

# Student Mobility and Its Relevance to International Relations Theory

Written by Nancy Snow

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2021/12/05/student-mobility-and-its-relevance-to-international-relations-theory/>

NANCY SNOW, DEC 5 2021

Student mobility refers to the process whereby a person enrolls at an academic institution across a national border for part or all of one's education. UNESCO (2015) defines an internationally mobile student as "an individual who has physically crossed an international border between two countries with the objective to participate in educational activities in a destination country, where the destination country is different from his or her country of origin." In fewer than three decades, this category of postsecondary student experienced a 300% growth from 1.1 million in 1985 to 4.1 million in 2013.

By 2025, several forecasts predicted a worldwide internationally mobile student population of 7+ million, although these numbers will certainly be impacted by an ongoing global pandemic. More noticeable than just numbers, however, is the projected geographical location concentration in Asia, specifically three countries. A 2013 megatrends report on international higher education (British Council) concluded that the "future of the world's mobile students to 2024, predicts that in ten years' time, four countries will be home to over 50% of the global 18–22 year old population; India, China, Indonesia and the United States." These students will become part of a global pool of skilled workers over which primary nation-state actors like governments and corporations will compete. Kuroda et al (2018) state that Asia is now the "center of the global landscape of international student mobility," as its outbound student numbers tripled from 771,496 to 2,328,887 (1999-2015). Likewise, Asia is serving as a popular inbound educational destination with nearly a triple-fold growth from 323,487 in 1999 to 928,977 in 2015.

The concept of the internationally mobile student includes self-financed international students – who make up the majority of the cross-border movement – as well as a small percentage of sponsored exchange students. Collectively, these students are part of an international educational exchange experience that is so intrinsically valued that the British Council and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) refer to international student mobility as the "crucial aspect of internationalization of higher education" and the "heart" of what these institutions do (Beall and Lemmens 2014). Most recently, Cull expands the dimension by referring to exchanges as the "soul" of public diplomacy (2019).

If international student mobility is the heart and soul of international relations, why is it so often ignored as a unit of study in International Relations theory? Is IR theory lacking its heart and soul? Not quite. What is needed is a better critical understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of student mobility in a body politic examination of the student on the move. Much of the higher education literature has emphasized push-pull factors and cultural adaptation aspects to international educational exchange. Policymakers and government officials in diplomacy are increasingly recognizing the political and economic power that these human relations bring to research and development.

International Student Mobility (ISM) is a merging of the global knowledge economy with the concomitant creative cosmopolitans and international political economy benefits. And yet, an overemphasis on the idealization of educational exchange outcomes has had the consequence of marginalizing student mobility in the international relations foundational literature. Indeed, student mobility is a mainstay of the pursuit of national interest (in French *raison d'État*) that is a foundation of the realist school (Morgenthau 1948), along with the neorealist pursuit of power in international relations (Waltz 1979). Consequently, student mobility must be viewed in light of great power relations

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between the United States and the People's Republic of China, the two leading indicators of student mobility in the world.

A quick view of the literature from the post-WWII era to the present notes a seesaw theoretical approach to student mobility. On the positive side, an American case can be made for promoting exchanges as a contributing factor in the postwar economic boom and national image (Snow 2008). Study abroad is viewed as a global public good that positively impacts one's perceptions and attitudes toward a host national culture, as evidenced by a British Council report, "Megatrends: The Future of International Education" (2013, 16):

Educational exchanges are generally accepted to be one of the most powerful and long lasting influences on attitudes towards national culture, therefore investment in student and academic exchange is seen as a very important. Student choice of one study destination over another is greatly influenced by a nation's culture and the potential to experience living and studying within it. [...] International student mobility is a crucial aspect of the internationalization of higher education, enriching the lives of ambitious and talented young people from across the globe, and building greater understanding and trust between nations.

Despite the realist portrayal of the anarchical nature of international relations where zero-sum gains dominate, crossing borders in pursuit of educational goals is assumed to have self-interested personal gains as well as win-win offshoots for nation-states in the form of an elite corps of globally skilled workers. Embedded within are social and psychological enhancers of trust-building and mutual understanding and the opportunity to build value networks (Scott-Smith, 2008). Manuel Castells (2010) refers to these internationally mobile students as communicationally powerful switches in a networked society. They move from the old to the new network and credibly represent the new to the old. Snow (1992) and Stephen Bochner (1981) have referred to these networks in a similar vein as Castells as cultural mediators or mediating persons serving as links between cultures, functioning as translators and synthesizers. "The mediating person is seen as an individual who serves as a link between two or more cultures and social systems" (Bocher, 1981, 3).

Senator J. William Fulbright (1976) referred to his namesake international educational exchange program as "the most significant and important activity I have been privileged to engage in during my years in the Senate." He envisioned those who have "Fulbrighted" as cosmopolitan peacemakers "scattered throughout the world, acting as knowledgeable interpreters of their own and other societies; as persons equipped and willing to deal with conflict or conflict-producing situations on the basis of an informed determination to solve them peacefully; and as opinion leaders communicating their appreciation of the societies which they visited to others in their own society." Ideally, in a 21st century sense, mobile students, through direct exposure and experience, transcend cultural homogeneity and become transcultural persons.

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is the outbound powerhouse of international student mobility. Karudo et al (2018, 17) note a six-fold increase from 123,539 students in 1999 to 801,187 in 2016. The top geographical destinations for outbound Chinese students are North America (USA-centric, Canada), Western Europe (UK-centric), and Australia, all exemplars of liberal democratic political systems. China is likewise serving as a destination center for globally mobile students. In 2002, there were only 85,000 foreign students in China, but by 2016 there were 442,000 foreign students, representing a 420% increase. This rise is not surprising since President Xi of China and his predecessor Hu Jintao have referred to the concept of soft power repeatedly in speeches and the concept has been readily accepted by Chinese leadership (Cull 2019, 16; Brady 2017). The China interpretation of soft power is more aligned with a top-down state-guided political influence approach than the top down version of civil society and networks presented by Nye. Forty percent of the inbound students to China originate from the East Asia Pacific region, which positions China well for retaining its regional hegemonic status.

In her research on China's influence in New Zealand, Brady (2017) argues that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), in its relationship to overseas Chinese, including students, does not want to be seen as leading them but rather guiding. "The goal of successful overseas Chinese work is to get the community to proactively and even better, spontaneously, engage in activities which enhance China's foreign policy agenda." In a report published by the Hoover Institution on Chinese influence activities in the United States, Diamond and Schell (2019, xii) conclude that

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the People's Republic of China "united front" influence bureaucracy views the whole worldwide Chinese diaspora as "overseas compatriots," who owe a measure of loyalty to "the Chinese Motherland."

With funding from the U.S. State Department, AidData, a research lab at William & Mary, published a series of reports to spotlight China's influence peddling through these inbound and outbound growth patterns in international educational exchange (Custer *et al* 2018, 2019). Mobile students in China are discussed as having not only a fiduciary benefit to the development of China, but also an ideological one – influencing the China narrative by becoming bound to the city capital image of Beijing as well as the country reputation of China. There is no other global education capital comparable to the power of Beijing, China in utilizing these students across a range of purposes from exchange diplomat to ersatz propagandist.

Hans Morgenthau's theories of power politics and realism are regarded as among the most influential theoretical scholarship of 20th century international relations. Morgenthau establishes prudence over moralism in foreign policy and says that nation-states must base decision making on the rational pursuit of interest. International relations is competitive and conflictual, habits rooted in human nature. His principles of realism can be easily applied to China's more strategic approach to student mobility. The foundation of these principles rests with the St. Augustine maxim that rational man is inevitability and perpetually lusting for power, i.e., gain and advantage.

As applied to diplomacy, Morgenthau identified nine rules, four of which were fundamental. The first fundamental is that diplomacy must not carry the spirit of the crusader. States and state actors must avoid being overly self-righteous or blindly pursuant about their beliefs (Art and Jervis 2013). The second fundamental is that foreign policy must always be defined in terms of the national interest and, in turn, be supported with adequate power to defend that interest. The third fundamental in diplomacy is to examine the political scene from the point of view of other nations (their interests and security). This examination is not like the empathic sense of walking in the shoes of another but more like a high stakes poker player would study the competition. Finally, nations must be willing to compromise on all issues that are not vital to the national interest. The last of the nine rules, what Morgenthau identifies as a prerequisite to compromise, is command and control with regard to public opinion. It is applicable to a realist interpretation with respect to authoritarian power politics players like China:

The government must realize that it is the leader and not the slave of public opinion; that public opinion is not a static thing to be discovered and classified by public-opinion polls as plants are by botanists, but that it is a dynamic, ever changing entity to be continuously created and recreated by informed and responsible leadership; that it is the historic mission of the government to assert that leadership lest it be the demagogue who asserts it (Morgenthau 1948, 144).

There is an asymmetrical imbalance in student mobility between the People's Republic of China and the United States, the world's leading economies under contrasting and conflictual political economies. China is the nation-state that leads the world in outbound students to Western nation-states, including the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia. The United States is the leading receiving country of the world's students. If one acknowledges the rise of China in not only student exchanges but in political economy, particularly in seeking regional hegemony (notably the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), then one must conclude that there is both political economic intent and political economic effect to exchange programs. Li Xiguang of Beijing's Tsinghua University (2010) argues that the U.S. combined use of soft and smart power has helped make it the leading receiving country for the world's mobile students.

Soft power is the power of making people love you. Hard power is the ability to making people fear you. Over the last 500 years, all the world powers gained their hegemony through hard power, but the US has gained its hegemony through combining hard power and soft power, both striking at and assimilating its opponents. The US has built its soft power by making its values and political system, such as the US interpretation and definition of democracy, freedom and human rights, into supposedly universal values (Xiguang 2010).

The emphasis in that quote is on "supposedly," as the PRC would not ascribe to a universal definition of a US-defined interpretation of values and political system, but rather its own alternative "peaceful rise" and "good

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neighbor” approach. China’s instrumentality in exchange lies close to that of offensive realism. Using John Mearsheimer’s offensive realism theory as a guide, the only great power status in an internationally anarchical system driven by fear is to become a hegemon. From this theory, one might conclude that China bases its survival and security in part on regional hegemony in student mobility. It may have sought a measure of global hegemony, an overreach, in its Confucious Institutes, but this did not turn out as planned as university host institutions over time began to reject the overt propaganda intent of what were cast as language and education (Shin 2020).

Mearsheimer argues that although the United States is often viewed as a global hegemon, it is more like a mirror to China, a regional hegemon in the Western Hemisphere to China’s regional hegemony in the Eastern Hemisphere (Lind 2018). A state that seeks global hegemony must commit enormous resources across vast distances, including the Atlantic and Pacific, and the power of nationalism makes it extremely difficult to occupy and rule a country over a lengthy time. Great powers recognize that the best way to ensure their security is to achieve hegemony that will eliminate any possibility of a challenge by another great power. Only a misguided state would pass up an opportunity to be the hegemon in the system because it thought it already had sufficient power to survive. The paramount goal a great power can attain is regional hegemony, which means dominating one’s surrounding neighborhood (Mearsheimer 2001, 2006). China calls this approach to its high profile foreign policy that took off under President Xi “neighborhood diplomacy” (Li and Zheng 2016) and refers to soft power and educational diplomacy as part of its overall “good neighbor” strategy (Zhao 2017).

Student exchanges as a tool of public diplomacy have long been associated particularly in the West in glowing terms, with positive-sum outcomes such as cosmopolitanism (citizen of the world), pluralist values, and enhanced soft power outcomes (Fitzpatrick 2011; Nye 2004; Marginson 2009 chap. 8). In a study of cultural mediation and blogging influence in international exchange programs, Lee and Ingenhoff (2020) stress that the relational and human dimension of international relations matters more despite the rise in online communication tools and international broadcasting to distribute information. Nye (2019, 14) argues that exchanges are more effective than broadcasting since through these relational exchanges one can “understand how [others] are hearing your messages and adapting accordingly.” Former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice (2006) pointed specifically to this goal at a U.S. University Presidents Summit on International Higher Education: “Every foreign student attending one of our universities represents an opportunity to enhance democracy in America strengthen the cause of freedom abroad.”

The opportunity to win hearts and minds is a long-held perspective that has its origins in the height of the Cold War and the battleground for public opinion and political influence between the US and USSR. After the Cold War, the U.S. sought to expand its global reach through heart and knowledge transfer, using person-to-person exchanges as a way to inject democratic values and the attributes of a democratic society into people. Economist and U.S. assistant secretary of educational and cultural affairs Philip Coombs referred to the human dimension in foreign policy as too often neglected or taken for granted in foreign affairs. He defines the human dimension as:

concerned, in short, with the development of people, both within and beyond our borders—their skills and knowledge, insights and understanding, attitudes, and values, and all their creative potentialities. It is concerned also with the development of knowledge and creative works—with scholarly research and scientific discovery, with the cultivation of arts and humanities. And it is concerned with the transmission and application of ideas and knowledge in myriad forms and ways.

Mobile students are assumed to have benign intentions, but to state institutions involved in the process, educational exchanges have political aims—to shape political attitudes and behaviors (Atkinson 2010). Such students do not cross borders in order to invade and conquer but to study and learn, transferring what they know to their counterparts at home. These students participate in educational exchange programs for human betterment and for enhanced educational attainment, and yet the political competition never subsides in this human interaction.

It is possible for student mobility to have both positive-sum and zero-sum features? Yes. China’s power pursuits are seen by some scholars and officials as not “soft” but increasingly “sharp” in seeking regional hegemony and engaging in a game of zero-sum politics (Economy 2020; Fullerton 2018). As Elizabeth C. Economy (2019) states:

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During part of the Mao-era, in the late 1950s and 1960s, China promoted its revolution as a model for other third world countries. But it is not until now that the Chinese leadership has once again sought to export its model. Whether the export of this model is welcomed by others or not, whether it succeeds or fails, and whether we believe the impact to be benign or malign are second order questions. What matters in the first instance is that we recognize and acknowledge that China's leaders believe they have a model worth exporting and are seeking to do so.

China presents its regional hegemony in positive-sum language like "peaceful rise" (Zhang 2017). In September 2014 Xi Jinping gave a speech on the importance of united front work or political influence activities as one of the CCP's "magic weapons" (Brady 2017, 1). Do China's foreign influence activities undermine the sovereignty and integrity of the political system of targeted states? It is too soon to tell. Jennifer Lind (2018) states that while the U.S. is currently the hegemonic power in East Asia, it will not last:

Great powers typically dominate their regions in their quest for security. They develop and wield tremendous economic power...use regional institutions and cultural programs to entrench their influence. Because hegemonies fear that neighboring countries will allow external rivals to establish a military foothold, they develop a profound interest in the domestic politics of their neighborhood, and even seek to spread their culture to draw other countries closer.

So far, China's rhetorical flourishes underemphasize hegemony and overemphasize promotion of peace and development. In a December 2018 speech, President Xi suggested the potential universality of the China model: "Forty years of practice has fully proved that China's development has provided successful experiences and shown bright prospects for the majority of developing countries to modernize. It is a powerful force for promoting world peace and development, and a great contribution of the Chinese nation to the progress of human civilization." To that end, China was through the end of 2019 investing heavily in becoming a more attractive recipient nation for international students as it continued to dominate the international marketplace in outbound students.

Shen (2020) refers to a term first coined by Juan Pablo Cardenal in 2017, "sharp power" as wielded primarily by authoritarian regimes to "manipulate and co-opt culture, education systems, and media." This approach takes advantage of the asymmetry between free and unfree systems, allowing regimes to limit free expression and distort political environments in democracies while simultaneously shielding their country from outside influence. China's foreign policy has transitioned in recent years from attraction-based soft power to sharp power, leveraging its economic and ideological might. This has led U.S.-based scholars like Economy and her Council on Foreign Relations' colleague Joshua Kurlantzick (2008) to call for more proactive soft power activities to address China's sharp power strategies. In a statement before the U.S. Congress in March 2020 that preceded a global pandemic border lockdown, Economy said that "the United States should think creatively about how best to deploy non-traditional or soft power. For example, the United States should redouble its efforts to attract the best and brightest from around the world to study in the United States. In 2019, sixty-two current heads of state and heads of government had previously studied in the United States. The State Department, however, cut the number of visas it issues to newly enrolled international students by almost 10 percent during 2017-2019. This trend undermines a critical element of U.S. soft power at a moment when China is actively recruiting and paying students globally to study in China."

In applying IR theory to student mobility, states and their institutions still matter the most. The two dominant schools of international relations – realism and liberalism – view the state as the organizing unit of the international system whereby state behavior is both rational and intelligible. Realists extend state power further with respect to power. States seek power both as a means and as an end, which is why for realists, the so-called high politics of security dominates the low politics of social welfare and global social good. Idealists emphasize interstate cooperation more than realists, but acknowledge that states remain autonomous and self-reliant. To liberals, while there may not be an overarching global government entity to promote liberal values and norms (universality of human rights, cosmopolitanism), there are voluntary institutions of global governance like the UN and other international organizations that make cooperation more possible. Nevertheless, this cooperation is unpredictable and unsteady – and international institutions, which lack independent authority – are limited in their power to shape state behavior. This is why power politics and regional hegemony will likely continue to drive student mobility growth and influence. In 2021, the 75th year of the Fulbright Program, the political and cultural relevance that exchange of persons and

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international student mobility have on international relations theory should therefore not be taken for granted.

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edited by Nancy Snow and Nicholas J. Cull, New York and Abingdon: Routledge.

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