

China's Concerns on the Core Issues of Digital Trade

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Abstract. In the current era of digital trade, more and more regional free trade agreements regulate e-commerce or cross-border flows of data, and the WTO has started plurilateral e-commerce negotiations as well. With the gradual emergence of China's industrial advantages in the field of cross-border e-commerce, it has increasingly expressed its point of views on digital trade rules on various occasions. China is currently in RCEP and may soon join CPTPP and DEPA. Moreover, China has already put forward its claims in the WTO. However, although China has introduced a lot of laws and regulations in the field of digital law, it still needs to further improve the legal system of outbound data transfer in the future, and China needs to further clarify its position on controversial digital trade issues, striking a balance between data security and data free flow. component; digital trade; cross-border e-commerce; outbound data transfer; cross-border data flow.

Keywords: digital trade; cross-border e-commerce; outbound data transfer; cross-border data flow.

1. Introduction

While there is no single recognized and accepted definition of digital trade, there is a growing consensus that it encompasses digitally-enabled transactions of trade in goods and services that can either be digitally or physically delivered, and that involve consumers, firms, and governments. At present, the rules of digital trade have flourished not only at the domestic level, but also at the regional level and even at the global level.

1.1 Regional level

It is worth noting that, at present, more and more regional free trade agreements ("FTAs") focus on digital trade. Over the past few decades, FTAs have become a central venue for discussion of data governance issues. FTAs has helped overcome some problems and contradictions in the multilateral WTO system, formulated new rules for new issues of digital trade, and shaped the regulatory environment for cross-border data flow. The cross-border data flow rules in the E-commerce/Digital Trade chapters of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership ("CPTPP") and the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement ("USMCA") represent the latest developments in FTAs' data governance rules. USMCA has stipulated many digital trade rules beyond the CPTPP framework. It can be considered that USMCA has further deepened the digital trade rules under the TPP framework. Even more noteworthy, Singapore, Chile and New Zealand signed the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement ("DEPA") in June 2020, which is considered the world's first "pure digital" trade agreement. Regulatory measures on cross-border data flow directly affect the development of digital trade, and restrictive measures (such as data localization measures) will constitute digital trade barriers.

In addition, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement ("RCEP") basically aligns with the core principles of the US-style model in terms of cross-border data flow and data localization. On January 1, 2022, the RCEP, to which China is a party, entered into force. Chapter 12 of the RCEP, "E-commerce", sets as its primary objective the "promote electronic commerce among the Parties and the wider use of electronic commerce globally; contribute to creating an environment of trust and confidence in the use of electronic commerce; and enhance cooperation among the Parties regarding development of electronic commerce".

1.2 Global level

In addition, under the plurilateral framework, the WTO established the “Work Programme on Electronic Commerce”, adopted by the General Council in September 1998, tasks four WTO bodies with exploring the relationship between existing WTO agreements and e-commerce. Due to the stagnation of the Doha Round negotiations, the program has been lacking in substantive results for a long time, except for some achievements in tariff exemption of electronic transmission.

Since July 2016, the United States took the lead in submitting a proposal on the comprehensive discussion of e-commerce in the WTO. China submitted its proposal on e-commerce to the WTO for the first time in November 2016 as well, actively participated in the multilateral discussion of the issue, and participated in the plurilateral negotiations of WTO E-commerce as the initiator. In December 2017, 71 WTO members issued a Joint Statement on E-commerce at the 11th Ministerial Conference of the WTO, launching the negotiation and exploration of trade-related e-commerce issues under the WTO framework. On January 25, 2019, 76 WTO members, including China, the United States and the European Union, representing 90 percent of world trade, signed a Joint Statement on E-commerce, launching plurilateral negotiations on WTO E-commerce. Since the negotiations were officially launched in March 2019, WTO members have submitted more than 30 proposals covering a wide range of traditional issues of e-commerce and new rules for digital trade, and many of them have proposed specific provisions.

Judging from the current shaping of digital trade rules, three paradigms are indisputably emerging: US model, EU model and Singapore model. The US model emphasizes high standard rules such as the protection of personal information, the free flow of cross-border data, the ban on open-source code, the non-discriminatory treatment of digital products, and the non-forced localization of data storage. Although rule text of EU model lacks a mature and complete system, it strives to actively promote the development of rules in the cooperation of Information and Communications Technology (ICT), and sticks to its position on “audio-visual exception” and protection of personal information, and also vary the “bid” according to the strength of a party’s comparative advantage. The Singapore model is highly innovative, taking into account original issues such as digital identity and the design of industry standards in the field of emerging technologies. Compared with RCEP, CPTPP and the Japan-EU Economic Partnership Agreement, Singapore model pays more attention to the cooperation and development of small and medium-sized enterprises. For example, DEPA advocates the construction of electronic payment systems with interoperability and connectivity; Require members’ e-invoicing systems to adopt international standards, guidelines or recommendations for their e-invoicing practices; Create rules for digital identity, fintech and artificial intelligence. In terms of data innovation and sharing rules, there are also advanced systems such as regulatory data sandboxes and government data disclosure.

2. China’s participation in negotiations of Digital Trade

At present, China has participated in the RCEP, formally proposed to participate in the CPTPP and DEPA, and is engaged in plurilateral negotiations on WTO e-commerce. As mentioned above, CPTPP belongs to the US model, RCEP is developed on the basis of relevant regional trade rules of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (“ASEAN”), and DEPA belongs to the Singapore model, with great differences in emphasis and level of openness. Therefore, it means that in order to adapt to different negotiating counterparties and different focus on issues, China’s concern in the negotiation of different economic and trade treaties cannot and will not remain unchanged.

In terms of international cooperation, China has also taken an active part in the formulation of international rules in the digital field under multilateral mechanisms such as the United Nations, BRICS, G20 and APEC. China has initiated international cooperation initiatives such as the Initiative on “Jointly Build a Community with a Shared Future in Cyberspace”, the Initiative on International Cooperation in the Digital Economy of the Belt and Road Initiative, the “BRICS Digital Economy Partnership Framework”, and the Initiative on Digital Transformation of the

BRICS Manufacturing Industry. By the end of 2021, China had signed memorandum of understanding on Digital Silk Road cooperation with 17 countries and established bilateral cooperation mechanisms on Silk Road E-commerce with 23 countries. China's digital trade competitiveness is enhanced constantly.

2.1 RCEP

There are not many clauses on cross-border data flow in FTAs signed by China, and most of them are concentrated in financial chapters. The breakthrough trade agreement on cross-border data flow regulation participated by China is the RCEP.

First, China has for the first time included a clause on the “cross-border transfer of information by electronic means” in a trade agreement. The RCEP requires that “A Party shall not prevent cross-border transfer of information by electronic means where such activity is for the conduct of the business of a covered person”, while recognizing that “each Party may have its own regulatory requirements concerning the transfer of information by electronic means”, and shall not prevent a Party from adopting or maintaining measures necessary to achieve a legitimate public policy objective.

Second, for the first time, China has included a clause on the location of computing facilities in a free trade agreement. The RCEP requires that no Party shall require a covered person to use or locate computing facilities in that Party's territory as a condition for conducting business in that Party's territory, while acknowledging that “each Party may have its own measures regarding the use or location of computing facilities, including requirements that seek to ensure the security and confidentiality of communications”, A Party shall not be prevented from taking or maintaining measures necessary to achieve a legitimate public policy objective.

Third, the RCEP encourages dialogue and useful exploration among Parties on issues such as the treatment of digital products, source code, cross-border data flows in financial services and the location of computing facilities. It is worth emphasizing that the chapter on E-commerce in RCEP, compared with the chapter on e-commerce in previous FTAs, has added provisions on cross-border data flow, such as Article 12.14 of RCEP to calculate the location of facilities and Article 12.15 of RCEP to transfer information electronically across borders. In general, it provides a regulation mode of “principle & exception” for cross-border data flow, which draws on the cross-border data flow rules in CPTPP.

2.2 CPTPP

In terms of trade negotiations, China formally applied to join the CPTPP in September 2021, and the high-standard content of the CPTPP is consistent with China's efforts to further deepen reform and open up. After the US withdrew from the TPP, the CPTPP replaced the e-commerce chapter with the digital trade chapter, but still adopted the digital trade rules previously proposed by the US, and the relevant provisions were still retained.

Compared with RCEP, the CPTPP rules on cross-border data flow significantly limit the parties' right to self-determination in judging the legitimate public policy necessity, the implementation limits of the parties' exception measures, and the right to self-determination in national security. Moreover, there are restrictions on data localization storage, the forced transfer or acquisition of software source code is prohibited. Digital products have rules such as non-discriminatory treatment. For example, CPTPP does not exist in RCEP that the necessity of implementing such lawful public policies shall be determined by the implementing parties, and requires that the exception measures do not exceed the limit necessary to achieve the objectives, and CPTPP does not provide special security exception clauses in the cross-border flow of data clauses and data localization clauses.

2.3 DEPA

China formally applied to join Digital Economy Partnership Agreement (DEPA) in November 2021. DEPA is the world's first trade agreement focused on the digital economy. As China with the

largest digital trade scale in the Asia-Pacific region, joining DEPA will help play a more leading role, fully express the demands of developing countries in the field of digital trade, and further promote digital trade cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region.

The Singapore digital trade model is highly innovative, taking into account original issues such as digital identity and the design of industry standards in the field of emerging technologies. Compared with RCEP, CPTPP and the Japan-EU Economic Partnership Agreement, DEPA pays more attention to the cooperation and development of small and medium-sized enterprises. For example, DEPA advocates the construction of electronic payment systems with interoperability and connectivity; Requires members' e-invoicing systems to adopt international standards, guidelines or recommendations for their e-invoicing practices; Creates rules for digital identity, fintech and artificial intelligence. In terms of data innovation and sharing rules, there are also advanced systems such as regulatory data sandboxes and government data disclosure.

In terms of cross-border data flow rules, compared with RCEP, DEPA Article 4.3.2 clearly stipulates that information transmitted electronically includes personal information, removes the "basic security exception" in RCEP, and emphasizes the limits of measures implemented based on legitimate public policy objectives. In addition, it further emphasizes the non-compulsory localization of data storage. The security exception principle in RCEP and the explicit requirement for non-discriminatory treatment of digital products were removed.

2.4 E-Commerce plurilateral negotiations of WTO

On 25 January 2019, following an informal meeting of Ministers on electronic commerce, held in Davos in Switzerland, China, together with 75 other WTO Members, issued a Joint Statement on Electronic Commerce confirming their intention to commence WTO negotiation on trade-related aspects of electronic commerce. China's main points of view lie in the following four aspects: clarify the definition of trade-related aspects of electronic commerce and future rules' scope of application; establish a sound environment for electronic commerce transaction; create a safe and trust-worthy market environment for electronic commerce; promote pragmatic and inclusive development cooperation.

First of all, in terms of clarifying the definition of trade-related aspects of electronic commerce and future rules' scope of application, China insists on defining the trade-related aspects of electronic commerce, electronic transmission, etc., and clarify the relationship between future electronic commerce rules and the existing WTO Agreements. This is a fundamental work. After all, the relationship between cross-border data flow, digital trade and e-commerce has not been clarified for a long time, which is not conducive to further promoting the development of e-commerce and digital trade worldwide in the future.

Secondly, China finds it is significant to establish a sound environment for electronic commerce transaction, which specifically include facilitating cross-border electronic commerce, paperless trading, electronic signatures and electronic authentication, electronic contracts, moratorium of customs duties on electronic transmissions.

Thirdly, China advocates creating a safe and trust-worthy market environment for electronic commerce, which specifically include online consumer protection personal information protection, unsolicited electronic commercial messages, cyber security and transparency.

Last but not least, China's suggestion focuses on promoting pragmatic and inclusive development cooperation, which specifically include bridging the digital divide research, training and communication, electronic commerce for development program.

In all, China has put forward its own proposals on 14 specific issues, but most of them are those on which there is already a high degree of consensus such as facilitating cross-border electronic commerce, paperless trading, electronic signatures and electronic authentication, electronic contracts, bridging the digital divide research, training and communication, electronic commerce for development program, etc. However, China has not made corresponding claims on issues such as non-discriminatory treatment of digital products, cross-border data flow, data localization, data

openness, Internet openness, and protection of source code and proprietary algorithms, which are of concern to the United States and Japan.

3. China's domestic rules of Digital Trade

In recent years, China's domestic legislation on Digital Trade has developed rapidly, and the relevant legal system is being formed at an accelerated pace. China set different regulatory requirements for cross-border data flows from three different perspectives, namely, cyber security, data security and personal information protection.

3.1 Three Core Laws Concerning Digital Trade

The Cyber Security Law, which came into effect in June 2017, is the first time that China has made clear regulations on cross-border data flow from the legal level, by means of prior supervision. The Data Security Law, officially implemented in September 2021, regulates cross-border data flow rules in more detail, responds to the current situation of foreign long-arm jurisdiction and trade sanctions in a timely manner, and reflects China's firm stance on safeguarding data sovereignty.

In August 2021, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress passed the Personal Information Protection Law, and the law was officially implemented in November of the same year. The Act specifically regulates the cross-border data flow of personal information and establishes a relatively comprehensive and systematic system of rules. In general, the Cyber Security Law, the Data Security Law and the Personal Information Protection Law are interconnected and complementary to each other. According to the Data Security Law of China, it has been made clear that the Cyberspace Administration of China, the state cyberspace Administration, is responsible for coordinating online data security and related supervision. In addition, the E-commerce Law, implemented in January 2019, provides a legal basis for e-commerce data flow. The Law sets forth requirements for cross-border e-commerce data supervision, such as management innovation and service facilitation. Although the National Security Law implemented in July 2015 is not a law in this field, it is also closely related to Digital Trade as it involves the protection and supervision of state secret data.

3.2 Maintaining the Integrity of the Specifications

Moreover, administrative regulations such as Regulations on Network Data Security Management, departmental rules such as Measures for Data Security Management, Measures for Personal Information and Important Data Exit Security Assessment, Measures for Personal Information Exit Security Assessment, and Provisions on Personal Information Exit Standard Contract will be issued in the near future. There are also industry guidelines such as Guidelines on Information Security Technology and Data Exit Assessment Security and Technical Specifications for Certification of Cross-border Processing of Personal Information Based on Network Security Standards. So far, domestic data cross-border flow management provisions have covered laws, administrative regulations, departmental rules, standard guidelines and other national legislative levels.

3.3 Industry Norms and Local Legislation Concerning Digital Trade

At the same time, the domestic legislation on Digital Trade continues to expand to the industrial field and local legislation. In related industries, the Regulations on the Security Protection of Critical Information Infrastructure was officially implemented in September 2021, and Several Regulations on the Safety Management of Automobile Data (Trial) and Measures for the Safety Management of Data in the Field of Industry and Information Technology (Trial) were successively promulgated. In the face of complex situations such as China-US friction and the global epidemic, China has accelerated the introduction of the Biosafety Law, the Export Control Law and other laws to regulate important matters such as the exit of human genetic resource data and controlled item

data. In terms of local legislation, in July 2021, Shenzhen, Guangdong introduced China's first comprehensive local legislation specifically for data: Shenzhen Special Economic Zone Data Regulations. Then in November, Shanghai issued the "Shanghai Data Regulations", which proposed to explore the formulation of low-risk cross-border data flow catalog in the Lingang new Zone of Shanghai Free Trade Zone, so as to promote the cross-border security and free flow of data.

3.4 Outbound Data Transfer Rules to Be Improved

Recently, "Measures for the Security Assessment of Outbound Data Transfer" has been deliberated and adopted at the 10th Executive Meeting of 2022 of the Cyberspace Administration of China on May 19, 2022, and come into effect on September 1, 2022. However, security assessment system is only one part of Chinese data exit security management system, and further regulations and policy documents need to be formulated to jointly construct our data exit security management system. No matter what form of exit is adopted, self-assessment should be carried out before data exit, especially personal information security impact assessment. The responsibility of safety protection shall be fulfilled in the process of exit; After leaving the country, the data receiver shall be supervised to fulfill the obligations and prevent the security risks of outbound data transfer; When disputes arise, there is also the issue of cross-border accountability. In November 2022, the Cyberspace Administration of China issued the "Regulations on the Management of Network Data Security (Draft)" to solicit public comments, and Chapter 5 of which is about "Cross-Border Data Security Management". It is believed that it will be officially implemented in the near future, which will help improve the management rules of cross-border data flow.

As a specific example, Article 36 of China's Data Security Law stipulates that organizations and individuals within the territory of China shall not provide data stored within the territory of China to foreign judicial or law enforcement agencies without the approval of the competent authorities of China. This restriction on transmission appears to apply to all types of data and is not limited to sensitive categories such as "important data" or "core data", which are subject to additional restrictions under the Data Security Law and the Cyber Security Law. The Data Security Law currently does not prescribe what activities would constitute a transfer to a foreign judicial or law enforcement authority, how approval can be obtained, or what materials need to be submitted, and is currently unworkable. In June 2022, the Ministry of Justice provided answers to relevant questions in the Frequently Asked Questions on Judicial Assistance in International Civil and Commercial Matters, but it has yet to be clarified in the follow-up policy document of the Ministry of Justice. This also reflects that the management rules for outbound data transfer are not fully formulated by the Cyberspace Administration of China, but need coordination among relevant departments to jointly promote the improvement of domestic regulations on cross-border data flow.

4. China's Response in the Age of Data Trade

At present, China has deeply participated in the global e-commerce market and actively improved the degree of openness. However, for the construction of global digital trade rules, it still needs to further clarify its position and put forward constructive proposals under the controversial issues including data flow, data storage, treatment of digital products, etc. It is worth noting that China has expressed its basic position in the plurilateral WTO e-commerce negotiations, namely, trade-related aspects of data flow are of great importance to trade development. However, more importantly, the data flow should be subject to the precondition of security, which concerns each and every Member's core interests. To this end, it is necessary that the data flow orderly in compliance with Members' respective laws and regulations. China is willing to develop rules on trade-related aspects of electronic commerce with other Members, starting with issues in line with the common interests of Members, so as to promote the healthy, orderly and sustainable development of global electronic commerce, and to benefit enterprises, consumers and the global economy as a whole.

4.1 Balance Data Security and Data Freedom

On the topic of cross-border data flow and storage, we need to make it clear that cross-border data flow has become an irreversible trend. According to a study by the Information Technology & Innovation Foundation, using econometric models, localization requirements that restrict data flows have a statistically significant effect on a country's economy -- substantially restraining its total trade, reducing its productivity and increasing prices for downstream industries that are increasingly dependent on data. Every one-point increase in a country's data limits reduces its gross trade product by 7%, productivity by 2.9% and downstream prices in data-dependent industries by 1.5% over five years.

However, the free cross-border flow of data still needs to take data security as the basic premise, forming a dual principle of effective protection and legal utilization. In the dispute between "data freedom" and "data safety", adhering to the "principle of safe and free cross-border flow of data" not only means to dispel the misunderstanding that China is the strictest country in data localization, but also lays the foundation for cooperation with countries that stand on "data freedom", and clearly anchors the bottom line of data sovereignty, which is in line with the value appeal of "data safety" of developing countries.

4.2 Unification of data protection standards and exception provisions in FTAs

China has already established hierarchical data classification management and protection system which refers to the adoption of differentiated and targeted management and control measures for data of different importance and risk levels, and can cope with new data security risks under the large-scale data circulation processing and take into account the dual needs of data security and data development and utilization. China's Data Security Law defines that data can be classified into core data, important data and general data. The Measures for Data Security Management in the Field of Industrial and Information Technology (Trial) (Draft for Comments) released by the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology in October 2021 also classifies data into core data, important data and general data according to the degree of harm to national security and social and public interests. But for its specific identification, classification standards are still absent. In the future, the detailed rules of the identification and classification standards should be formulated in accordance with the "legitimate public policy objectives" and "national security exception" stipulated by the CPTPP, as well as the "privacy and personal data protection" of APEC and OECD. In order to prove the necessity and rationality of China's cross-border flow restrictions according to the importance of each type of data in future negotiations on international rules.

4.3 Switch from Defense to Offense in E-Commerce of China

Currently, China tends to present a defensive posture in the rule-making field of global digital trade and electronic commerce, especially in the negotiations of WTO electronic commerce. One of China's proposals with substantive claims involves requiring WTO members to grant non-discriminatory treatment to enterprises of other members and to network equipment and products related to e-commerce, not to exclude or restrict the supply of information and communications technology ("ICT") products or equipment unless fully investigated in accordance with legitimate public policy objectives, nor should public telecommunication networks or service providers be prevented from selecting technologies supporting their networks and services and network equipment and products associated with that technology, and nor should supply chains of network equipment and products related to e-commerce be hindered, especially those based on long-term commercial cooperation. This is related to the discriminatory treatment of China's ICT products or equipment represented by Huawei by the United States and other Western countries.

As early as 2018, the United States legislated against the purchase of products from Huawei, ZTE, Hyonda, Hikvision, Dahua and other companies. China may wish to insist on and further implement non-discriminatory treatment for enterprises and e-commerce related network equipment and products in the field of ICT in the WTO plurilateral negotiations on e-commerce. In addition,

the United States proposed in its proposal that it could impose threat mitigation measures against “acts that threaten cyber security”. However, if the definition standard of “acts that threaten cyber security” is allowed to be generalized, it will obviously be detrimental to Chinese Internet and ICT enterprises. China can put forward the concrete standard of “acts that threaten cyber security” in the negotiation and insist on refinement based on current objective assessments based on scientific evidence.

In addition, cross-border e-commerce is a characteristic industry in which China has a distinct advantage. Relevant elements of the current Chinese proposals include: member states should strive to further improve customs procedures; each member shall, to the extent practicable, adopt or establish a process allowing the option of payment by electronic means; member states should also use free trade zones and customs warehouses to promote cross-border e-commerce. However, it can be found that most of China’s current proposals summarize the rule appeals from the key concerns of cross-border e-commerce enterprises, which makes the content of China’s proposals relatively scattered, and there is a certain gap between them and the abstract and universal requirements of international economic and trade rules. In addition, most of China’s innovation in cross-border e-commerce comes from business innovation at the enterprise level, such as foreign trade integrated service agencies -- Shenzhen OneTouch Business Service Ltd., which is more of a business model innovation rather than rule innovation, and it is difficult to export through international rules. Therefore, a long-term and regular communication mechanism should be set up at the domestic level for Chinese cross-border e-commerce enterprises, social organizations, industries and commercial authorities, so that consensus can be built and proposals can be summarized, helping China to turn defense into offense in global e-commerce negotiations.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, China has participated in the RCEP, formally proposed to participate in the CPTPP and DEPA, and is engaged in plurilateral negotiations on WTO e-commerce. Although China has already set different regulatory requirements for cross-border data flows from three different perspectives, namely, cyber security, data security and personal information protection, and has introduced a lot of regulations and norms in the field of digital law, it still needs to further improve the legal system of outbound data transfer in the future. At the same time, China needs to further clarify its position on controversial digital trade issues, strike a balance between data security and data free flow, make unifications of data protection standards and exception provisions in FTAs, and make good use of its own industrial advantages to switch from defense to offense in e-commerce.

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