

STRATEGIES TOWARDS A GREAT POWER: GOVERNMENT ALIGNMENT TO CHINA'S CORE INTERESTS

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INTRODUCTION

The strategy adopted by governments of different countries in response to the core interests of a great power has been a central question in the field of international relations. Various theories have sought to historically understand how countries align themselves and why different strategies are adopted. Issues related to state security, economic perspectives, ideational perspectives, and domestic factors have all explained why countries either challenge, accommodate, or align themselves with a major power (Williams, Lobell, and Jesse 2012). The recent growth of China over the past decades has revived this classic debate and has generated a specific line of research aimed at understanding the positioning of various countries and governments in response to this phenomenon.

A review of the academic literature reveals that the debate remains open regarding the factors that explain countries' and governments' responses to the core interests of a great power like China. Its growing economic importance has taken precedence as the primary theory explaining why countries position themselves in a particular way. However, advances in research do not entirely clarify the preeminence of this explanatory factor and results also depend on the cases under analysis. Thus, several questions remain unanswered: What drives different stances towards China? Is the fear of economic retaliation the fundamental aspect explaining the position? Do security concerns influence the decision? Do shared ideas among elites about the international order lead to foreign policy convergence? Or are domestic political considerations what tilt the balance in one direction or another?

This article provides an analysis of the existing literature and concludes that there are several pending aspects that can contribute to our understanding of governments' positioning in response to China's growth. First, it questions the preeminence of the economic factor in explaining the reasons behind these positions. Second, the growing interest but still insufficient focus on the responses of small countries to China's core interests allows for various perspectives on explanatory factors. Finally, understanding the causal mechanisms that link explanatory factors to positioning is crucial for a better understanding of this phenomenon. Additionally, this literature analysis is followed by a presentation of how two Latin American countries have responded to China's growth and particularly to its central interests. The cases of Chile and Uruguay are discussed, providing an insight into how two countries with the same level of development, geographically distant from China, with limited national capacities and similar levels of economic dependence, have positioned themselves vis-à-vis this great power.

CHINA'S RISING AND THE CLASSIC DEBATE OF WHY DO STATES ENGAGE OR CHALLENGE

Since its accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001 and its subsequent consolidation as the world's second-largest economy, China has become a key player in the international system. It stands as one of the leading exporters of manufactured goods and a major importer of raw materials. China has become the primary or secondary partner for nearly all Asian countries and has developed vast economic ties with the rest of the world (Kastner and Pearson 2021). Simultaneously, China has modernized its armed forces, engaged in international institutions, and increased its visibility in international politics (Kang 2007).

The rise of China has sparked a broad debate in the field of international relations literature, primarily concerning its role in the international system and the potential competition or conflict with the United States (Buzan 2010; Economy 2010; Foot 2006; Friedberg 2005; J. Ikenberry 2008; Johnston 2003; Mearsheimer 2010; D. L. Shambaugh 2013). Beyond the debate about competition among great powers, the discussion of the consequences of China's growth has also revived a classic debate in international relations literature about how countries align themselves internationally (alignment behavior). One traditional way to explain the alignment of countries has historically been through the prism of security. Broadly speaking, this line of research found the determinants of alignment in the role of military capabilities and security concerns.

However, this argument has been challenged by various authors, who emphasized that differences in political institutions, cultures, economic structures, or leadership goals unrelated to a state's relative power are causally relevant in explaining different foreign policy choices. This discussion about which factors influence a country's alignment is what theoretically guides this article, primarily to understand to what extent the economic explanation that has been questioned in the security perspective mentioned earlier explains alignment with a power like China. So, in this classic debate of international relations various theories that seek to explain alignment can be clustered but also interact between them. Arguments in the literature suggest that the motives for forming alliances and alignments may reflect preferences shaped by historical experiences, intentions, and cultural influences (Ross 2006), or a combination of different factors.

HOW ASIAN COUNTRIES RESPOND TO CHINA

Research on China's growth and its repercussions has not been limited to the global power struggle with the United States and other major international players but has also focused on the impacts it had in the Asian continent (Goh 2016; Johnston and Ross 1999). China's growing economic and military power in Asia, along with an increase in its political influence and involvement in multilateral institutions, has brought about profound changes in the region's international relations. Analyses of Asian countries have marked the beginning of a line of research aimed at understanding why certain countries, beyond the United States, react differently to China's rise. In this line of inquiry, questions have arisen in the literature, such as what has been the position of

Japan and Australia's leaders regarding China's growth, or why countries in the region respond differently to this event (Tan 2012).

These research efforts have emphasized the importance of analyzing secondary states in their positions regarding China. Concerning how countries are positioning themselves in this situation, Kang (2003) argues that countries in East Asia tend to accommodate China rather than balance its power. In line with this perspective and analyzing the strategies of various Southeast Asian countries, such as the Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and Myanmar, Roy (2007) contends that these states align with China because they seek to trade and value the maintenance of good relations.

Much of the research on responses to China's growth has focused on Asian neighbors, with the strategies of other states relegated in the debate. However, there is an increasing body of research seeking to understand how middle powers (such as Turkey, South Africa, Brazil, India, etc.), European countries, or smaller states respond to this major power, and it is within this context that this research is situated. For example, Gilley and O'Neil (2014) argue that middle powers face similar economic, security, and political challenges as a result of China's growth, and their responses to China demonstrate a distinct inclination (and capability) for autonomous and multidirectional initiatives.

In conclusion, it is not only necessary to emphasize the importance of the revival of this classic debate, which explores the complexity of factors influencing positioning, but also the significance of the cases that have been used to explain these factors. Various research efforts have attempted to understand the positions of countries regarding China's growth, whether by examining the alignment of all United Nations member states (Strüver 2016), Asian countries (C.-C. Kuik 2021), middle powers (Gilley and O'Neil 2014), or by comparing specific cases, such as Australia and New Zealand (Köllner 2021). Studies on small states are relatively scarce in this literature beyond the previously mentioned Indo-Pacific region, and they offer an opportunity to contribute to our understanding of how these countries position themselves in relation to China.

CHILE AND URUGUAY TOWARDS CHINA CORE INTERESTS

When comparing the positioning of the governments of the last ten years in Chile (Bachelet II, Piñera II, and Boric) and Uruguay (Mujica, Vázquez II, and Lacalle Pou) regarding China's central interests (sovereignty and territorial integrity, national security, and economic development), the first thing to highlight is a broad similarity within and between the countries, both in terms of positioning and explanatory factors.

Over the past 10 years, the relationship between Chile and China has shown continuity with no significant changes. The governments of Bachelet, Piñera, and Boric have maintained similar positions of neutrality regarding two of the central interests observed in this research: Hong Kong and Xinjiang. Differences in positioning are observed in the area of technological investments, with Bachelet's government expressing favorable views, Piñera's government adopting a combination of opposing

and neutral stances characterized as ambiguous, and Boric's government presenting neutral positions.

Regarding the factors explaining these positions, China's economic importance to the Chilean economy is crucial in understanding these stances. The hope for greater ties is evident in Bachelet's government's favorable stance towards Chinese investments. These factors persist during Piñera's administration, with the added element of conflicting interests with the other dominant power, the United States, leading to an ambiguous contrary stance on Chinese investments. In all three cases, secondary factors such as path dependence (historical pragmatism in the relationship with China) and international policy strategies (viewing China as a future power) play a role. Path dependence refers to a continuity in the relationship with China both within the political spectrum and among bureaucratic personnel in the ministry.

In the case of Uruguay, a similar continuity in government attitudes toward China is observed. Uruguayan governments (Mujica, Vázquez, and Lacalle Pou) have maintained neutral positions on two central China-related issues, Xinjiang and Hong Kong. These stances are similar to those of Chilean governments, primarily involving neither favorable nor unfavorable positioning towards China. In terms of technological investments, Mujica and Vázquez's governments were favorable and proactive in this pursuit. This changes only in Lacalle Pou's government, which adopts more neutral positions regarding Chinese companies' investments in the technological sector.

Regarding explanatory factors, as in Chile, economic importance is key in all three Uruguayan governments, along with the hope of achieving greater economic ties, especially in the early administrations of Mujica and Vázquez. The difference between these two governments and Lacalle Pou's administration is not due to a domestic explanatory factor such as the ideological orientation of the government but rather the presence of another relevant factor during Lacalle Pou's government—interests of the other dominant power, the United States. Two additional explanatory factors are path dependence (in this case, the principle of non-intervention in internal affairs) and international policy strategies (such as viewing China as a power and seeking to diversify partners). These aspects are similar to the Chilean case, with two nuances: the path dependence in the Uruguayan case is the policy of non-interference in internal affairs instead of the bilateral relationship's pragmatism, and in the international policy strategy, there is an emphasis on diversifying partners amid the stagnation of the Mercosur bloc.

In conclusion, observing the positions in both countries reveals similarities. There is a general continuity in the relationships; in both cases, it has been asserted that the economic-commercial aspect has been the driving force, and there is little ideological aspect in the China relationship, with a central focus on commerce. The idea of China as an opportunity for wealth is prevalent.

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