**The WTO and APEC: What Role for China?**

China applied to rejoin the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) over a decade ago and negotiations for China’s entry into GATT’s successor, the World Trade Organisation (WTO), are still proceeding. China has participated in regional economic cooperation processes for about the same period. Our interest in China’s approach to the WTO and to the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC) lies, in part, in China’s motivation for, and approach to, its interactions with those organisations. We are also interested in how China’s participation does or might impinge on the existing members of those organisations and the global trading system that those organisations represent. The institutions themselves also have interests that are affected.

In assessing what role China might play in these institutions, we need to examine some broader questions about China’s approach to international cooperation in general, and about the extent to which, in its acceptance of the benefits of international cooperation and economic interdependence, it is willing to meet the obligations and commitments implied in membership of such organisations, including constraints on domestic policy autonomy. Of particular interest is, therefore, the extent to which there has been a learning process (cognitive or adaptive) on the part of Chinese individuals, organisations and systems of government following China’s involvement with these organisations, not only with respect to participation in the international system but also in terms of domestic social and political development.

**Background**

China, while under the Nationalist Government, was one of the 23 original signatories of GATT. The Nationalists withdrew from GATT in 1950 following their exodus to Taiwan. When, in 1980, the then People’s Republic of China (PRC) resumed its seat on the United Nations (UN) Interim Commission for the International Trade Organisation, which appointed the Director-General of GATT, this was taken to be an indication of Chinese interest in GATT (Jacobsen and Oksenberg 1990, p. 84). In 1981, China started to observe GATT meetings dealing with the renewal of the Multifibre Arrangement (MFA). China became a member of the MFA in January 1984. In November 1982, China had started to observe ministerial level GATT meetings, and in December 1984 it became a permanent observer at meetings of the GATT council and its subordinate bodies.

In July 1986, China formally applied to resume its status as a contracting party to the GATT. A working party was set up in 1987 to consider the terms of China’s entry. Negotiations have been proceeding since then on the conditions of China’s admission to what is now the