.’ A rising power is an emerging country, which is increasingly important both economically and politically and whose importance to the international system and within the international order is ever growing. Typically a rising power is still developing and is confronted with great social and economic challenges. The sheer size of China alone dictates that it will effectively continue to be a developing country for many more years. ‘This dual identity can sometimes allow rising powers to bridge North-South divides.’ (Patrick 2010: 48) Patrick argues that such ‘emerging countries wrestle with conflicting identities.’ He suggests that they simultaneously ‘seek a louder voice in global affairs,’ whilst asserting their rights as developing countries, remaining ‘committed to alleviating poverty within their own borders. Thus, they resist global initiatives that would hamper their domestic growth.’ (48) This idea can be used to explain why China
has at times resisted certain initiatives within the WTO, such as the ‘Singapore issues,’ which led to deadlock of the Doha Round in Cancun. China aligned itself with the developing countries, in order to prevent the institution of rules and regulations, which would have had negative ramifications for it economically and were thus not in its national interest as they called for greater regulation which could potentially make trade more difficult to conduct and costly for China at its current stage of development. This does not demonstrate that it is a revisionist power, but rather a developing country and rising power seeking to protect its own unique interests.

**Conclusion**

China is genuinely internalising the norms of the global trade regime, demonstrated by the sheer amount of changes and reforms it has instituted, in order to bring itself into line with these norms and adhere to its obligations as a WTO member. China has also been willing to renegotiate its sovereignty by making compromises and concessions and accepting the toughest terms of admission of any prospective WTO member. Whilst there have been issues of non-compliance, it seems that these originate more from a lack of capacity to uphold the laws and rules, which have been instituted and the sheer scale of reforms required, rather than a deliberate contravention. Such issues are a reminder of China’s complex identity as a rising power and should be recognised as such, rather than as evidence of revisionism. China can thus be argued to be doing the best it can and the level of commitment that it has demonstrated should be taken as evidence of its intentions to work within the regime’s norms and principles, as a status quo power. However in the future, there is the potential for problems to arise, as when it institutes some of the ‘more painful reforms,’ it may begin to encounter domestic difficulties with its national interests no longer aligning with the norms and principles of the regime. As Chan (2006) suggests, “as volume of trade between China and the outside world grows, trade frictions are bound to increase.” (108) This is because realist considerations may once again come to outweigh the benefits of cooperation.

The next section will look at China’s behaviour in the environmental regime and demonstrate that in that regime China acts very differently, remaining fundamentally committed to realist considerations of its own national interests, which it is seemingly not willing to compromise.
2. China’s behaviour in the international environmental regime: realist considerations and revisionism.

China’s behaviour in the international environmental regime, in terms of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) conventions and treaties, will now be discussed, and it will be shown to take a largely revisionist stance, reflecting its realpolitik approach to foreign policy. China’s rapid development and economic growth over the last thirty years have brought it enormous success and benefit, but this growth has been fuelled by vast amounts of natural resources and Johnston (1998), suggests that ‘by the year 2020 China will be the world’s largest producer of CO2 gases, possibly accounting for as much as 25% of world emission.’ (555) China is therefore a crucial partner, in addressing international environmental problems. Without its cooperation, the ability of the environmental regime to achieve much headway in solving such problems will be severely limited.

*Increased participation post 1978*

China’s involvement in this regime has grown dramatically since 1978, when it was party to just six international treaties in this issue area.

By 2002, China had promulgated seven environmental protection laws and over 120 regulations, concluded, or acceded to, over 30 bilateral and multilateral environmental pacts, and formulated over 400 environmental standards. (Kent 2007: 153)

China has acceded to all the major elements of the regime and this engagement clearly demonstrates its recognition and acknowledgement of environmental problems internationally and domestically, but this does not necessarily translate into a more cooperative China, willing to address problems with binding, tougher actions and agreements.

*The limits of cooperation*

In this regime China can be seen to take an extremely strict stance on maintaining and upholding its sovereignty and specifically its sovereign right to develop and use its own resources as it pleases. (Johnston 1998: 568) China is unwilling to concede any of its sovereignty to the regime and thus will not agree to stronger more binding cooperation...
measures, which impose specific commitments on it. This is exemplified by its consistent refusal to accept any commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. China ratified the Framework Convention on Climate Change (FCCC) in 1993, but it was not willing to discuss the creation of an additional protocol, to assign developing countries specific emissions reduction commitments. (Economy 2001: 247) China’s behaviour in the international environmental regime can thus be seen to be firmly based in realism and not on neoliberal institutionalist ideas, which recognise the need to cooperate and render some sovereignty to a higher power, in order to solve a common problem. Therefore China can be seen to be taking a revisionist stance in the regime by refusing to make stronger commitments.

Brown and Hsing (2011), suggest that such refusal to engage in deeper forms of cooperation, demonstrates that China is still somewhat suspicious and defensive in this regard. (12) Such unwillingness can be seen as ‘defensive positionalism,’ in line with Greico’s theory (1990). China can be seen to be seeking to maintain its current position and not to lose any of its power. It does not wish to allow developed countries to impose restrictions on it, which might constrain its ability to catch up to them. This would in turn allow the developed countries to maintain their relative power advantage. This demonstrates a clear concern with relative over absolute gains since while embracing international cooperation on the environment could achieve absolute environmental gains thus mitigating the costs of environmental decline, China is instead more concerned with protecting its own power and capabilities relative to that of other states, in this case, developed states.

This was evidenced as recently as December 2009, at the Copenhagen UN Climate Change Conference. There were calls to create a new protocol to replace the 2002 Kyoto protocol, and effectively change the regimes enshrined principles and norms, i.e. ‘a legal distinction between rich nations, which must cut carbon emissions, and developing nations, for which action is not compulsory.’ (Brown and Hsing 2011: 12) China was eager to prevent a change, which it perceived as a ‘rich nation conspiracy,’ that would assign it and other developing countries, tangible targets, and thus limit and restrict their behaviour.

The Copenhagen Summit was fully indicative of China’s continued penchant for conspiracy strategies, victim mentality, fears of being bullied by developed countries, and a general defensive stance in a world that it views as dangerous and unfriendly. (Brown and Hsing 2011: 12)
Common but differentiated responsibility

China has shown further evidence of revisionist tendencies as it has endeavoured to bring about consensus within the developing world to actively oppose and prevent the implementation of such commitments. China can therefore be seen to participate in the regime not out of neoliberal, status quo maintaining objectives to solve common environmental problems, but instead out of realist, instrumental considerations, as through active participation it has been able to shape the norms and rules of the regime in line with its own national interests.

For example China has spearheaded the push by developing countries to create international environmental law, which recognises that environmental problems are common to and affect all countries, but that developed countries historically, bear most of the blame for such problems, and should consequently play a more significant role in efforts to address them. (Chan 2006: 162) China has also reiterated the need for developed countries to help them, to improve their indigenous capabilities to address global environmental problems, through capacity building and technology transfer. This is described as ‘common but differentiated responsibility,’ which China has been insistent on throughout its participation in the regime. (Chan 2006: 163) This is exemplified by the fact that in 1991, prior to the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development (UNCED), China arranged a meeting of 41 developing countries, which led to the Beijing Ministerial Declaration on the Environment and Development. The Declaration affirmed the need for international cooperation on the environment and it also demanded ‘financial assistance and asserted both the right to development and opposition to interference in the internal affairs of developing countries.’ (Ross 1999: 299)

China clearly sees deeper, more binding commitments as the sole obligation of developed nations, but the sheer scale of its growth, the related demand for resources and huge CO2 emissions, mean that this is increasingly a less viable position for it to maintain. ‘China has become far too big to stand on the sidelines-let alone to stand in the way-while others attempt to resolve these issues.’ (Christensen 2011: 54) China’s cooperation is crucial to the regime’s ability to address the issues, and as a result China can no longer hide behind the label of ‘developing country,’ and must take on more concrete commitments. Until it does this, it can be argued to be taking a revisionist stance, by refusing measures, which would help to
address the problems more successfully and thus demonstrating its lack of true resolve to address international environmental problems.

_A positive international image_

An additional instrumental consideration can be seen to come from China’s desire to promote a favourable image of itself on the international stage. Johnston suggests that, “China’s involvement in international institutions, in effect, has created an audience for Chinese diplomacy,” and that the potential ‘image effects of participation have altered the basic cost-benefit calculus that previously favoured a freeriding or low-commitment strategy.” (1998: 564) This suggests that it has become clear to China, that it must play a more proactive role in the regime, in order to not be seen negatively and as uncooperative by the international community. Whilst it was once more advantageous for it to do very little and not incur the costs of cooperation, there are now greater costs in terms of image, associated with such a strategy. “Once image concerns enter the calculus these can lead to more cooperative behaviour. (1998: 564) Johnston suggests that this has led China to favour instead ‘low cost high profile activism,’ which shows it making positive contributions to the regime and serves as ‘good public relations.’ (1998: 570) One example demonstrating this is the fact that prior to the visit of the international Olympic committee’s, screening committee to Beijing in the Spring of 2001, a number of emergency measures were instituted to address the issue of smog in the capital. “21,000 coal burning heating units were replaced with cleaner burning gas fired ones in factories, municipal offices and restaurants.” (Economy 2004: 192-3) This clearly demonstrates China’s concerns with how it is perceived by the international community as it made an effort to change its practices simply to avoid being seen as a polluted and environmentally degraded country. This suggests that perhaps the positive, cooperative things which China has engaged in are merely done out of image concerns, and do not actually demonstrate China absorbing the norms and ideas of the regime but just ‘adapting tactically,’ to avoid being perceived negatively.
A lack of understanding?

China can be seen not to have truly internalised the norms of the regime because it has not truly accepted the urgency to address global environmental problems, and can be seen to favour its ‘traditional attitude’ to the environment. This traditional attitude places environmental concerns below the promotion of rapid economic growth and has its roots in the policies of the Mao era, during which, China was seen to be ‘trading environmental health for economic growth’ and the catchphrase ‘First development, then environment,’ was widely promoted. (Economy 2005: 206) As social constructivism would suggest, there needs to be a base of shared knowledge and mutual understanding, in order for international cooperation to be achieved. According to this logic, it could be argued that China merely lacks the knowledge and ideas, which are necessary foundations to achieve much progress towards deeper international cooperation.

There has been a growth of environmental Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in China, which began with the emergence of Friends of Nature in 1994. The government allowed such NGOs to take shape, in the mid-1990s, as Economy (2004) suggests, they ‘opened popular participation in environmental protection.’ (129) According to Haas’s (1992) concept of epistemic communities, the growth of such NGOs provides groups, with relevant knowledge and understanding of environmental issues. The activities of such NGO’s can force the state to consider and reflect their views in policies. NGOs ‘open up the model of the unitary state actor,’ and create new dimensions to state decision making, with the ability to shape state’s behaviour in the environmental regime and even to ‘force compliance with treaty norms.’ (Chayes and Chayes 1998: 269-270)

However Economy (2004), suggests that these NGOs play only a limited role and have little impact on state behaviour. She suggests that instead they ‘offer a degree of political cover to an otherwise authoritarian government, signalling to the world that China does tolerate independent societal organization.’ (173) She goes on to suggest that whilst the government outwardly supports such organisations, they are limited in what they can do by a number of restrictions, on everything from registration to funding, which have, ‘constrained the number and range of their activities.’ (174) There is growing awareness of environmental issues in China which could be nurtured further, but the paramount concern of the government remains economic development and this continues to be given precedence over other issues. Economic growth has been the cornerstone of the ruling Chinese Communist Party’s
legitimacy, in that, their authoritarian, one party rule, has been able to maintain its authority for so long as a result of its ability to achieve such phenomenal growth. (Hsing and Brown 2011: 157)

…The Communist Party can endure as long as it continues to deliver the financial goods, but increased economic problems may serve to threaten party stability and its dominant role in governing China. (Lanteigne 2005: 56)

The Party is clearly worried that without this output legitimacy, it will not be able to sustain its hold on power and so it must try to maintain the impressive levels of growth, in order to protect its position and maintain social stability. Lanteigne suggests that the link ‘between economic performance and regime stability,’ was demonstrated in both Indonesia and Malaysia where long ruling leaders and regimes were ousted in the aftermath of the Asian Financial Crisis. (2005: 56) Consequently we see that China is increasingly aware of international environmental issues, but that considerations of national interest prevent it from taking a more proactive role with the will to accept more binding, stronger commitments which might entail economic costs.

Conclusion

China has acceded to nearly all the relevant treaties, conventions and agreements and built domestic environmental institutions and plans to address environmental problems domestically. There has also been a growth of domestic NGO’s and increasing awareness of environmental problems. These have all been positive developments and demonstrate that China has made efforts to address environmental issues within the framework of the international environmental regime. However this willingness to work within the regime is conditioned by its strict interpretation of sovereignty and eagerness to protect and defend its national interests. These considerations limit its cooperation to relatively weak commitments, which are non-binding. China’s participation can be seen to be a tactical adaptation, as through limited engagement with the regime it can promote a favourable image of itself as a responsible and compliant member of the international community.

In the future it seems that China may well take a more cooperative stance in the regime. As environmental problems begin to have economic costs, it seems that China will become more compliant and willing to accept more binding agreements, because the costs of not addressing
such problems may come to outweigh the cost of cooperation. ‘China’s environmental problems now have the potential to bring China to its knees economically.’ (Economy 2004: 25) Economy estimates that environmental pollution costs China between 8 and 12% of its GDP annually. (2004: 25) Such costs will begin to alter the cost benefit calculus once more tipping the scales in favour of accepting higher costs, which will bring higher payoffs as they address costly environmental problems.

The next section will demonstrate a more complex case of China’s behaviour, in a regime concerned with military security, which can be seen to fluctuate between status quo maintenance and revisionism and is shaped by a number of external influences rather than mere realist considerations of national interest.

3. China’s behaviour in the Nuclear Non-proliferation regime: from revisionism to status quo to revisionism?

This section seeks to provide an example of China’s behaviour in a regime concerned with issues of military-security, in this case the nuclear non-proliferation regime. This section does not have scope to look at all the elements of this regime, and so it will focus on China’s commitments regarding its own nuclear capabilities. It will argue that China’s behaviour in the regime has evolved over time from being wholly revisionist to a more moderate status quo maintaining stance. However it can still revert to revisionism when it feels threatened or at a potential security disadvantage. Consequently Gill (2001), has characterised China’s behaviour in the regime as ‘Two Steps forward, One Back.’ (258) This section will describe and assess China’s changing behaviour and try to account for it in terms of the relevant strands of regime theory.

China’s evolving participation

China is one of the five declared nuclear weapons states (NWS) and over the last thirty years has embarked on a program of military modernisation, of both its conventional and nuclear forces. (Swaine and Johnston 1999: 90) As such, China is a crucial player in this regime.
Prior to the mid-1990s China was not a member of this regime, acting outside of its norms, not bound by any agreements or commitments in this issue area. When China re-joined the international system in the late 1970s it was still engaged in the modernisation of its military and seeking to further develop an indigenous nuclear capability which it regarded as an important way to maintain and ensure its security and survival. In the early 1980s, China allied itself with developing countries in order to protect its own right, and that of other developing countries, to continue to develop nuclear weapons. (Kent 2007: 73) China was therefore acting in a revisionist way as it was unwilling to engage in international cooperation.

It was not until the 1990s that China was ready to accept restrictions on its behaviour. In 1992 China acceded to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), marking a change in its behaviour. The NPT can be seen as the cornerstone of the nuclear non-proliferation regime. (Chan 2006: 127) By acceding to this treaty, China accepted and embraced the norms of the regime and made a commitment to work towards disarmament. Kent suggests that ‘western observers also saw this as a turning point’ in China’s position on arms control. (Kent 2007: 78) China then signed the Complete Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) in 1996, another landmark in its behaviour as the ‘first time China had agreed multilaterally to place effective limits on its weapons capabilities.’ (Gill 2001: 261) In January 1999, it also signed an additional protocol within the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), allowing it to conduct, ‘more intrusive inspection’ into, ‘China’s civilian nuclear program.’ This demonstrated China actively trying to improve transparency and openness regarding its capabilities and compromising its sovereignty to do so. By March 2002 China had implemented the necessary domestic legal procedures to comply with the protocol, and was the first of five NWS to do so, demonstrating a clear determination to comply with the norms of the regime and accept costs from its cooperation. (Chan 2006: 129) All of this represented a significant shift in China’s behaviour and brought it gradually into line with the norms of the regime and as a cooperative member of the regime, effectively a status quo power.

**Tactical adaptation?**

The dramatic change in China’s behaviour can be seen to have been a tactical adaptation, indicating that it did not come out of a realisation of the need to address the issue of nuclear
proliferation or work towards disarmament in line with neoliberal institutionalism. But out of realist instrumental calculations as the costs of acting as a revisionist power were becoming too great. This can be seen in its decision to stop nuclear testing, ratifying the CTBT in 1996, doing so out of instrumental calculations in order to avoid economic and image costs. During 1994/5 China continued to test weapons, despite other NWS ceasing to do so with mounting pressure for China to follow suit. In 1995 China actively opposed a UN General Assembly resolution, which ‘urged the halt of nuclear testing.’ In May 1995, China conducted another test and Japan responded by, ‘suspending the grant portion of its Chinese foreign aid program.’ (Gill 2001: 262) Thus China began to incur economic costs and was perceived as a threat by its neighbours and the West. Following a final test in 1996 China announced an end to its testing representing its transition to a ‘cooperative member of the disarmament community.’ (81) Whilst this was a positive step it was not predicated on neoliberal concepts of the recognition of the need to work together with other states to address a common problem, in this case the issue of collective security.

However, the decision rested primarily on a difficult calculation of constrained Chinese national interests rather than a powerful commitment to the international non-proliferation and disarmament norms embodied in the treaty. (Gill 2001: 263)

This is yet another example of China’s cost-benefit analysis and Samuel Kim’s idea of the mini-maxi principle. Rather than be seen as a threat by the international community China committed to change but only to a minimum level in order to gain the maximum amount of benefit.

**Resisting the norm of transparency**

China remains reluctant to adopt a policy of greater transparency with regard to its nuclear arsenal and military capabilities leading it to be referred to as a revisionist power. As Swaine and Johnston state, “its military budget and strategic plans remain opaque to the rest of the world.” Consequently there is a significant degree of uncertainty surrounding its nuclear capabilities fuelling a security dilemma for other states. “Uncertainty exists about China’s nuclear weapons capabilities, its strategic intentions and the long-term goals of its nuclear modernization program.” (Swaine and Johnston 1999: 91) “The baseline Chinese view of military transparency runs contrary to that of the West…” Western countries regard
transparency, as an important part of the regime, helping to reduce uncertainty, and the potentially destabilising dynamic of the security dilemma. China conversely “emphasise the potentially destabilising effect that transparency can generate in certain circumstances.” (Gill 2001: 275) “In other words, transparency is not universally beneficial or applicable, particularly as it may expose the vulnerabilities of weak nations.” This clash of ideas renders cooperation difficult to achieve regarding transparency, in line with social constructivist notions of the need for shared knowledge and ideas to facilitate cooperation. (Gill 2001: 275)

This aversion to transparency was demonstrated during China’s accession to the CTBT, where the level required was a major sticking point in the negotiations. China “objected to the use of national technical means (NTM) of verification of the CTBT.” (Gill 2001: 260) NTM is states using domestic means of verification techniques including, “satellites, technical measures, or other forms of surveillance, such as espionage” in order to verify the compliance of other states who are party to the treaty. China saw this as being tantamount to spying and thus an infringement of its national sovereignty. They therefore called for an alternative “international monitoring system that would be open to all parties to the treaty.” China was only willing to ratify the CTBT after this change was instituted. (Gill 2001: 260) China has also ‘resisted calls to reveal even basic information on its strategic weapons and fissile material stockpile.’ (Gill 2001: 275)

China has however recognised the need to increase transparency and has implemented measures to try to achieve this. Gill (2001) suggests that China’s military transparency has, ‘increased since the 1990s’ and ‘these developments suggest that in the face of widespread international practice and norms China will be more forthcoming, although still within conservative limits.’ (Gill 2001: 275) For example, it has published eight white papers on arms control and defence areas and out of these the 2004 and 2005 papers were considered as demonstrating a particularly significant improvement in transparency. (Kent 2007: 94) This demonstrates that China may have joined the regime and relevant treaties out of instrumental calculations. However as Kent suggests concerns about reputation and image and can be seen to have helped China to undergo a process of learning and socialisation and to come to see the real benefits that could be achieved through deeper cooperation and fostering collective security. (2007: 68) It is therefore trying to bring itself into line with the norms as far as possible without compromising its own beliefs and interests too far.
A step back

China has clearly come to recognise the need to halt the spread of nuclear weapons demonstrated by its increased cooperation with the regime, signing and complying with the major treaties and agreements. However most recently China has been seen to taken a ‘step back’ somewhat retreating from cooperation. (Gill 2001) This suggests that China has lost some of its faith in the regime and could revert to its revisionist tendencies, however it can be argued to be being forced to do so. China’s engagement and cooperation with the nuclear non-proliferation regime can be seen to be heavily influenced by how it perceives the strategic environment around it. (Kent 2007: 97) This can explain its stance at any given time, either allowing it to adopt a status quo orientation or pushing it to act in a revisionist manner. During the Cold War it developed nuclear capabilities to protect its own position and provide itself with a strong deterrent. Following the end of the Cold War, China felt less threatened and more secure therefore becoming more willing to cooperate with the regime. Its attitude shifted again in the early 2000s as it perceived America’s increasing use of unilateral decision-making as a worrying trend. This means that China’s behaviour may shift once more as, ‘…its continued compliance and cooperation with regime norms, principles, and rules remain dependent on the maintenance of a favourable strategic environment and on the continuing reciprocal compliance of other states. (Kent 2007: 102)

China may have lost some of its faith in the regime, however this is because for cooperation to be successful and viable it needs to be reciprocal. (Kent 2007: 87) Krasner refers to Jervis’s idea of reciprocation suggesting that ‘when states accept reciprocity they will sacrifice short-term interests with the expectation that other actors will reciprocate in the future, even if they are under no specific obligation to do so.’ (1995: 3) States cooperate with international regimes by accepting constraints which others are also committed to uphold. However if another state defects from cooperation, it leaves the cooperating state vulnerable. This has become problematic in this regime, as America has increasingly failed to wholly cooperate. Chan refers to a speech made by the Ambassador for Disarmament Affairs of China referring to ‘setbacks in arms control in recent times,’ which cited a number of things mostly done by America, at the Conference on Disarmament in 2002. (Chan 2006: 137) Examples of this are America’s abrogation of the Anti Ballistic Missile Treaty announced on June 13th, 2002 and its failure to ratify the CTBT, which was rejected by the senate in 1999. (Gill 2001: 261) China can be seen to have come to the,
reluctant conclusion that widely shared norms of international behaviour, an assumption of interdependence, and even the fragile authority of International rules were under threat, paradoxically from one of the original architects and strongest champions of the International legal system. (Kent 2007: 88)

Chan uses this point to argue that China can be seen to be increasingly interested in upholding the status quo, thus acting as a status quo power whilst America ‘moves in the opposite direction, leaving behind step by step the present status quo in pursuit of its absolute national security.’ (2005: 141) This suggests that as China increasingly embraces the norms and logics of common and collective security, America is progressively more concerned with its own security and interests and is abandoning certain elements of the regime. Consequently China’s ‘step back,’ demonstrated for example by the fact that it has still not ratified the CTBT, can not be seen as evidence of its revisionism and unwillingness to comply, but merely as a response to American unilateralism and the threat of an America no longer constrained by the norms of the regime. Gill (2001) states that ‘the Chinese leadership claims it will ratify the treaty, but may await U.S. ratification.’ (261)

Conclusion

China’s behaviour in the nuclear non-proliferation regime has evolved from being revisionist to largely working within the status quo. Initially this change may have taken place out of instrumental calculations, as China wanted to avoid the costs associated with remaining outside the regime. However it has undergone a process of learning and socialisation through its participation and come to see the benefits of truly working within the norms of the regime. When other powers are working within the existing status quo China is seemingly happy to do so. It is no longer a revisionist power and threat to the nuclear non-proliferation regime, but it does still possess a heightened sense of insecurity and so when it sees other powers especially America acting in a revisionist manner it seems to see no option than to do so as well, out of realist concerns for its own security and survival. Consequently its behaviour shifts in response to external changes and if it feels threatened or disadvantaged in terms of security it will revert to revisionism once more.
4. Drawing Conclusions

The three case studies have demonstrated a level of variation in Chinese behaviour in regimes covering different issue areas. In general terms China has been shown to be receptive to the norms and rules of the global trade regime and to have seen the benefits of cooperation in a world where interdependence is an important feature of the international system, thus acting in accordance with neoliberal institutionalist ideas of international cooperation. In the international environmental regime China was seen to be eager to defend its national interests and to protect its right to develop and thus as favouring a realist approach to cooperation, limiting its participation and being resistant to any costs of cooperation. China’s behaviour in the nuclear non-proliferation regime demonstrated a more complex example, as it moved between realist protection of its national interests and a more neoliberal institutionalist approach, which recognised the mutual benefits, which could be achieved through cooperation and the maintenance of collective security.

Whilst there were overall differences in its behaviour there were also a number of similarities and consistencies. All three cases demonstrated the importance of ideas, knowledge and culture in shaping China’s behaviour in international regimes in line with social constructivist theory. Attitudes and ideas are changing in China with growth in the number of NGOs and other forms of political activism, which help promote greater awareness of international issues, pushing the government to engage in deeper forms of international cooperation to solve such problems. However the realities of the Chinese state’s one party authoritarian rule limit these influences meaning that traditional attitudes to sovereignty and security favouring realism are still preferred. Domestic problems such as marked inequalities and issues of domestic cohesion remain key challenges for the Chinese state, influencing and constraining decision makers, preventing them from accepting forms of international cooperation, which could cost China too high a price. An example is the environmental regime where China remains unwilling to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, as this would require them to invest in cleaner energy production methods, and restrict the activities of businesses and enterprises. In the global trade regime it was also noted that as China begins to see higher costs from its participation it may become less cooperative.

In all three case studies China was seen at times to fall back on the argument that it is a developing country aligning itself with developing states. It does seem reasonable for China
to seek greater recognition of its specific national interests, which result from its paradoxical position as an emerging great power coupled with being a very large country, with considerable domestic problems to overcome. Therefore its leadership regarding the concerns of the developing world and insistence on its interests being reflected in international regimes are legitimate. China does have capacity building issues and problems enforcing domestic legislation to bring it into line with the norms of the different regimes as a result of its status as a developing country, and where these are the cause of China’s defection from cooperation, it is a relevant justification. However this trend can arguably demonstrate China’s revisionism, as this insistence on its rights and unique interests can be seen as an excuse to legitimise its unwillingness to cooperate and avoid commitments that it simply does not want to make. This is especially evident in the environmental regime and is a less acceptable stance for China to take, as it is now, ‘too big to fall back on its developing-country status as a way to resist making sacrifices to stabilise the world economy and mitigate environmental damage.’ (Christensen 2010: 57)

Economy makes the point that in order for China to comply with a regime, “it must not hinder China’s economic development, infringe on its sovereignty…or permit the advanced industrialized countries to further the already unequal technological or economic advantages they enjoy…” (2001: 251) Such concerns were evidenced in different ways in all three regimes. The key issue in the environmental regime is its potential restriction on economic development. In the nuclear non-proliferation regime China is primarily concerned with infringements on its sovereignty and the idea that NWS, especially America could defect from cooperation and potentially advance their capabilities beyond those of China. In the global trade regime these stipulations were upheld less stringently, but still played a role in negotiations and decision-making. Clearly these considerations show that China has not truly embraced neoliberal institutionalism, as its cooperation and behaviour in international regimes is limited by a number of provisos and stipulations, which China is unwilling to compromise, unless such compromises would generate benefits, which would outweigh the related costs. China is still an inherently realist state, but the three case studies have demonstrated that at least in terms of international economic cooperation China has come to recognise the imperatives of ‘complex interdependence,’ and thus the need to cooperate with other states, in order to sustain its impressive levels of economic growth. (Keohane and Nye 1989: 24) This economic imperative to cooperate, could then feed into other issue areas and
lead China to become more cooperative in those too. “Politics and economics not just strictly technological and military considerations- will play an increasingly important role in the fields of non-proliferation and arms control as China becomes increasingly enmeshed in a lengthening list of international and domestic commitments.” (Gill 2001: 284) Participation in economic issue regimes could help China to see the wider benefits of cooperation in other issue areas, as there are often elements of other issues incorporated. In its participation in the WTO for example, China may increasingly have to abide by rules concerning environmental best practices, which will help to socialise China and bring it more into line with the norms of the international environmental regime. (Chan 2006: 164)

This paper would suggest that since re-joining the international system thirty years ago, China has undergone a process of learning and socialisation through participation and its attitude and behaviour has been changed and shaped to favour a status quo orientation. It suggests that China does want to be a status quo power, but in an international system which recognises its domestic realities and national interests yet simultaneously acknowledges its rising power and status and ascribes it the appropriate measure of respect. ‘…Erosion of sovereignty and international cooperation are not inherently contradictory for China; being treated respectfully as an equal partner is just as important. China is willing to “play the game” as long as it is involved in making the rules.” (Yang 2009: 13) China has clearly come to see the benefits of cooperation but does not want the rules and norms to be dictated to it and based only on the interests of developed, western countries. There has been much evidence of China trying to give the voice of developing countries greater status and recognition in international regimes. This can be seen as revisionist as it calls for a change to the existing international system. However the current system and international order is clearly dominated by western, predominantly American, ideas and norms which are increasingly inappropriate in a world where countries such as China are becoming increasingly powerful and successful, using their own models of development and approaches to government. China is trying to fit into this system but can only do so much without jeopardising its own future growth and success. If its unique interests were better, or at least equally, represented with those of developed countries this paper suggests that China would be willing to cooperate and act as a wholly revisionist power. This was demonstrated by the fact that when the gains offered by participation were relatively symmetrical China was willing to accept costs and cooperate with international regimes such as in the WTO and in the nuclear non-proliferation regime, in times of American compliance. This shows that
China has clearly embraced neoliberal notions of cooperation and working together for mutual gains, but it does remain primarily concerned with equality and fairness and will not accept costs unless other states accept equal levels of commitments and constraints. China’s behaviour is often looked at as if in a vacuum and thus unaffected by the behaviour of other states and this leads it to be perceived as revisionist, when in fact it is merely trying to work within the existing system in line with neoliberal institutionalist theory, but if others do not reciprocate then it is not a viable system.

China can still revert to revisionism when it feels threatened politically, militarily or economically and does still possess a heightened sense of insecurity, which is easily triggered when it feels unfairly treated or disadvantaged relative to other powers. However in order to appease such concerns China is not seeking a radical overhaul of the existing system. It merely wants to make it more relevant and representative of developing states concerns and interests within conservative bounds. In the future China’s behaviour may revert to revisionism as it reaches a sufficient level of development throughout its borders and feels ready and able to take on the reins of global leadership.

This paper has argued that China did initially cooperate with international regimes for instrumental considerations and was tactically adapting to ensure that it was not perceived as a threat or irresponsible power particularly in the environmental and nuclear non-proliferation regimes. However through participation it has absorbed some of the norms of these regimes particularly the global trade regime and it has come to recognise that it needs to be a part of the international system, to realise its aspirations and to support its national interest. Therefore its interests lie in participating in and upholding that system rendering it for the time being a status quo power.

References:


