China's Attitude to Multilateralism in International Economic Law and Governance: 
Challenges for the World Trading System

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I. INTRODUCTION

This paper argues that China’s attitude to multilateral trade is unclear. Moreover, China assumes little responsibility to maintain international order in global economic governance. In other words, China should hide less behind the status of a developing country and stand up to its own ambition to new leadership. For example, China seems to go against "traditional" powers (mainly the U.S.), and tends to focus on South-South regionalism.1 The results of the July 2008 World Trade Organization (WTO) ministerial conference, composed of a trade G-7,2 are evidence of this. At the ministerial, WTO members' latest attempt to salvage a deal in the Doha round broke down. Import-sensitive China and India were pitted against the U.S.'s demands for predictable market access for farm products.3

In addition, for most of the Cold War period, China "was not prepared to play entirely by the rules."4 By the 1990s, however, China had fully accepted the identity of statehood and the rights and duties implied by sovereignty.5 It accepted these pluralist rules at a time when the rules of the game were changing.6

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1 That said, according to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, as global indicators continue to reveal the breadth of the 2008 financial crisis, developing countries in general may soften the impact on their economies by increasing cooperation with other nations of the South. See Bridges Weekly Trade News Digest, “UN Urges Increased South-South Cooperation in Response to Crisis.” Vol. 13, No. 5, 12 February 2009.

2 This trade G-7 should not be confused with the finance G-7 representing the most industrialized nations in the world. The trade G-7 has replaced the so-called 'Quadrilateral Trade Ministers' Meeting' and is composed of the Quad plus China, India, and Brazil. Its purpose is to see how key trade and investment matters can be moved forward.


The dynamics of this changing order were driven by economic liberalization and the advance of liberal values and purposes including universal human rights. In 2005, then U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick, gave a speech entitled “Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility,” which focused on the rise of China’s international influence and the management of a Sino-U.S. great power relationship. Zoellick expressed anxiety about China’s remarkable economic growth and growing influence as well as uncertainties about how China will use its power. He said “[M]any countries hope China will pursue a peaceful rise, but none will bet their future on it.”

The idea of China as an international stakeholder has been reinforced by U.S. foreign practitioners and scholars in many documents and speeches related to U.S. foreign policy. For example, the 2006 U.S. National Security Strategy reaffirmed China’s international status as a global player and urged that “[China] must act as a responsible stakeholder that fulfills its obligations and works with the United States and others to advance the international system that has enabled its success.” It is therefore argued in this paper that it is necessary to pave the way for responsible multilateralism for the common goal of establishing peace, security, and prosperity in the 21st century.

The paper is divided into four parts. After the introduction, Part II deals with the criteria to be a global economic superpower, making the case that China is one of the three global economic superpowers today (the U.S. and the EU being the other two; the EU remains the world’s biggest economy). Part III examines China’s attitude toward multilateral trade, making the case for China’s preference for regionalism, and analyzes China’s position at the WTO. Part IV presents some concluding remarks.

II. A NEW GLOBAL ECONOMIC SUPERPOWER ON THE BLOCK

The establishment of the People’s Republic of China took place in 1949. Since then, not only has China undergone an extraordinary transformation domestically, but

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8 Ibid, pp. 3-4.
11 Bruno Simma proposes other goals, in addition to peace and security: solidarity between states at different levels of development; environmental health; and the protection of human rights. These are explained in more detail in Bruno Simma, „From Bilateralism to Community Interest“ 1994:vi Rec. des Cours, pp. 217-384 (Martinus Nijhoff Publ.: The Hague/Boston/London, 1997), at 236-243. See also Erika de Wet, “The International Constitutional Order,” 55 Int’l & Comp. L.Q. 51, 54-57 (2006) (describing the emergence of the international community as a process by which international and regional organizations as well as individuals were brought under the reach of international law that had formerly been reserved to states).