

Britain's foreign policy toward China 1997-2001

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In a book on human rights and international relations, the author nicely phrased how foreign policy officials generally view the issue of human rights: 'Taken in a foreign minister's baggage on a world tour, they might ... spoil the whole trip' (Vincent, 1986, p. 137). However, in his speech on Britain's foreign policy in which the start of a new conduct in international relations was announced, Foreign Secretary Robin Cook (1997a) claimed that 'the labour government does not accept that political values can be left behind when we check in our passports to travel on diplomatic business.'^[1]

In 1997, Britain saw the election of the New Labour government under Tony Blair with Robin Cook as Foreign Secretary. An important difference with the previous government was the adding of an ethical dimension to British foreign policy. Two months after the election, sovereignty over Hong Kong was transferred from the United Kingdom back to China. This created the potential for the New Labour government to build a more constructive relationship with China. British foreign policy was aimed at enhancing trade and investment opportunities in China while at the same time promoting political and social change, with special attention to human rights. Those two objectives might be seemingly contradictory (Breslin, 2004). China, arguably, is more likely to provide economic opportunities for Britain when not confronted with their human rights record. Promoting human rights could undermine the goal of enhancing commercial interaction, and therefore economic concerns may override political values. However, in this paper it is argued that they can in fact be reconcilable. A liberal analysis is made of UK-China relations under the New Labour government from 1997 until 2001. During this period Robin Cook served as Britain's Foreign Secretary and was largely responsible for the adoption and implementation of the ethical dimension of British foreign policy. Through economic interdependence and participation in international organizations, the United Kingdom and China have mutual interests in maintaining a strong partnership. The development of a successful partnership can be brought about as the United Kingdom pursues a policy of economic engagement. As China becomes entangled into the international community through this engagement, diplomatic dialogue and socializing Chinese political elites to the norms of democracy and human rights provide a way of promoting political and social change (Rath, 2006). Therefore, the following thesis statement is defended: Economic engagement with China serves Britain's commercial interests while it also allows the UK government to put human rights at the heart of British foreign policy toward China.

First, a brief description is provided of the development of a partnership between the United Kingdom and China. Second, their relationship is analyzed from a liberal perspective by focusing on economic interaction and international institutions, which both may help to promote liberal values such as the respect for human rights. Second, the ethical dimension for which Robin Cook advocated is discussed and its implications for British foreign policy toward China are investigated. Third, it is explained how the two foreign policy objectives regarding China can be achieved through economic engagement. Finally, in the conclusion the main findings of the paper are summarized.

Development of a strong partnership

Britain is almost certainly the EU-country with the most developed and deeply established relationship with China. The United Kingdom has been one of the first countries in the West to recognize the People's Republic of China in 1950. However, up until 1997, the issue of control over Hong Kong has frequently generated tensions between

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Britain and China. Since 1997, the relationship between the United Kingdom and China has become more friendly and has encountered less frictions. One factor in the development of a more successful relationship has been the election of Tony Blair's Labour Party in 1997, after the Conservatives had been in power for nearly two decades. The New Labour Party was motivated to intensify diplomatic dialogue with China. Another factor has been the return of sovereignty over Hong Kong to China, so that Hong Kong no longer presented a major issue in UK-China relations. In 1998, the two countries agreed to scale up their efforts of political and military dialogues and to cooperate in the attempt to bring about global peace and security (Wong, 2008). However, the relationship between the United Kingdom and China has mainly been characterized by economic interests. The United Kingdom has been among the largest European investors in China (Martins, 2005). In turn, Chinese investments in Europe have been largest in the United Kingdom and the United Kingdom has been one of the most important European trading partners of China. Therefore, there has been a mutual interest to sustain a peaceful relationship regarding trade and investment in order to protect their economic stakes in the other country. Indeed, the United Kingdom as well as China has emphasized the importance of developing and deepening a strong partnership (Sandschneider, 2002). This partnership is not only important for the attainment of commercial objectives, but also for the establishment of a successful dialogue on human rights.

Liberal analysis of the UK-China partnership

The partnership between the United Kingdom and China shows that states are, despite their self-interest, able to cooperate with each other and establish a peaceful relationship. This can be explained within a liberal framework that emphasizes transnational interactions characterized by economic interdependence and facilitated by international organizations. (Dunne, Kurki & Smith, 2010)

Liberal theory stresses the importance of interdependence between states (Doyle, 1983). Economic interaction may serve the self-interest of states while at the same time it allows for the development of mutual understanding and durable cooperation. Immanuel Kant argued that commercial exchange therefore served an economic as well as a political purpose: strengthening the national economy while maintaining a peaceful relationship. International organizations play an important role in facilitating this economic interaction. However, next to the goal of advancing economic interests, they also may serve to promote respect for human rights. The Kantian view on global affairs highlights an interdependent system of influences. In this system, economic interdependence requires international institutions and rules that allow states to predict each others actions and to build mutual trust. International organizations are increasingly involved in the promotion of democratic values. They are able to socialize political officials to international rules and norms of democracy (Dunne, Kurki & Smith, 2010). Hence, as Britain engages China through further developing their economic relationship, China becomes increasingly subjected to the rules and regulations of international organizations in the global system. Participation in these international organizations provide a way for Britain to establish diplomatic dialogue with China and to use social learning in order to bring about social and political change. Thus, transnational interactions may provide the link between the two objectives of advancing economic interests and giving special attention to human rights issues (Breslin, 2004).

Cook's ethical dimension and the third way

When Foreign Secretary Robin Cook came into office he argued that British foreign policy was to be driven by global security, prosperity, environmental concerns, and an 'ethical dimension'. This mission statement broke with the traditional course of Britain's conduct in foreign affairs. The most contentious aspect was the importance attributed to the ethical dimension. Skepticism arose concerning the compatibility of the ethical dimension and the goal of economic prosperity. It was thought that economic interests were very likely to be given priority and that they would override the promotion of human rights (Breslin, 2004).

In his speech about British foreign policy, Cook (1997a) highlighted the impact of internationalism on today's world affairs[2]. States are becoming increasingly interdependent through globalization of the economy and facilitated communication as a consequence of the information revolution. Hence, in this increasingly interconnected modern world, he argued that Britain should take moral responsibility for the way the country responds to foreign tragedies and affairs. As nation-states are becoming ever more interdependent, foreign policy should promote the same goals

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as the ones that are pursued as part of domestic policy. While Britain's national interest is defined by security, prosperity, and quality of life, it also includes the promotion of its own values. Hence, the United Kingdom also has a sense of purpose, which prescribes an ethical stance toward foreign policy (Smith, Hadfield & Dunne, 2008). Therefore, according to Cook (1997a), Britain should contribute to the promotion of peace and democracy throughout the world and gain international legitimacy for its actions. As argued by Cook, the image of Britain had to be based not on past or present military power, but on values of a self-assured, innovative, tolerant, and inclusive society. New Labour did not talk of threats to international security, but rather about the promotion of liberal values of democracy and people's diplomacy. In fact, as Cook explained the need for an ethical dimension, he stated that human rights would receive the central focus in British foreign policy. Furthermore, the process of conducting foreign policy had become more open as the British government allowed for a more active role of the media and promoted public debate (Wheeler & Dunne, 1998). Globalization has facilitated this openness as it has brought about a communication revolution in which people become more aware of the issues abroad and in which human rights organizations can mobilize public opinion and thereby pressure governments to take on duties beyond borders (Smith, Hadfield & Dunne, 2008). As noted by Wheeler and Dunne (1998), within liberal states, it has become increasingly difficult for state leaders to claim that human rights abroad are of no concern for them. Indeed, the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, an international independent body concerned with human security and state sovereignty, proposed a 'responsibility to protect' doctrine. In case a state fails to provide for human security of its citizens, the international community has to take responsibility. (Smith, Hadfield & Dunne, 2008) This doctrine is largely consistent with Cook's argument that Britain should promote respect for human rights in those places in the world where they are being violated, including China.

The ethical dimension in Britain's international relations was linked by Robin Cook to the idea of a 'third way' that was adopted by the government of Tony Blair. The third way served as a middle ground between the old left and the new right. Regarding Britain's foreign policy, the link of Cook between the ethical dimension and the third way focuses in particular on human rights diplomacy. The third way prescribes to the idea that pursuing the national interest need not oppose the promotion of human rights. Since the relationship between the United Kingdom and China is primarily based on economic interests rather than guided by security concerns or any other national interests, the third way in this case implies that enhancing commercial opportunities need not contradict the objective of promoting human rights (Wheeler & Dunne, 1998).

Economic engagement

According to Breslin (2004), British foreign policy towards China since 1997 has been founded on two objectives: developing profitable business opportunities for British companies and to bring about social and political change through the promotion of liberal values. As Foreign Secretary Cook advocated for the ethical dimension, he stated that more attention should be paid to human rights than was done by the previous government, but advanced the argument that it will be more effective to establish a dialogue with China rather than public confrontation. (Wheeler & Dunne, 1998) According to the new Labour government, engagement seemed the best implementation for realizing the two objectives of its foreign policy. This engagement would be characterized in particular by economic interaction (Breslin, 2004).

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office of the British government portrayed that expanding economic relations with China is the most effective way of integrating China into the international community while at the same time promoting UK commercial interests. China is not generally perceived as a threatening superpower that must be contained. Rather, British foreign policy toward China is mainly shaped by economic relations in which the United Kingdom engages China. The UK government has argued that engagement both promotes political and social reform in China and serves Britain's key business interests. Engaging China is meant to ultimately transform China into a liberal democracy, while at the same time enjoying the benefits of economic relations. Related to the engagement of China, two significant changes in Britain's foreign policy can be detected that have become ever more noticeable since 1997. First, within the British government, economic agencies are becoming increasingly important as there is a transfer of power from diplomatic agencies to economic agencies. This shows the belief in the importance of economic means for reaching the objectives of British foreign policy. Second, non-state economic actors become actively involved in promoting the goals of the government, while they continue to pursue their own private interests

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(Breslin, 2004).

Private sector companies in Britain fulfill many of the tasks of sustaining and developing economic relations with China (Martins, 2005). Private companies are not only important for Britain's economic growth, they also have the role of constructively engaging with China and thereby promote and instill liberal values into the country (Williams, 2004). The China Britain Business Council (CBBC) is a strategic agent that aims to provide profitable business opportunities in China for British companies. It is largely private, although its activities are supported by the British government. The CBBC serves as an example of a private actor that plays an increasingly important role in the conduct of Britain's foreign policy (Breslin, 2004). While commercial interests are given priority, the president of the CBBC argued: 'We do believe ... promoting business in China is actually one of the most powerful agents for change' (cited in Breslin, 2004, p. 413). Hence, he reflects a liberal perspective on UK-China relations that reveals the potential of economic engagement for bringing about social and political change and promoting human rights.

As China becomes entangled into the international economic system with the help of economic agencies and private companies, it becomes easier for the British government to establish diplomatic dialogue and socialize Chinese politicians. Whether the strategy of economic engagement is successful for the promotion of human rights remains to be seen (Rath, 2006). However, in an interview Foreign Secretary Cook (1997b) argued that the government had enhanced and intensified the dialogue on human rights^[3]. He reported that funds had been provided to initiatives that promote village democracy and that the government has been scaling up its efforts to improve the judicial process. Although China can be considered as one of the major powers in the world, Cook stated: 'I actually wouldn't make a distinction between the importance of human rights to a small country or a big country, they are both of equal importance'.^[4] This shows that he was very much devoted to the promotion of human rights, and was determined not to let them override by other interests.

Conclusion

The foreign policy of the United Kingdom toward China under the new Labour government aimed to enhance economic interests while at the same time to add an ethical dimension to the relationship with special attention to human rights. While seemingly contradictory, liberal theory reveals that the two objectives can be reconcilable. Transnational interactions have embedded China in the international society. Through engagement with China, Britain could improve its economic relations, while at the same time promote liberal values and support political and social change. Economic agencies and private companies have an increasingly important role in the conduct of British foreign policy by helping to realize the government's objectives. Human rights diplomacy comes into play as China becomes entangled into the global economic system and becomes an active member of the international community. A system of transnational connections and interactions between Britain and China allows for diplomatic dialogue and social learning as means to promote human rights.

Although many foreign policy officials hold the view that human rights might spoil the whole trip when one travels around the world for diplomatic business, Robin Cook was nevertheless determined to add an ethical dimension to Britain's foreign policy and to pay special attention to human rights. The British government was concerned with pursuing its economic objective of enhancing trade and investment opportunities in China, and did not want that the promotion of human rights undermined this goal. Equally, the economic objective was not to override the support for political and social change. Engaging China provided a way for realizing the two objectives simultaneously. Thus, political values did not need to be left behind when Britain would travel to China for a diplomatic business trip.

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[1] Cook's speech in Guardian news article 12 May 1997: 'Robin Cook's speech on the government's ethical foreign policy': <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/1997/may/12/indonesia.ethicalforeignpolicy>

[2] Cook's speech on 'British foreign policy' in news article 12 May 1997: 'Robin Cook's speech on the government's ethical foreign policy': <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/1997/may/12/indonesia.ethicalforeignpolicy>

[3] Interview with Cook on BBC radio, 14 may 1997: 'Robin Cook defends his ethical foreign policy': <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/1999/jan/25/ethicalforeignpolicy.indonesia2>

[4] Idem.

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