Brooks and the China-US Security Policy Dilemma

Stephen Brooks’ 2005 work *Producing Security: Multinational Corporations, Globalization, and the Changing Calculus of Conflict* provides a liberal argument that the globalization of production heavily reduces the possibility of conflict among the great powers of the world. Brooks, while concluding that globalization does not have a uniformly positive effect on all nations, does not address the effect rising great powers have on the balance of security of the current great powers. Despite this, some of Brooks theories remain relevant to the strategic relationship between the United States and China.

Brooks’ central thesis is that the effect of widespread production by Multi-National Corporations (MNCs) has stabilized the security relations of great powers, especially among the triad of the US, the EU and Japan, but will ultimately have a net negative impact on the security of developing nations. Brooks classifies China as a developing nation; however, it is rapidly rising to great power status, both within the Asian region and globally.

The current national security relationship between the US and China is largely colored by the economic codependence between the two. The US and China are mutually each other’s second largest trading partner. Any major action taken by either would threaten the economies of both. China recognizes the US as an Asian-Pacific power, but seeks to strengthen its own influence among the Asian region.

In his argument, Brooks presents three central theories that connect the global economy to security. The globalization of production has changed the incentives that motivate nations, the very nature of those actors, and the capabilities that nations now have.

The first theory argues that the economic benefits of conquest have diminished due to the now paramount importance of foreign direct investment (FDI) and the prevalence of knowledge-based societies among developed countries. A conquered country loses the stability of commitment FDI requires, and any extractive structure a conqueror implements will ultimately hinder innovation and diminish gains to the conqueror. Brooks uses the examples of the Nazi war machine during WWII and the Soviet empire during the Cold War to provide evidence supporting this theory. In the modern case of China, the closest example could be the China’s struggles with the Tibetan region. While China regards Tibet as an official part of China, Tibet sees itself as significantly independent to validate independence. Tibet exists under the constructed Chinese economic system. The US recently challenged claim of sovereignty to the region by meeting with the Dalai Lama, the expatriate leader of the people of Tibet, which China regards as an example of US interference.

Brooks’ second theory follows the logic that developing countries that alone are unattractive to MNCs form regional trade agreements (RTAs) to increase the flow of FDI to those countries. ASEAN represents the most relevant RTA to China. As a regional power, China trades extensively both with ASEAN and with the member states of ASEAN. China too large of a developing country to need membership in such an RTA, but the role it plays in providing FDI to many of the countries within ASEAN reinforces its regional power.

Of all of Brooks’ theories, the third theory is most relevant to the Sino- American relationship. Brooks argues that autarkic weapons production of any major power is infeasible. To remain as close to the cutting edge of military technology and proficiency as possible, states must pursue international defense production. The cost of a go-it-alone defense policy is insurmountable, especially given the loss of the benefits of economies of scale. China recognizes its position as a developing nation, albeit a strong one, and has accepted the need for international defense production.

China has no clearly stated grand strategy, but as a rising power, China likely does not seek to replace the US as the global hegemon. China’s international goals are to strengthen China’s regional power, confirm its sovereignty, and keep its economy sustainable. Brooks does not address the changing status of rising global powers – at what point does China become a great power instead of a developing country? – but his theories still have relevance in examining the world in which China finds itself.