

The prospects of human rights in US–China relations: a constructivist understanding

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Accepted 8 July 2018

Abstract

What are the prospects of U.S.–China relations in the area of human rights? Skeptics maintain that human rights is no longer an issue between the United States and China. A traditional understanding of U.S.–China relations ignores the role of norms, while the constructivist perspective recognizes their independent effects. This paper links the traditional understanding of power politics between the United States and China with the study of constructivist norm research. The three findings of constructivist norm theories are relevant and applied to predict the status of human rights in U.S.–China relations: the historical construction of norms, the long-term and multifaceted effects of norms, and the persistence of norms. Based on these theoretical predictions, it is expected that, although convergence is not completely impossible, the past dynamic of competition and confrontation will continue and human rights will still be a contentious issue in U.S.–China relations.

1 Introduction

What are the prospects of US–China relations in the area of human rights? Skeptics maintain that human rights are no longer an issue between the United States and China and that conflicts on human rights may not emerge in the future. A few analysts claim that President Clinton’s 1994 decision not to link China’s most favored nation status with its human rights conditions is a clear indicator of the primacy of economic considerations over human rights issues (Kissinger, 2011; Peck, 2012). Others point to US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s 2009 remark that she would raise human rights issues if doing so did not interfere with China’s cooperation in ‘the global economic crisis, the global climate change crisis and the security crisis’ (Spencer, 2009). It has been understood that the Obama administration lowered the critical tone toward China’s human rights record, and some predict that Trump will ‘de-emphasize’ human rights (McCain Institute, 2017, p. 7). This article begins with these observations. Are we really going to witness the end of human rights issues in US–China relations?

Recent incidents suggest two possibilities. On the one hand, many commentators have pointed out that human rights issues have so far not been in the spotlight during two summits between President Trump and President Xi (Lau, 2017). John Kelley, Trump’s Chief of Staff, when asked about China’s human rights practices in an interview, stated that it was ‘not up to us to pass judgment’ on China (Ingraham, 2017). Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch, has evaluated Trump to be ‘a disaster’ when dealing with authoritarian countries (Carriat and Cabrera, 2018). On the other hand, one week before the Mar-a-Lago summit, Chen Guiqui, wife of detained human rights lawyer Xie Yang, and her two daughters, who had fled China for fear of persecution, entered the United States from a Thai detention center (Kellogg, 2018). Chinese agents and US officials were in ‘an hours-long standoff’ at the Bangkok airport, which nearly boiled over into ‘a physical clash’. This episode shows that, on some issues, the United States is willing to confront China and take ‘bold action’ (Shih, 2017).

The purpose of this article is to elucidate the prospects of human rights in US–China relations, using insights from the constructivist approach to international norms. A traditional understanding of US–China relations ignores the role of norms, while the constructivist

perspective recognizes their independent effects. This article links the traditional understanding of power politics between the United States and China with the study of constructivist norm research. The three findings of constructivist norm theories are relevant and applied to predict the status of human rights in US–China relations: the historical construction of norms, the long-term and multifaceted effects of norms, and the persistence of norms. Based on these theoretical predictions, it is expected that, although convergence is not completely impossible, the past dynamic of competition and confrontation will continue and human rights will still be a contentious issue in US–China relations.

This article consists of three substantial parts. In the first part, I define international norms and introduce different constructivist approaches to studying these norms. I present an overview of existing studies and formulate insights on the dynamics of international norms, focusing on norm contestation. In the second section, I explain my research design, focusing on the case selection. I present an overview of existing research and identify its limitations. I then show why the examination of human rights norms is important and timely and explain my case selection. In the third section, I explore historical and contemporary cases of competition and cooperation over human rights. Here, I compare theoretical predictions with current affairs. I also provide an evaluation of the future trajectories of US–China relations in the area of human rights.

2 International norms

International norms are ‘collective expectations for the proper behavior of actors with a given identity’ (Katzenstein, 1999, p. 5). Norms arise when actors categorize behaviors as right or wrong, legitimate or illegitimate, or desirable or undesirable. Normative concerns include ideas about whether states and other international actors should or should not do something. This intrinsic sense of ought-ness or logic of appropriateness is often made explicit in their codification, legalization, or institutionalization. Norms can be explicitly detected when they are codified into laws, treaties, or the preambles of international organizations. However, norms can also be identified by examining states’ practices of compliance or violations. Otherwise, norms can be detected by examining noncomplying states’ justifications.

International norms have been a central focus of constructivist research. There are three perspectives in the study of norms: the study of norms as a research topic, as an approach, and as a theory or theory-building process. Most scholars engage in the study of norms from the first perspective and are less familiar with the latter two. In the first perspective, norms are treated as a topic. Various international relations (IR) theories, such as realism and liberalism, can be applied to new issue areas. Various topics such as human rights, environment, and corruption, which were not traditionally core topics of IR, are now widely studied. Studying norms as a topic, however, inevitably entails adopting a few key assumptions. This is the second perspective, which understands the study of norms as an approach. Approaches tend to have one distinct shared assumption in a research program. Scholars who study norms as an approach also believe in the independent effect of norms and the relative importance of ideational factors over material elements. However, I find the last perspective to be the most illuminating, which views the study of norms as a theory or theory-making process. From this perspective, scholars are interested in the role of norms in the making and unmaking of the international order. The study of norms currently falls somewhere between approach and theory, and many interesting and important theorizations have been and are being conducted in the field.

Emphasis is placed on the process of norm dynamics, including norm creation (emergence), diffusion, localization, contestation, internalization (compliance or commitment), decay (regression or erosion), and even death (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann, 2013). The most widely used constructivist account is the norm life cycle theory (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998). According to this theory, norms arise in three phases: emergence, cascade, and internalization. A central element of this framework is the tipping point, which distinguishes the emergence phase from the diffusion phase. Norms spread slowly in the earliest phase, mainly through persuasion by norm entrepreneurs, but are then diffused rapidly as of the tipping point. The role of norm entrepreneurs and pressure from like-minded states is central. In the final stage, the norm is taken for granted and produces 'rule-consistent behavior' (Risse *et al.*, 1999).

Many studies have examined the spread of international norms and diffusion dynamics, and their impact on domestic politics (Keck and Sikkink, 1999; Risse *et al.*, 2013). More recently, however, scholars

have discovered that the norm dynamic process is more complex and conflictual than norm diffusion theorists initially assumed. Three groups of scholars have criticized ‘the linear and static’ understanding of norm dynamics (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann, 2013, p. 1). The first group of scholars emphasizes the role of local and domestic agents in the norm diffusion process. Bob (2002, p. 134), for example, questions why some norms become more prominent than others, focusing on ‘strategic action by local-level human rights victims’. Others claim the primacy of local and domestic processes (Finnemore and Jurkovich, 2014; Helleiner, 2014; Wahl, 2016), while Acharya (2004, p. 241) further conceptualizes the norm ‘localization’ process as ‘contestation between emerging transnational norms and preexisting regional’ norms.

The second group of scholars, while not necessarily emphasizing local actors, focuses on the conflictual relations of international norms involving various actors such as states, intergovernmental organizations, and international nongovernmental organizations (Carpenter, 2007, 2011; Kelley, 2008). Scholars argue that norms are innately contested and that norms develop through this norm contestation. Krook and True (2009, p. 104), for example, argue that norms are, by definition, ‘processes’ and thus are contested even after their initial construction and acceptance. Sandholtz (2008, p. 102) similarly emphasizes that norms are themselves dynamic processes of argumentation, during which actors “constantly reshape” them. Wiener (2004) finds that the impact of norm contestation does not necessarily lead to the regression of norms but also potentially to their progress.

The third group of scholars focuses more on the issue of human rights. These scholars highlight re-emerging power politics in a ‘neo-Westphalian world’ and predict that global human rights will be heavily influenced by power dynamics among great powers (Hopgood, 2013, p. 166). Scholars assert that the development of human rights has thus far been heavily dependent on the power of the United States (Moyn, 2012); it therefore follows that the relative decline of U.S. power will bring about a corresponding decline in human rights (Hopgood, 2014). I disagree with their understanding of the history of human rights, but many scholars share an expectation that human rights will be increasingly dependent on the power dynamics of a few great powers (Kissinger, 2011).

3 Research design

There are two camps in the current literature linking the politics of norms with US–China relations. The first group of scholars focuses increasingly on US–China relations, in terms of particular issues related to norms. Research in this vein has existed for a long time but has resurfaced with the recent rise of China. However, what is more interesting is the second group of scholars, which focuses on the overarching implications of the rise of international politics around norms. These scholars emphasize general trends, rather than interactions within a particular area at issue between two states. These scholars are more interested in mapping the terrain of cooperation and conflicts between the United States and China over nontraditional issue areas.

First, it was [Foot and Walter \(2011\)](#) who laid the groundwork for the study of US–China relations with an emphasis on international norms. Five issue areas – use of force, macroeconomic policy, nuclear proliferation, climate change, and financial regulation – were examined to answer why the United States and China comply with norms and how future relations are likely to unfold. They concluded that China’s behavior in terms of norms has generally been improving since the opening era, while the United States has been selectively conforming to norms. In addition, they maintained that norms rarely play autonomous roles in affecting state behavior but work in conjunction with other factors such as domestic interests, values, and institutional configurations. Second, [Shambaugh \(2013\)](#) studied China’s global impact by examining the changing dynamics of the Chinese global identity. After examining five areas – diplomacy, global governance, economy, culture, and security – he concluded that China’s global impact will be modest. Similarly, [Nathan \(2016\)](#) explored the possibility of China seeking to overthrow global norms and concluded that it is unlikely, because China has been complying with international norms to date and has been a willing participant in many international conventions.

However, there are three limitations to the abovementioned research. First, these studies tend to treat international norms simply as a topic, not as an approach or as a theory. Thus, the independent power of norms is often under-evaluated. At most, scholars focus on the power of norms to change the behavior of states by changing the payoff structure. What is more interesting and should be a focus is the constitutive

effect of norms, which influences state identities (Wendt, 1999). Second, these research emphasize norms that have already gone through a process of institutionalization or legalization. These scholars are less interested in the social and historical construction process of norms. Thus, there is an innate difficulty in seeing how the United States and China have interacted in creating, operating, and applying norms over time. Finally, most studies suffer from a *status quo* bias, especially in their understanding of China's view of the existing order. It is wishful thinking to assume that China will not challenge current norms simply because it has generally complied with them until now. Existing studies tend to focus on the challenges that are currently occurring and assume that the rules of the game will be maintained. However, this is a hypothesis that should be empirically tested rather than assumed *a priori*.

My research design is different from previous research in two ways. First, my purpose is to overcome the above limitations by examining international human rights norms based on the insights of a constructivist research program. Human rights issues have been a source of disagreement between the United States and China in both the 20th and 21st centuries. Human rights norms are also closely linked to many other norms. Historically, there have been numerous human rights incidents involving the United States and China. Second, I systematically selected cases from the list to represent different administrations in the United States and China and to reflect temporal dimensions and trends. The cases were selected in such a way as to avoid mixing multiple, prominent incidents that reflected only conflict and confrontation over human rights. Sikkink (2017, pp. 159–162), for example, succinctly summarizes the findings from psychology and asserts that scholars tend to pay more attention to prominent negative information when studying human rights. Here, I attempted to overcome this bias by paying equal attention to cooperation, competition, and contestation.

4 Cooperation, competition, and contestation

Constructivist scholars generally agree on the following three aspects of international norms. First, international norms are historically and socially constructed. Second, the effects of norms are rarely short-term or unidirectional but long-term and multifaceted. Third, the impact of

norms is consistent and persistent. In each subsection, I first overview the constructivist understandings of norm characteristics and then apply them to past and current US–China relations.

4.1 *Historical construction of international norms*

Constructivists argue that to understand current dynamics in world politics, the past processes of historical and social construction must be considered. Two aspects of construction are important: the historical construction of actors and their identities, and the role of the ‘historically produced and culturally bound’ knowledge structure in world politics (Barnett, 2014, p. 158). When the process of historical construction is closely examined, we find interesting and surprising facts associated with this complicated relationship. On occasion, an examination of the history of norms provides us with a new perspective or a more complex picture.

The United States and China have a long history of interaction around human rights norms. What happened between China under the Kuomintang Party and the United States in 1948 during UN Charter negotiations is illuminating. Scholars have discovered that Chinese and Latin American delegations played critical roles at the San Francisco meeting where the UN Charter was first drafted (Sikkink, 2014). The US delegation was instructed to avoid any discussion of human rights, since it would undermine national sovereignty. It was China and Latin America that pressed for the inclusion of human rights language in the Charter. Without the initial inclusion of human rights language in the Charter, the subsequent creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights may have been difficult.

Similarly, conventional wisdom provides a snapshot of US–China relations with a *unidirectional* criticism of the United States toward China. However, this understanding cannot fully capture the complexity of US–China relations. Many scholars have studied the 1989 Tiananmen Square case and the reaction of the United States to China (Zhang *et al.*, 2001; Suettinger, 2003). What is less studied is the influence that Mao had during the US Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s (Joseph, 2006, p. 207). Mao issued two official statements in 1963 and 1968 supporting the movement. This event preceded George HW Bush’s public statement condemning the use of violence by the Chinese

government and supporting the student protestors in 1989. Without an understanding of the greater historical context, a simple snapshot of US–China relations has the potential to mislead our perspective.

When we examine the historical construction of human rights, we see that human rights—which are often criticized as being a Western construct imposed by Western powers on less powerful states—are a global construct with input from both Western and non-Western countries such as China. Scholars have found that many norms, including human rights, development, foreign aid, and multilateralism, are not as Western as previously assumed (Helleiner, 2014). International human rights laws and institutions are not simply a Western product but a global construct that non-Western countries have played an active role in constructing. Scholars have pointed out the critical role that non-Western countries have played in establishing the ideas and principles of international norms (e.g., transitional justice) and the contributions they have made to their global diffusion (Sikkink, 2011).

In terms of human rights, there have been two debates in which China played an important role: the three-generation debate and the cultural relativism debate (Van Ness, 1999; Bell, 2000). Both debates were important in shaping the landscape of human rights discourse. China, along with the Soviet Union, contributed to the rise of the second generation of rights, which are economic and social rights. These rights have been and are still seen as a major alternative to the first generation of rights, i.e. civil and political rights. Vincent, after surveying the development of human rights during the Cold War era, claimed that the history of East–West relations was ‘in an important sense the history of a dispute about human rights’ (Vincent, 1986, p. 61). Even under the Obama administration, this debate continued. During the 30th Session of the Human Rights Council in 2015, China criticized the deep-rooted human rights problems in the United States and recommended that the United States ratify the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. Likewise, during the 19th US–China Human Rights Dialogue in the same year, the United States demanded that China ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

China also contributed to the rise of the third generation of rights, which are collective rights. China’s participation in the nonalignment movement and Zhou Enlai’s Five Principles of Peace contributed to

the emergence of the new rights supported by decolonized countries, such as the right to self-determination, economic development, and peace (Ishay, 2008). Kinzelbach (2012, pp. 310–311) found that China ‘played a very active role’ in pushing the newly established Human Rights Council to adopt a Declaration on Human Social Responsibilities. China continues to stress economic, social, and cultural rights, and a special emphasis is put on ‘prioritization of the right to development’ (Kinzelbach, 2012, p. 328; Zhu, 2011, p. 219). All these elements are included in the Beijing Declaration adopted by the First South-South Human Rights Forum in December 2017, attended by delegates from 70 developing countries from Asia and Africa (Chang, 2017).

Moreover, China has raised the issue of cultural relativism, which is a fundamental challenge to the universality of human rights (Bauer and Bell, 1999; Bell *et al.*, 2001). This debate is intense, not at the level of legalization but at the level of implementation and enforcement (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann, 2013). The most significant challenge to the concept of universalism was the Bangkok Declaration from the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights, in which China played ‘a leading role’ (Davis, 1995, p. 216). Representatives at the conference reached a declaration, claiming that human rights must be approached from a pluralistic perspective that respects differences in culture, region, religion, and history. This further led to the debate over ‘Asian values’, which questions the universality of human rights and democracy (Sen, 1997; Foot, 1997). Between 1992 and 1995, China found allies in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, and demanded that Western developed countries be more sensitive to diversity (Foot, 2000, p. 153). In the 21st century, China still promotes the same idea that ‘human rights entitlement must be adapted to national circumstances’, a point emphasized in the Beijing Declaration in 2017 (Kinzelbach, 2012, p. 308; Chang, 2017).

China additionally plays a role in various UN human rights agencies, criticizing the imposition of Western-style human rights on other countries and emphasizing individual countries’ capacity building, yet China has been opposed to country-specific approaches to human rights and has advocated for a thematic focus (Kinzelbach, 2012, p. 313). China maintained this position throughout its negotiations over the mandate and procedures of the new UN Human Rights Council, claiming that

country-specific resolutions would lead to unnecessary ‘political confrontations’ over human rights (Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the UN, 2006). During the negotiations, China proposed an extremely high standard for the passage of country-specific resolutions, so as to make their achievement ‘nearly impossible’ (Foot and Inboden, 2016, p. 244). Instead, China focused on promoting the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), which states that all UN member states are obliged to go through a review process of their human rights records (McMahon and Ascherio, 2012). The UPR process is the first human rights mechanism to ensure that every member state is equally represented and evaluated. China was initially concerned that the UPR process might ‘overlap with the work of human rights treaty bodies and special mechanisms, thus increasing report burdens for developing countries’ (Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the UN, 2006). However, the UPR process was adopted as a complementary measure to the work of treaty bodies, emphasizing its ‘cooperative nature’ and suggesting that it should be ‘constructive, non-confrontational and non-politicized’ (Abraham, 2007, p. 36). Many developing countries supported the measure, while China used its ‘reputation as a general champion of developing country positions’ (Foot and Inboden, 2016, p. 254).

The current debates around cultural relativism and generations of rights can be demonstrated by the case of China’s counterattack against US human rights reports. Since 2005, China has released the Human Rights Record of the United States, in response to American criticism of China on this matter. In April 2016, China justified the publication of the report, claiming that since the United States ‘refuses to hold up a mirror to look at itself, it has to be done with other people’s help’ (Bo, 2016). In this debate, the fault line is not only between the civil and political rights emphasized by the United States and the economic and social rights emphasized by the Chinese government but it is also seen in the debate over how human rights standards should be implemented in each country.

4.2 The long-term and multifaceted effects of international norms

For realists, international norms are mere epiphenomena that ‘reflect state calculations of self-interest based primarily on the international

distribution of power' (Mearsheimer, 1994/95, p. 39). Skeptics argue that human rights have either been ineffective overall in transforming the world or will become ineffective due to their confusing ends and means (Kennedy, 2005; Hopgood, 2013). Despite this criticism, however, the effectiveness of human rights has been proven in various ways. Scholars have conducted extensive research on the globalization of human rights (Dunne and Wheeler, 1999; Donnelly, 2003; Forsythe, 2006). Furthermore, many scholars have demonstrated how international norms, through the work of norm entrepreneurs and their organizational platforms, have changed state behaviors and preferences (Risse *et al.*, 1999).

Recently, scholars have provided the powerful explanation that human rights have contributed to change or have even transformed the sovereign state system. Thomas (2001) examined the impact of the Helsinki Accord on bringing about systemic change to the Cold War order. The signing of the Helsinki Accord, for most of the Eastern bloc countries, opened up the floodgates of liberalization and democratization by providing the means for both domestically mobilized and transnational groups to work together. Reus-Smit (2011) argued that the struggle for human rights had a significant impact on the globalization of the international system. These findings affirm the reciprocal relationship between state sovereignty and human rights. Sovereignty has always been a 'compromise' with other important principles such as human rights, and it has been referred to as a 'cognitive script characterized by organized hypocrisy' (Krasner, 2001, p. 17). Furthermore, as Reus-Smit (2001, p. 519) argues, human rights have been 'integral to the moral purpose of the modern state'. Kent (1999, p. 247), in studying China's actions on international human rights, concluded that the effectiveness of the regime is due to 'the standard setting and promotional aspects of the UN regimes' imposed 'by means of the long drawn-out, often tedious, process of China's participation in each of the UN human rights bodies and conferences'. In sum, these scholars argue that the impacts of human rights norms are long-term and multifaceted.

Answering whether human rights norms have had an autonomous effect on US-China relations is not a simple task. However, historical events suggest the possibility of a long-term, structural effect of norms. The Tiananmen Square protest and its aftermath are understood to be

important for the United States and China in terms of the issues of human rights and democracy. The United States adopted strong measures against the Chinese government, including the suspension of military sales, the cancellation of high-level visits and regular meetings between the two countries, and a request to stop all new loans from the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. Harsher measures followed, such as the revocation of China's most favored nation status and the connection of the issue of human rights with trade (Schaefer, 1998). 'American bilateral monitoring' of Chinese human rights conditions officially ended with the decision of the Clinton administration not to link these two issues in 1994 (Kent, 1999, p. 235).

When the long-term dynamics are examined and a wider spectrum of human rights issues is surveyed, we find that human rights have been a key concern between the two countries at various levels. Since the Tiananmen Square incident, the conflicts and contestations have been moved to other venues, especially UN bodies such as the UN Commission on Human Rights (Foot, 2000, p. 22). The battle over human rights has taken place in the arenas of both bilateral and multilateral relations (Kent, 1995; Wan, 2001, p. 46). Scholars see the Tiananmen Square incident as a critical juncture – 'a watershed' for US–China relations – that had a lasting impact on not only bilateral relations but also on each country's general foreign policy orientations (Kent, 1999, p. 233; Foot, 2000; Wan, 2001; Suettinger, 2003).

First, bilaterally, the United States has continued to press China on human rights issues, especially through Congress. One example is the 1996 Congressional public hearing on Tiananmen Square in the House of Representatives. In addition, Congress passed a bill to extend student visas for Chinese students with overwhelming support from both the House of Representatives and the Senate. Although the president vetoed the bill, the government accepted many students and dissident activists through various asylum and immigration policies (Suettinger, 2003). Congress additionally passed numerous resolutions, including resolutions supporting Tibetan independence and the creation of Radio Free China (Manning, 1994, p. 195). These activities in Congress pressed the government, especially the State Department, to change their stance on matters of human rights, labor rights, and religious freedom in China.

These changes are reflected in US reporting practice on China, which produces important documentation in the State Department. The United States criticized human rights violations in China using the abovementioned annual human rights report and a separate report on religious freedom. In these reports, the conditions of religious freedom, the suppression of ethnic minorities, and the repression of Falun gong followers were addressed. The tone of these reports was 'highly critical', representing a drastic change from previous reports in which improvements had been extensively recorded (Foot, 2000, p. 122). In other words, Tiananmen Square changed the American belief that progress in human rights was occurring in China. After the Tiananmen protest, 'there was more of a willingness to acknowledge that human rights violations had been prevalent over a long period' (Foot, 2000, p. 122). Importantly, in subsequent reports to date, there has been little variation in perspective (Kim, 2015).

Second, at the level of multilateral relations, important moves have been made in terms of the politics of resolution adoption in the UN Commission on Human Rights and the General Assembly. The United States played 'a leading role' in sponsoring and lobbying UN resolutions criticizing the practices of China and requesting political change in 1995 (Wan, 2001, p. 48). For about 10 years afterwards, it was China's top priority to prevent any resolution on human rights in China from being passed in the UN (Sceats with Breslin, 2012). China adopted an active diplomatic strategy to avoid isolation and form close ties with other Asian nations (Wan, 2001, p. 45). Foot (2000, p. 148) states that 'the impact of Tiananmen on China's external relations was undeniably severe', since it illustrated 'the power of universal institutions' such as the UN. In other words, what happened between the United States and China over the Tiananmen Square event fundamentally shifted the goals and orientations of Chinese foreign policy, especially in terms of multilateralism.

In the international arena, the Tiananmen Square incident 'changed the landscape for the long-term future', because no one could deny the large-scale human rights violations occurring in China (Foot, 2000, p. 122; Kinzelbach, 2012, p. 330). China began to realize 'the significance of human rights as a legitimate subject for both domestic and international policies' (Zhu, 2011, p. 224). Thus, for Chinese multilateral diplomacy, human rights became a 'structural weakness' that China

had to overcome through active diplomacy (Nathan, 1994, p. 48). To overcome these weaknesses, China even made the difficult decision to study and eventually apply the concept of human rights internally and to issue white papers on human rights in 1991 (Foot, 2000, p. 148). Consequently, China stated, in the 2004 Constitution, that ‘the State respects and protects human rights’ and released the National Human Rights Action Plan of China in 2009. In the multilateral setting, China undertook ‘vigorous human rights diplomacy’ and pursued ‘a more active search for . . . like-minded’ states to ‘forge an alliance between developing countries’ (Kent, 1999; p. 234; Foot, 2000, p. 149; Kinzelbach, 2012, p. 327). China’s decision to itself engage in international human rights organization is a sign of progress since, for authoritarian states, their participation in international institutions has ‘the most significant causal influence’ on future compliance (Kent 2007, p. 219). For the United States over the long term, the 1994 decision to disconnect human rights from economics was not the end of human rights foreign policy toward China; it meant that the ‘explicit linkage’ strategy changed to ‘an implicit linkage between human rights and other issues in dispute between the two nations’, such as military buildup, trade balances, intellectual property rights, and Taiwan (Wan, 2001, p. 46).

In recent US–China relations, we still observe the long-term and multifaceted impact of human rights norms (McCain Institute, 2017, p. 4). As norm contestation scholars discovered, norms are dynamic and continuously contested and (re)interpreted (Krook and True, 2009; Sandholtz, 2008; Wiener, 2007). Thus, the content and format of interaction around human rights are always in flux. When we explore the past three US administrations, we note that human rights interactions with China have taken various forms on diverse issues. Some issues deal exclusively with human rights, while others are human rights issues related to other issues such as Internet governance, diplomatic relations, trade, and technology. The Bush administration focused on freedom of religion, while the Obama administration concerned itself with dissidents such as Liu Xiaobo and Chen Guangcheng, human rights activists and lawyers, the missing Hong Kong booksellers, draconian foreign NGO laws, and the Dalai Lama. The Trump administration has thus far emphasized the free flow of information in cyberspace and human rights abuses toward US citizens such as Sandy Phan-Gillis

(White House, 2017). Over time, the focal points have shifted and ‘the fault line’ has evolved with the changing nature of norms (Zhu, 2011, p. 218).

In addition, the main actors and venues of contestation have also shifted. The Tiananmen incident shifted the actors and venue from the state to Congress and from bilateral diplomacy to multilateral relations at the UN. The Obama administration had ‘a strong record for addressing human rights in China’ (Lewis, 2017, p. 476). The State Department criticized China’s Internet control and issued a joint statement with European countries on its deteriorating human rights record (Lewis, 2017, p. 472). At the same time, Congress still plays a key role, as we can see from the activities of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China. Public hearings have been held on Hong Kong’s autonomy and democracy, religious freedom, the role of Yahoo in aiding the Chinese government to arrest Shi Tao, and Chinese influence on the spread of authoritarianism. Moreover, a notable change has occurred in the activities of non-state actors. Traditionally, human rights organizations such as Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch have been vocal, but recently, private firms and businesses such as Google have started to add their voices to the discussion of issues such as the rule of law, transparency, cybersecurity, and the free flow of information (Lewis, 2017, p. 492).

4.3 The persistence of international norms

Scholars have identified a few characteristics of international norms and found that their most important characteristic is persistence. International norms are difficult to change. It is not impossible to change them, but it is difficult and usually takes a long time. Norms are not only created by several significant events but also by social, economic, and cultural factors that are deeply rooted in history. Change is not easy and once change occurs, it takes a long time to internalize the values and principles embodied in international norms. The long history of interaction between the United States and China provided fertile ground for norm competition between the two countries. The United States, upon China’s participation in the Korean War, ‘thought that China’s intervention in Korea showed that she was aggressive, not that she had legitimate concerns about her security’

(Jervis, 1976, p. 72). Confrontations over the use of biological weapons reaffirmed America's previous belief that China was aggressive and antagonistic. Jervis further argues that this negative perception continued in the United States and affected US foreign policy.

The persistence of norms is the result of norms being ideational factors, like values, identities, and perceptions. The most distinctive characteristic of these ideational factors is their tendency toward 'consistency or balance' (Jervis, 1976, p. 117). States tend to believe that 'countries we like do things we like, support goals we favor, and oppose countries that we oppose'; similarly, countries tend to think their enemies make proposals that would harm them, work against the interests of their friends, and aid their opponents (Jervis, 1976, pp. 117–118). In this process, even emotion leads to 'irrational consistency' in behavior, while expectations 'create predispositions that lead actors to notice certain things and to neglect others, to immediately and often unconsciously draw certain inferences from what is noticed, and to find it difficult to consider alternatives' (Jervis, 1976, pp. 55, 78, 145). Here, the most important characteristic of these ideational factors is consistency, regardless of the reason it is rational or irrational. The negative perception created during the early period of the Cold War, which for a short period improved during *détente*, deteriorated with the Tiananmen Square incident and had a lasting impact on US–China relations.

On various fronts, similar confrontations over human rights occurred. This struggle is often encountered during the UPR process. In this review process, China accepted all 41 of Asia and Africa's recommendations, while accepting only eight of 69 recommendations from Western Europe and other groups (McMahon and Ascherio, 2012, p. 245). In return, China made several recommendations to the United States. For example, China recommended that the United States address the root causes of racial discrimination; eliminate the excessive use of force against African Americans; fully disclose the abuse of torture by its intelligence agency; stop massive surveillance activities; and respect indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities' rights (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2015). In other areas of international norms, such as Responsibility to Protect and international criminal justice, scholars have confirmed that intense confrontation continues (Wu, 2010; Tao, 2015).

Scholars have identified some qualities of norms that are powerful and unlikely to change. [Finnemore and Sikkink \(1998, pp. 887–917\)](#) provide two such conditions: norms associated with a success model and norms that are similar to the already existing and widely accepted norms. The first condition suggests that the ‘world time context’ is important, according to which, ideas associated with the winning side of a conflict or with political or economic success are more likely to be effective ([Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998, p. 909](#)). The second element focuses on the content of norms to see whether new ideas are consistent with established norms and whether there is path dependence in norm dynamics. What is interesting is that ideas and norms promoted by both the United States and China have similar characteristics that easily meet the abovementioned conditions. For example, [Zhu \(2011, p. 232\)](#) argues that China is more effective in implementing its strategies due to its ‘increasing economic and political clout’.

As China rapidly moves to the center stage of world politics, the question of China’s international role is becoming more important than ever ([Zhang, 2013](#)). After surveying recent literature on the rise of China, [Zhang \(2013, p. 1407\)](#) argues that there is ‘China anxiety’ among scholars in the United States. Interestingly, the cause of China anxiety is not the material aspect of power that China has been projecting in the world but rather the challenge made by the political and economic success of China to the fundamental philosophical assumptions and political beliefs of the United States, such as belief in democracy or a liberal world order ([Ikenberry, 2008](#)). In other words, China anxiety in the United States is both a rational and an emotional response to the rise of the so-called Chinese model in both domestic and international politics. The fear is not unfounded, since the Chinese government, under Xi, has publicly announced its plan to increase its soft power significantly; it is challenging liberalism by combining Marxism with traditional Chinese values ([Yan, 2018](#)).

Scholars have found that the United States is attempting to ‘wrap a web of international obligations, relationships, and common understandings’ around China ([Tammen, 2008, p. 321](#)). This strategy was successful in the 1990s when the United States ‘socialized’ China to the norms and rules of the World Trade Organization. However, whether this will succeed again in the 21st century remains to be seen. If we evaluate the words and deeds of China to date, China is certainly not a

‘passive norm-taker’ (Sceats with Breslin, 2012, p. 2). The importance of this struggle can be examined on various fronts. First, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has already begun to emphasize soft power and public diplomacy (Shambaugh, 2013). The rise of Confucius Institutes around the world and the 2014 appointment of top deputy chief of the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) Publicity Department, Luo Shugang, as head of the Ministry of Culture are clear examples. Moreover, a new team of experts on international law was instituted in 2015 in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to address issues of territorial concern and the many extradition cases related to corruption and anti-government issues (Ng, 2015).

More evidence can be found in the Chinese domestic situation. The 2004 document of the Central Committee of the CCP, which defines Marxism as ‘an indispensable element of any innovative reformulation of IR theory by Chinese academia’ is clear evidence (Noesselt, 2015, p. 433). In 2013, the *New York Times* released the party’s document issuing a warning about seven subversive ideas of the West (Buckley, 2013), and in July 2015, a new national security law was passed, with a broad definition of security that encompasses culture, education, and cyberspace (WoNg, 2015). The recent crackdown on human rights lawyers by regional governments also demonstrates that the Chinese government has begun defending itself from Western norms and ideas in earnest.

Domestic and international norms could also be interconnected and become more persistent. Many international norms promoted by the United States and China are not simply internationally projected norms but norms that are respected in domestic practices, which makes them more resilient and persistent. An interesting case is China’s principle of noninterference in domestic affairs, which is a strong norm for China in protecting itself from external criticism. To sustain this position, China also maintained its ‘no strings attached’ approach to foreign aid and overseas development assistance policy toward many Asian and African countries. This policy, however, was in opposition to the current global norm of linking good governance with foreign aid, and thus created conflict with Western countries. It is highly unlikely that either the United States or China will suddenly change the promotional course of its ideas. The norms promoted by both

countries have also been historically consistent, which is an important element of legitimacy.

5 Conclusion

The United States and China are the two most important actors in world politics today. Despite many claims of US decline, the United States maintains its global influence in various issue areas, including economics, the military, and culture (Zakaria, 2008; Beckley, 2011). At the same time, the rise of China is another evident reality. China is displaying more assertive and challenging stances in diplomacy, especially in economic and military affairs in the region (Swaine, 2010; Swaine and Fravel, 2011). The creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the Belt and Road Initiative, and the New Development Bank indicate that China has the potential and the political will to challenge the US-led global order (Schweller and Pu, 2012). It is highly likely that US–China relations will profoundly affect the 21st-century international order.

Many important scholarly and popular studies have been conducted on this topic. Most research, however, tends to focus on military and strategic aspects or economic and financial relations. In other words, scholars interested in power, security, strategy, and economics have dominated research on US–China relations. There are a few exceptions to this general trend (Nathan, 1994; Van Ness, 1996; Wan, 1997; Foot, 2000). However, compared to the numerous studies focused on material power, there are few that emphasize ideational power. Norm- and idea-based disputes and rivalries have existed since China's first encounter with modern Western society (Gong, 1984; Hobson, 2004; Suzuki, 2009; Kang, 2013), although scholars have only recently started to emphasize the role of soft power and international norms in US–China relations.

It is expected that international human rights norms will become increasingly important in the future. The prospects of US–China relations, when examined from the perspective of human rights norm dynamics, are mixed. There has been a lengthy era of cooperation and a close relationship between the two countries, which could provide a model for the future. Ikenberry (2011, p. 2) maintains that the two countries have 'a remarkable range of common or overlapping

interests’. Chinese scholars like [Qin \(2010, p. 138\)](#) similarly argue that since international society is an ever-changing ‘process’, it is possible for the identities of both countries to change and transform the system. Scholars of Chinese human rights policy also argue that there have been ‘incremental and cautious changes in discourses and behavior’ ([Foot, 2010, p. 82](#)). There is still some hope because, as we have seen, the current normative structure is not created by the United States alone but with the input of China. Mutual learning and socialization between China and the United States or China and international organizations is another possibility ([Kent, 1999](#)). If norms have historically played a significant role in helping US–China relations, arriving at common values – or at least at common interests – is a possibility.

After applying constructivist insights to past and contemporary US–China relations, however, I expect a complete convergence of international norms to be difficult and lengthy. With President Trump, the future is even more uncertain. [Lewis \(2017, p. 476\)](#) similarly predicts that ‘human rights will remain a challenging facet of the U.S.–China relationship’. Although this prediction is based on her evaluation of the characteristics of Chinese leadership, which is repressive and long-term, the expectation is the same ([Lewis, 2017](#)). [Kinzelbach \(2012, p. 329\)](#) predicts, ‘with a considerable degree of certainty’, that Beijing ‘will continue to resist the notion of human rights that are universal and individualistic’. In sum, it is highly likely that the current dynamic of competition and confrontation will continue in the future.

Scholars of human rights have also predicted that in the realm of human rights norms, ‘great power politics’ will return ([Hopgood, 2014, p. 67](#)). Realist scholars expect that the level of dissatisfaction of both countries, which is a key concept of power transition theory, could increase. US–China relations are often understood to be a relationship of dominant power and challenging power ([Tammen and Kugler, 2006](#)). Conflicts are explained using two key variables: relative power difference and level of dissatisfaction. The level of dissatisfaction is ‘the major determinant of conflict’ ([Kugler and Tammen, 2004, p. 44](#)). An analysis based on norm dynamics shows that the level of dissatisfaction is highly likely to increase in the future. Heightened levels of dissatisfaction in both countries could provide fertile ground for further conflicts.

Some scholars are skeptical about the possibility of conflicts over norms, because the United States is not actively responding to the norms that China is proposing. However, it is highly doubtful that the US government will remain silent if there is parity in economic and military domains. In 2010, China's economy had already overtaken that of Japan to become the world's second-largest economy, and it is increasingly challenging the United States. China is also beginning to rival the presence of the US military in the Asia-Pacific region, and some analysts cautiously predict that this challenge might occur at the global level by the year 2035. If the current trend continues, China and the United States will eventually reach parity in their degree of power: first, in economic power, and then, in military power (Beckley, 2011; Shambaugh, 2013). US–China relations are ongoing, and conflicts in the areas of norms are likely to increase as security and economic relationships intensify.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was supported by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF-2015S1A5A2A03048000). This research was supported by the Asia Research Foundation Grant funded by the Seoul National University Asia Center (#SNUAC-2016-005).

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