

How to Debate the China Issue without China Bashing

By John Gershman

The congressional debate over China's trading status with the United States and its entry into the WTO has stirred a parallel debate among the directors and staff of Foreign Policy In Focus and within the two organizations—Institute for Policy Studies and Interhemispheric Resource Center—that sponsor the FPIF project. This essay is the first in a series of FPIF discussion papers examining the internationalist and nationalist tendencies within the fair trade movement in the United States. We invite readers to join the discussion by sending their comments to tom@irc-online.org for inclusion in the FPIF's ezine, The Progressive Response.

For Americans, “China has not been a nation—but a metaphor,” observes University of Chicago historian Bruce Cumings in *Parallax Visions*, his review of fifty years of U.S.-East Asian relations. It's an observation that helps explain the intensifying debate over China's accession to the WTO and the upcoming Congressional vote on permanently granting normal trade relations (NTR) status to China. Granting permanent normal trade relations (PNTR) would obviate the need to approve NTR treatment for China annually—which Congress has done since 1980, after China signed a bilateral trade agreement with the United States.

For the largely business-led campaign to approve PNTR, China is the grand economic prize: the world's largest market and source of cheap labor. For many opponents, China symbolizes all that is wrong with a corporate-driven form of economic globalization. In the words of AFL-CIO spokeswoman Denise Mitchell, “The China vote is going to become a proxy for all of our concerns about globalization.” Other opponents view China as the last evil empire of communism and a major security threat to the United States.

But I argue that there are good, progressive, internationalist reasons to support approving PNTR; and that supporting PNTR does not require buying the arguments of the business-dominated, pro-PNTR camp. These arguments—including that PNTR and China's entry into the WTO will lead to greater prosperity for the majority of Chinese and U.S. citizens, and that they will support the expansion of democracy in China—are in fact not likely. Passage of PNTR and China's entry into the WTO will not lead to greater prosperity for all (or even most) Americans and Chinese, as business supporters claim. But to acknowledge this is not to say that China's integration into the global economy and its membership in the WTO will, *in and of itself*, worsen poverty levels, income disparities, worker conditions, and environmental deterioration. These are problems arising from the global capitalist economy, current free trade rules, and the growing power of transnational corporations relative to states and citizen movements—not attributable to China. Nor is PNTR

likely to promote democracy. While PNTR and China's entry into the WTO will probably extend the level of transparency in China on issues of contracts, regulation of foreign investment, intellectual property rights (IPRs), and other concerns primarily of interest to corporations, this may very well be associated with greater crackdowns on independent organizing efforts by Chinese workers and peasants.

The focus on PNTR and China's membership in the WTO has led progressive trade activists into dangerous alliances and has fostered China bashing, and, in the process, has shifted attention away from the structural problems created by unregulated corporate power and unaccountable institutions of global economic governance—like the WTO—in the global economy.

Many, if not most, voices in the anti-PNTR campaign echo the arrogant and destructive tradition of U.S. unilateralism—a tradition most often embraced by reactionary political groups, not progressive ones. It also reinforces a growing anti-Chinese racist tendency within U.S. politics, embodied in the prosecution of Los Alamos scientist Wen Ho Lee, accusations of Chinese spying, and campaign-finance scandals in which some Asian-American Democratic Party supporters have been convicted.

What's At Stake

The congressional vote on PNTR is the next step following the November 15, 1999, trade and investment agreement between the U.S. and China. That agreement, together with similar agreements with Japan and Canada, paved the way for China's accession to the WTO, although China still needs to complete negotiations with the European Union to have all four of the Quad powers (the most powerful actors in the WTO) on board to approve China's WTO membership. The November agreement was greeted with strong approval by the U.S. business community not only because it creates new

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investment and trade opportunities, but also because it adds additional protections against Chinese imports (including a delayed reduction of U.S. quotas for Chinese textile exports and safeguards against import surges).

The November trade deal will eventually increase the access to U.S. markets for goods produced in China. It will also increase the access for U.S. goods, services, and capital to China as soon as PNTR is granted. It's certainly true that the U.S. suffers a large trade deficit with China, but increased protection of U.S. markets against Chinese imports (as many PNTR opponents propose) would not be likely to alter the overall U.S. trade deficit, since much of China's export production would simply shift to other countries that have PNTR status.¹

The November 15th agreement was the crucial hurdle on the U.S. side for approval of China's accession to the WTO. For this agreement to become operational, Congress must approve PNTR for China. However, China can join the World Trade Organization with or without the PNTR vote. The failure to approve PNTR would mean that China *could* restrict the access of U.S. goods and services to the Chinese market, as would be China's right under WTO rules.² Furthermore, a failure to approve PNTR would heighten tensions between the United States and China and would likely strengthen the hand of hard-liners in Beijing.

Although the government has been loosening state control, China's economy is still not the open, liberalized one in the image of what the U.S. has been exporting around the world. The November 15th agreement includes commitments by Beijing to significantly open sectors of its economy (especially in finance) that had sheltered China from some of the contagion effects of the Asian crisis. By liberalizing China's economy, the agreement would weaken its ability to stem financial contagion. China's lack of foreign exchange convertibility has prevented extensive speculative attacks on its currency and was critical to China's key role in preventing the 1997-98 Asian *cum* global economic crisis from spreading.

If implemented, the agreement will also deepen the internal divisions that have emerged since China's economic opening to the international economy. The social

and ecological costs of China's economic transformation since 1979 have been immense. Growing inequality within urban areas and between urban and rural areas suggests that significant grievances and unrest lie just below the surface. There are regular reports of demonstrations, particularly in rural areas, relating to corrupt local officials, floods, and high taxes. After the flooding of the Yangtze River in mid-1998, there were 130 reports of rural rebellion in four provinces, including the attacking and occupying of government offices. Labor unrest is at levels unprecedented since the Chinese Communist Party came to power in 1949.

China has allowed the first bank to fail since 1949 and is in the process of privatizing large sections of its economy, including enterprises previously managed by the military. The financial sector, including both state banks and the provincial and municipal fundraising and investment institutions known as ITICs, is also in serious trouble. China has begun a restructuring of non-bank financial institutions. Managing this transformation presents daunting challenges for China's political leadership, especially at a time when both overall and export growth rates are slowing, and the dramatic inequality that has accompanied rapid growth is threatening China's political stability.³

Divergent Views on China and the WTO

As the divisions increase around the pending China vote, the Clinton administration is facing the predictable consequences of having allowed commercial interests to overshadow other concerns in shaping policy toward China. The Clinton administration's China policy—described as "manic mercantilism" by one analyst—has focused on expanding trade and investment opportunities for U.S. corporations, and has included pressure for intellectual property rights for film and music companies.

In the six years since the Clinton administration formally delinked progress on human rights from the annual vote on granting China temporary NTR, the number of congressional representatives voting in favor of NTR has slowly but steadily increased. Because it is an election year and because many of the forces mobilized at

Seattle have targeted China as their next issue, the vote over PNTR will be more contentious this time, and the result is by no means certain. Opponents and supporters of PNTR status span a spectrum from outright opposition, to support with conditions, to outright support, to the viewpoint that "It's not China, it's Corporate-Led Globalization."

The most vocal supporters of PNTR are those in the business community with interest in expanded trade and investment opportunities in China—primarily, but not exclusively, larger transnational corporations. Also lending strong support to the pro-PNTR campaign are the nation's leading foreign policy think tanks and Asia scholars.

The opposition to PNTR is more heterogeneous. One wing comprises veterans of the "Battle in Seattle," including the AFL-CIO, the Citizen Trade Campaign, Friends of the Earth, and many other environmental, fair trade, and human rights groups. Opposition from this progressive coalition ranges from fears about job losses associated with low-wage Chinese imports, to concerns about violations of labor, human rights, and environmental standards. Some labor and other groups also oppose China's entry into the WTO because reforming the WTO to add a social clause and/or environmental conditions would be more difficult with China as a voting member. These groups perceive China's membership as strengthening the largely Southern opposition to the inclusion of labor and environmental conditions regarding trade within the WTO. For example, in John Sweeney's testimony to the Senate Finance Committee in March, 2000 he argued, in part, against granting WTO membership to China, because it would "give the world's biggest lawbreaker a voice in writing the rules." In another statement, Sweeney called China "a rogue nation that decorates itself with human rights abuses as if they were medals of honor."⁷ In his speech at the AFL-CIO's "No Blank Check for China" rally on April 12, 2000 he even brought out the standard canard of China as military threat against Taiwan as one reason for opposing PNTR.

Activists with a progressive internationalist stance, in contrast to the nationalist stances above, provide two main reasons for denying PNTR status for China. One is the provided by American University

China and Human Rights

China's record on human rights is clearly mixed and uneven. At the national level, explicit challenges to the Communist Party's monopoly of power are met with repression. Yet some spaces in civil society, albeit closely watched, have been carved out for organizations (other than independent labor unions) that are not explicitly political, and there is a not insignificant process of fairly competitive elections occurring in China's rural villages. More than 75% of China's total population lives in rural areas and votes for village committees every three years. However, on the national level, the crackdown on the Falun Gong religious organization illustrates the government's continuing fear of the emergence of large-scale citizen organizations outside of Communist Party control.

China signed the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) in 1997 and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in 1998. It is unclear when either will be ratified. China has not ratified key International Labor Organization (ILO) conventions regarding the abolition of forced labor, and protecting the rights of free association, and the right to organize and bargain collectively. (Of these, the U.S. has ratified only the ICCPR and the ILO convention on forced labor).

On security and economic issues, China has engaged positively in multilateral forums. However, it has been reluctant to engage with multilateral institutions when the subject is human rights. The September 1998 visit by UN Human Rights Commissioner Mary Robinson received mixed reviews, but her visit did set the stage for the United States to advance its human rights agenda as part of a broader multilateral agenda. Some human rights organizations gave Clinton high marks for his comments during his visit in June 1998 when he stated that the Tiananmen crackdown was wrong and argued that "stability in the twenty-first century will require high levels of freedom" in China. But much more could be done in U.S. private and public diplomacy to pressure China to improve its human rights record.

Washington sponsored a resolution critical of China at the UN Commission on Human Rights in 1999. But it did so in a somewhat unenthusiastic manner, waiting to announce its intention to issue the resolution until shortly before the Commission met, rather than trying to build broader support earlier. This year, under pressure from human rights advocates and mindful of the PNTR debate, the Clinton administration was more forceful in proposing the resolution, which was defeated by a Chinese government-sponsored No Action motion, as in 1999. The U.S. lobbying effort still lacked high-level White House involvement, with President Clinton himself not being involved. When previously faced with credible human rights campaigns in Geneva, China has taken some positive, albeit limited, steps forward—such as signing UN human rights treaties or releasing high-profile political prisoners. After many years of dismissing human rights concerns, Beijing has started to include in its public diplomacy some high-flown language about the importance of human rights and the rule of law. Clearly, the U.S. must work with other nations to keep up the pressure to ensure that this rhetoric is translated into new policies.

With respect to China, two major areas relating to sovereignty and human rights are Hong Kong and Tibet. The transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong from Great Britain to China on July 1, 1997, and the installation of the new Special Administrative Region (SAR) government were arguably the most important events in the territory's history. The political transition produced no dramatic crackdowns, no arrests, and no bans on demonstrations. The U.S. should monitor the human rights situation in Hong Kong to insure that China maintains its commitments to respecting democracy and human rights. With respect to Tibet, the Clinton administration, mindful of the powerful lobby of Tibetan exiles and supporters, has maintained an ambivalent posture, giving official support to the voices of the Tibet Lobby, while not disavowing stated U.S. policy that Tibet is indeed a province of China.⁴

economist Robin Hahnel, who argues that Americans "should oppose China's entry into the WTO on grounds that it will

adversely affect the lives of the great majority of Chinese as well as the lives of a majority of Americans." Critical of the

China as a Security Threat

The currently dominant security policy in the Clinton administration holds that China has essentially replaced the former Soviet Union as the chief strategic threat to the United States in Asia, and that the U.S. should essentially retain its cold war containment strategy, with China targeted as the new antagonist. Rather than incorporating China into a common security strategy for Asia, the U.S. continues to label China as a major security threat—a position that has enabled the U.S. defense establishment to maintain the bilateral military alliances of the cold war and to develop the new Theater-based Missile Defense system, designed to protect South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan with a U.S.-crafted missile shield.⁵ China's defense budget has grown by more than 50% in real terms over the course of the 1990s and is projected to increase 12.7% in 2000, the 11th straight year of double-digit increases in defense spending. China's occupation of 11 islands and reefs in the Spratlys, including Mischief Reef, 378 kilometers from the Philippines, is also used as evidence of Beijing's expansionist nature (virtually all habitable portions of the Spratlys have now been taken by various claimants, including Vietnam, Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei).

But China is not an aggressive, expansionist power. As home to the world's largest population, encompassing a vast territory, and preoccupied with managing a wrenching transition to a more open market-oriented economy, China's focus is largely domestic. Chinese policy for the past two decades, according to Harvard University Professor Alastair Iain Johnston, has been "to subordinate military modernization to development of the overall civilian economy."⁶ China's increased military spending goes largely to salaries and subsidies for military-owned industries.

Furthermore, China is faced with significant security challenges of its own. It has the largest number of bordering countries of any country in the world, including long-time adversaries Russia, Vietnam, and India. Also bordering China are the new Central Asian states carved out of the former Soviet Union, which Beijing regards as potential threats, in part because they may ally with minority groups within China.

And China's threat to the U.S. pales in comparison with the U.S. threat to China. Of China's nuclear arsenal of roughly 400 warheads, only about 20 are capable of reaching the United States (which has more than 8,300 operational warheads, nearly all of which could be targeted against China). China's long-range ballistic missiles number fewer than two dozen, carry a single warhead, and are liquid-fueled—all 982 U.S. ballistic missiles, including 432 aboard invulnerable Trident submarines, carry multiple warheads (MIRVs) and are solid-fueled, allowing launch on short notice. China has also demonstrated an increasing willingness to participate in efforts to control the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction by subscribing to or signing since 1992: the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), the Chemical and Biological Weapons Conventions, and the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR).

Today, China's major concerns involve dealing with massive economic and political transformations—transformations that will only become more dramatic if China enters the WTO and meets its commitments under the various agreements it signs with the Quad powers. In such a context, an aggressive U.S. military posture strengthens the *realpolitik* advocates within China's security apparatus. A better strategy would recognize the longer-term strategic benefits of enmeshing the U.S. and China within multilateral security frameworks that provide the opportunity for confidence building measures, mutually verifiable force reductions and disarmament commitments, and that address the multiple nonmilitary threats to security in the region. China's WTO membership and PNTR status would facilitate such steps.

stances of many other opponents to China's entry into the WTO, he argues that opposition to China's entry into the WTO based on human rights grounds or the difficulty it poses in reforming the WTO is arrogant and employs double standards. He argues that the United States government has no

authority to sit in judgment on the human rights records of other governments, especially given the U.S. government's own complicity in human rights violations worldwide, and its failure to ratify many international human rights agreements. He also brands as hypocritical those who

advocate both the democratization of the WTO and the exclusion of the world's most populous country from the WTO.⁸

The second reason progressive internationalists provide is that defeating PNTR for China is an important tactical battle in the fight against corporate-led globalization.

Like other trade fights, the opposition to the administration also includes a broad spectrum of adversaries: right-wing forces that would like to further isolate what they perceive as an aggressive China; businesses in sectors like textiles and garments that will eventually suffer from increased low-cost imports from China; the Tibet Lobby; and Christian fundamentalists. Some PNTR opponents belong to what is known as the Blue Team—a loose-knit, rightwing lobby that includes congressional members and staff, think tank analysts, Republican Party operatives, conservative journalists, former intelligence officials, and a handful of academics. According to the *Washington Post*, the Blue Team has had considerable success in championing issues such as China's military threat, violations of religious freedom, the Chinese spy scandal, and U.S. military support for Taiwan. Many, though not all, Blue Team members oppose U.S. trade with China in addition to China's proposed WTO membership. Some, however, argue that increased trade and investment will raise pressure to broaden political freedom in China.⁹

This diverse anti-PNTR alliance has fostered a spate of unprincipled analysis. Whatever ammunition can be found that might win the battle against PNTR is being used to bash China. Mike Dolan, Deputy Director of Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch and Field Director of the Citizens Trade Campaign, has called activists to put "progressive pressure" to defeat PNTR for "the brutal, arrogant, corrupt, autocratic, and oligarchic regime in Beijing." Robert Scott of the Economic Policy Institute presents arguments that combine many of the opposition positions in a way that is more identifiably nationalist than progressive, contending that "China can wait" to enter the WTO because the Chinese government violates labor rights, China is a non market economy, and Beijing pursues "market distorting government policies, including requirements for technology transfer to domestic firms, local content and offset requirements."¹⁰

Essentially, he criticizes China for not being sufficiently *laissez faire* (i.e., not looking like the U.S. economy) and calls for the elimination of the very policies that have been central to the relatively successful development strategies of several Asian countries. These policies, including the strategic use of protectionism, active state regulation of foreign investment, and significant government direction of the financial sector, were all key components of the relatively rapid growth achieved by Japan, Taiwan, and Korea in the post-war era, and have been central to China's high-speed growth in the 1980s and 1990s. Such regulations can be used to force the transfer of greener production technologies, a major objective of sustainable development advocates.

The criticism of China for labor and human rights violations is on target, but having a pro-labor think tank argue that the Chinese economy should restructure itself in a more *laissez faire* fashion underscores the unprincipled character of much of the anti-PNTR coalition.

Supporting PNTR after stipulating human rights conditions is the position of Human Rights Watch. In testimony before Congress, Mike Jendrzeczk, Washington director of Human Rights Watch's Asia Division, argued that WTO membership would provide some incentives for China to become more respectful of international law: "Restructuring China's economy to fit WTO standards will give a boost to those within China arguing that it must open up further both politically and economically if it is to be a respected member of the international community." But broader trade with China can be consistent with advancing human rights only if it is combined with effective, sustained pressure on China to respect basic civil and political rights, according to Jendrzeczk. Human Rights Watch does not take positions on trade agreements, but it recommends that "in exchange for PNTR, Congress should insist on reciprocal concrete steps on human rights by China. The Congress should set concrete, meaningful, and realistic human rights conditions that China must meet before receiving PNTR. The President should be required to certify that these conditions have been met, and this could happen any time following China's accession to the WTO." These conditions would include, for example, the stipulation

that within one year of receiving PNTR status, China should be required to:

- Ratify both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).
- Begin dismantling its huge system of "reeducation through labor," which each year allows officials to sentence thousands of citizens to labor camps for up to three years without judicial review.
- Open up Tibet and Xinjiang to regular, unhindered access by UN human rights and humanitarian agencies, the foreign press, and independent monitors.
- Review the sentences of more than 2,000 "counterrevolutionaries" with a view toward releasing most of them.

use China a metaphor or a proxy for their real concerns about the direction of the global economy. I argue that the real issue is corporate-led globalization, not China, and that's where the reform agenda should be focused—not on PNTR and blocking China's entry into the WTO.

To support PNTR does not mean to accept that human rights issues should be de-emphasized in favor of business concerns. It simply means that China should not be selectively evaluated and that normal trading relations should not be held hostage to annual congressional reviews. Human rights should be a major thrust of U.S. diplomatic efforts in all negotiations with China. But, as Robin Hahnel notes, the application of human rights grounds to China's trade status reeks of arrogance, unilateralism, and double standards. Advancing human and labor rights and

The Clinton administration is facing the predictable consequences of having allowed commercial interests to overshadow other concerns in shaping policy toward China.

These are legitimate issues that Washington should raise in its diplomacy and negotiations with Beijing. But when these demands are linked to the granting of a trade status enjoyed by all but a handful of the world's nations, they constitute a foreign policy characterized by selective treatment and double standards. If the U.S. were to demand that China ratify the ICESCR as a condition for normal trading status, it would be obligating China to meet a standard that the U.S. itself has not met. In addition, on a practical level, these conditions seem tantamount to blocking PNTR because China certainly won't accept them.

It's Not China, It's Corporate-Led Globalization

PNTR opposition draws from both sides of the political spectrum, but on both the left and right, the opposition forces tend to

environmental sustainability in China requires positive programs to support and encourage positive steps, not just a policy of sanctions.

To support PNTR does not mean that increased trade with China is necessarily good for U.S. workers. PNTR could create incentives for greater investment by U.S. corporations in China that would lead to job losses and downward pressure on wages in the United States. But it is not clear that defeating PNTR is the best approach for addressing these concerns. There are some benefits for U.S. workers in the November 15 agreement, including explicit safeguard provisions for import surges. The proposed legislation for granting PNTR status to China includes new resources for the USTR and Department of Commerce to monitor China's compliance with the agreement. For all their flaws, WTO dispute resolution mechanisms would strengthen multilateral oversight of China's compliance with international rules and remove

the emphasis on unilateral mechanisms. The main benefits of trade policies that attempt to protect vulnerable sectors in the United States will mostly accrue to protected businesses. Instead of shaping foreign policy around the interests of a few economic sectors, policymakers should instead focus on funding more effective retraining, income, and trade adjustment assistance programs. Such measures would provide a far better strategy for attempting to manage global economic integration,

for three reasons. First, the historical and contemporary political context suggests that the benefits of defeating PNTR for China would be reaped more by the right wing and nationalists than by progressive internationalists. Second, focusing the debate on China's PNTR status displaces limited resources away from other direct struggles against corporate-led globalization. It is notable that while the AFL-CIO did endorse the recent Mobilization for Global Justice in Washington, D.C. that

camp, holds China to a double standard, risks endangering improved U.S.-China security relations, and diverts attention away from the corporate practices in the global economy. The main challenges to U.S. workers are posed by transnational corporations and the unaccountable organizations that govern the world economy. These corporations—not China—are the appropriate targets of those concerned about globalization. Furthermore, there are important peace and security issues, also of importance to progressive internationalists, that argue for enmeshing China within multilateral organizations.

Both the left and right opposition tend to use China a metaphor or a proxy for their real concerns about the direction of the global economy.

than trying to isolate China from the world and the U.S. from China.

It is likely that China's entry into the WTO will be bad for China's workers. But should the U.S. government, in the absence of a call from a dissident Chinese movement with popular support, reject PNTR in the name of the Chinese people? Should progressive internationalists speak in the name of Chinese workers and peasants? The sanctions in Burma and apartheid-era South Africa were requested by internationally recognized leaders of democratic liberation movements. To date, none of the major Chinese human rights organizations are calling for a rejection of PNTR, nor have any of the democratic trade unions or labor organizations within China. They rightly, however, point to the fact that the Clinton administration has fought much harder for the rights of U.S. businesses than for human rights. Would a defeat of PNTR lead to greater human rights efforts on the part of the U.S.? Would those efforts be more effective? There is no evidence that they would be, since China's NTR status has been approved annually in spite of a worsening human rights situation since 1998.

What of the argument that the anti-PNTR campaign is an important tactical battle in the struggle against corporate-led globalization? I argue that this is incorrect

targeted the World Bank and IMF, its own mobilization focused on defeating PNTR for China. That reflects a clear strategic choice about the use of resources. Finally, whatever tactical leverage is gained in the fight against globalization is gained at the cost of undermining multilateralism and internationalism. The anti-PNTR position at least implicitly—and often explicitly—argues for the need to retain annual NTR review of China by the U.S. government. Emphasizing the use of the annual reviews for NTR relies upon the Jackson-Vanik amendment, a cold war era relic, which specifically targeted then-communist/state-socialist countries. Progressives, especially internationalists, should not be reinforcing the legal infrastructure of the cold war to make our points. If an annual review is to take place, make it a consistent, across-the-board requirement. Intentions aside, campaigning against PNTR status for China as a tactical maneuver in the fight against globalization reproduces the U.S. unilateralism central to the nationalist and reactionary agendas, and is criticized as such even by such anti-PNTR advocates as Hahnel.

Focusing on PNTR as a defining issue runs the risk of stigmatizing China as the source of U.S. economic problems, reinforces the interests of the most reactionary and racist members of the opposition

Pitfalls and Contradictions

U.S.-China relations will be at the center of the U.S. political scene this year because of the pending vote on PNTR and the election campaign (a time in modern American political life when China bashing is always popular). Stigmatizing China as a threat to U.S. economic and military security may win sound bites and possibly even votes. And citizen groups may find a certain popular resonance in blaming China for America's economic woes. But to augment or to lend credence to such xenophobic policy analysis undermines the internationalist claims of U.S. citizen and labor organizations while deterring progress toward the creation of a more progressive policy agenda for improved U.S.-China relations. Writing in *The Nation* (January 31, 2000) about attempts to reform the global economy, William Grieder observed that "reformers from the wealthy nations, especially the United States, must first establish their bona fide intentions... Poorer countries are naturally skeptical of our high-minded motives, since they've had long experience with the power of American self-righteousness. If this movement is truly international, it will begin by convincing distant others (the citizens, if not their governments) that our commitment to common humanity is genuine." By joining in the anti-China crusade against PNTR, U.S. reformers risk casting doubt about their true intentions and motives.

Certainly, it's important to keep up the popular and political pressure against corporate-led economic globalization. But China—the world's most populous nation—should not be used as a proxy in

the battle to change the rules of the global economy. And progressives concerned about the direction of economic globalization should be more careful about joining alliances of convenience with the right wing—a pattern that emerged in the NAFTA fight and continued in the political battles against fast track legislation and the IMF. Given the historical difficulties of moving the progressive economic agenda forward, the U.S. labor movement and the citizens fair trade movement have decided to hang their own anti-free trade agenda on the legislative hook of China's NTR status. Such a strategy entails more costs (delegitimizing the progressive agenda in the U.S., increasing U.S.-China tensions, bolstering hard-liners and militarists in China) than perceived benefits (keeping China out of the WTO, protecting vulnerable U.S. industries, obstructing the free trade agenda).

If the fair trade movement needs a legislative hook with which to target the WTO, there are other options. As required under the legislation that approved U.S. entry into the WTO, the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) prepared a report on U.S. gains and losses after five years of membership in the WTO and delivered it to Congress in January 2000. The legislation has a provision that allows a congressional vote on maintaining U.S. membership if such a bill is introduced in Congress within 90 days of the issuing of the USTR report. Such a bill has been introduced, but WTO opponents led by the Citizens Trade Campaign have decided not to mobilize to have Congress terminate U.S. membership in the WTO. Citizens

Trade Campaign (CTC) says it's a battle that they can't win and argues that engaging in such a losing battle would legitimize continued U.S. membership in the WTO. Instead they have focused on the vote to grant China uncontested normal trading relations along with all but a few other nations. The CTC (among others) feels the PNTR campaign has a better chance of success, because the self-identified fair trade forces can count on the strong anti-China sentiment in Congress.

If the WTO is the problem, then reforming or abolishing the WTO should be goal—not isolating China.¹¹ The focus should stay on the WTO itself, rather than making China a referendum on the WTO or, as the AFL-CIO spokeswoman says, “a proxy for all of our concerns about globalization.” If globalization is the issue (or perhaps more accurately, global capitalism), make that the fight.

Since the early 1990s, some progressive forces opposing the dominant free trade agenda have repeatedly joined formal and informal alliances with nationalist and reactionary forces. In some cases, these alliances have failed (annual votes on China's NTR status and passage of NAFTA), while in other cases they have succeeded (fast track votes). These alliances are understandable because politics is inherently a game of tactical alliances. But as leading elements in the progressive community are about to throw their support behind another such alliance, more reflection and clarity are needed regarding the conditions under which such alliances should be forged and important questions need to be asked:

Does a short-term victory of stopping PNTR—and thereby perhaps slowing down globalization—enhance the long-term goal of redirecting globalization? What are the implications of this selective treatment of China for international peace and security? This fight against China is dominated by advocacy groups focused on achieving legislative victories—forging whatever alliances are deemed necessary and using whatever ammunition is at hand to ensure victory. But such an approach has implications beyond Washington DC politics. The alliances formed around global economy issues over the past decade have set a dangerous direction for the powerful citizens movement in the United States. The right-left lobbying alliance in Washington has given the fair trade movement a nationalist, unilateralist, protectionist, and U.S.-centric edge.

By using China as a proxy, progressives risk promoting self-righteous double standards while sacrificing a distinctly progressive internationalism. It's an internationalism that in rhetoric—and more importantly in practice—differs sharply from the globalism of the corporate and foreign policy elite. It's an internationalism that has historically opposed the reactionary nationalist strain within populism. Traditionally, the advocacy of unilateral (rather than multilateral) instruments to shape international affairs has not come from the progressive community. It is time to break the tradition of dealing with China as a metaphor or as a proxy, and instead deal with China as China.

Endnotes

¹ See FPIF, “What's This Organization: An Abbreviated Glossary of Terms and Concepts about the World Trade Organization,” posted at: http://www.foreignpolicy-infocus.org/wto_contents.html

² If Congress rejects PNTR, the Clinton administration will be forced to invoke the “nonapplication clause” of the WTO charter, which permits either a current WTO member or an incoming member to refuse to apply WTO commitments to one another. The U.S. could still vote in favor of China's WTO accession, but it would not be bound by WTO rules for trade and dispute settlement. China could also invoke the “nonapplication clause” for trade with the U.S. prior to becoming a WTO member.

³ For analysis about political dynamics in China, see James H. Nolt, “China and the WTO: The Debate,” FPIF, December 1999, Vol. 4, No. 38, posted at: <http://www.foreignpolicy-infocus.org/briefs/vol4/v4n38china.html>

⁴ See Tom Grunfeld, “Reassessing Tibet Policy,” FPIF, Vol. 5, No. 9, April 2000, posted at: <http://www.foreignpolicy-infocus.org/briefs/vol5/v5n09tibet.html>

⁵ See James H. Nolt, “U.S.-China-Taiwan Security Relations,” FPIF, Vol. 5, No. 11, April 2000, posted at: <http://www.foreignpolicy-infocus.org/briefs/vol5/v5n11china.html>

⁶ Quoted in Robert G. Kaiser and Steven Mufson, “‘Blue Team’ Draws a Hard Line on Beijing; action on Hill Reflects Informal Group's Clout,” *Washington Post*, February 22, 2000.

⁷ “Statement by AFL-CIO President John Sweeney on China and the WTO,” November 15, 1999, posted at <http://www.aflcio.org/>

⁸ Robin Hahnel, *The Right and Wrong Reasons for Opposing China's Entry into the WTO*, Feb 21, 2000, <http://www.zmag.org/ZSustainers/ZDaily/2000-02/21hahnel.htm>

⁹ Robert Kaiser and Steven Mufson, “‘Blue Team’ Draws a Hard Line on Beijing,” *Washington Post*, February 22, 2000.

¹⁰ Robert E. Scott, *China Can Wait: WTO Accession Deal Must Include Enforceable Labor Rights, Real Commercial Benefits*, Briefing Paper, Economic Policy Institute, 1999.

¹¹ This is roughly the position of the Institute for Food and Development Policy (Food First). See comments of Anuradha Mittal, Food First's Policy Director posted on *The Progressive Response* at: <http://www.foreignpolicy-infocus.org/progresp/vol3/prog3n45.html>

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