

Preventing nuclear proliferation: the role and interests of China

Wyn Q. Bowen

King's College London

Professor of Non-Proliferation and International Security

Director, Centre for Science and Security Studies

Preventing the spread of nuclear weapons possession is arguably the most important security challenge currently confronting the international community. Indeed, the Year of the Tiger may prove to be decisive in determining the future direction of nuclear proliferation and, by direct implication, the prospects for maintaining security and stability in key regions such as the Middle East and East Asia. China has a leading role to play in proliferation prevention and doing so is in the country's national interest.

China and non-proliferation

Chinese officials have frequently stated the country's opposition to any form of nuclear proliferation as a responsible signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)¹. It must be recognised, of course, that all states view non-proliferation through their own unique lens constructed through years of national experience. China is no exception and its policy preferences are understandably influenced by historical experience, geographical location, resource dependencies and international responsibilities.

As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, China has a pivotal role to play in preventing nuclear proliferation whether through bilateral diplomacy,

1. Statement by Ambassador Li Baodong, head of the Chinese delegation, NPT Review Conference, New York, 4 May 2010, p.5
http://www.un.org/en/conf/npt/2010/statements/pdf/china_en.pdf accessed 5 January 2012.

working in multilateral settings such as the Board of Governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency and the Security Council, or by undertaking measures to enhance national capabilities to prevent trade in sensitive technologies to locations of proliferation concern.

To be sure the current prognosis for proliferation prevention is not promising with the potential for nuclear weapons to spread to further centres of control revolving around two core scenarios. Each scenario would have a direct and negative impact on Chinese economic and strategic interests.

Insecurity and Iran

Iran's continued and flagrant non-compliance with its obligations as a non-nuclear weapon state signatory of the NPT is a slap in the face of a rules-based approach to international relations. If Tehran cannot be persuaded to comply with Security Council demands, continues to develop sensitive nuclear capabilities that make no economic sense, and fails to come clean about 'all' of its nuclear work including that directly related to military applications, the only result can be growing insecurity in the Gulf and the wider Middle East.

Neighbouring states already perceive Iran's continuing nuclearisation in the face of international opposition as highly destabilising in strategic terms. Israel has long painted the Iranian nuclear programme as posing an existential threat and made clear its readiness to use military force to set it back if such action is deemed necessary. Among the Gulf states Saudi Arabia – primarily because of its historically tense relationship with revolutionary Iran -- is widely seen as the most likely to respond to Tehran 'going nuclear' by seeking its own nuclear weapons.

Combined with the political and strategic uncertainty associated with the 'Arab spring', the regional insecurity engendered by such developments would inevitably have a knock-on effect on the prospects of realising comprehensive solutions to the myriad security problems confronting the Middle East. World oil prices would also be affected with the resultant negative impact on global economic stability and international efforts to stabilize currencies.

Iran recently stated it could close the Strait of Hormuz to shipping if sanctions designed to gain the country's compliance with UN demands were strengthened by targeting its oil sector; this threat immediately prompted a rise in the price of

oil. The Strait is the most significant oil transit chokepoint with 40% of the world's oil reportedly shipped via this route¹. In this respect Iranian proliferation is already complicating the economic interests of many countries, including China, that rely on hydrocarbon supplies from, and regional stability in, the Gulf. While Tehran might judge that the international community's response to any attempt to shut down the Strait makes such an initiative too risky in the short term, the regime would feel significantly emboldened to do so if it harnesses the military atom.

Diminishing nuclear restraint in East Asia

The other scenario involves North Korea. While Pyongyang has already crossed the nuclear weapons threshold its erratic behaviour on the regional stage has long driven nearby states toward the protection of a nuclear umbrella. Unprovoked attacks against naval vessels and the territory of other states, and provocative nuclear and long-range rocket tests, only serve to diminish nuclear restraint in neighbouring countries. This is not to say that South Korea and Japan are currently engaged in military nuclear activities, but political barriers in this area are only eroded by such actions on the part of Pyongyang. A latent nuclear arms race in East Asia is in no-one's interest, not least China's, because of the far reaching implications this would have on threat perception and strategic and defence planning across the region.

Implications and priorities

At the 2010 NPT Review Conference Ambassador Li Baodong, head of the Chinese delegation, noted that China is 'committed to promoting diplomatic solutions' to the nuclear issue in both the Korean Peninsula and Iran². Diplomatic solutions have proved to be illusive thus far but this only increases the onus on China and others to step up their efforts.

-
1. Christopher Johnson, 'Oil above \$111 on Iran, China, U.S. data', Reuters, 3 January 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/01/03/us-markets-oil-idUSTRE7AD06820120103> accessed 3 January 2011.
 2. Statement by Ambassador Li Baodong, p.5.

The death of Kim Jong-il has prompted concerns that nuclear-armed North Korea could seek to strategically assert itself over the coming months and years as Kim Jong-un acts to cement his power base. Chinese officials always downplay their influence on the North but a window of opportunity may exist for China to seek to induce Pyongyang down a more cooperative path, including a return to the nuclear negotiation table under the Six Party Talks. Of course, Kim Jong-un's need to avoid being perceived as weak in the face of external pressure, and the still fresh images of the Qadhafi regime being toppled in Libya, have probably made denuclearisation of the North even less likely than before. At the very least Beijing should encourage Pyongyang to temper its behaviour so that nuclear restraint in the wider region is not further eroded.

An effective NPT regime is dependent upon the proactive diplomacy of the P5 members of the Security Council. Beijing could usefully apply its diplomatic influence to induce Iran into addressing the outstanding questions about its nuclear programme. China has traditionally adopted a policy of non-interference in such issues outside of the UN process. But the strategic and economic stakes tied up in the Iranian nuclear crisis are now too significant and demand more direct approaches. With the EU likely to approve an embargo on Iranian oil imports in the near future, and 20% of Iran's oil currently sold to China, it is clear Beijing will be in an increasingly influential position to demand that Tehran fully complies with IAEA safeguards and the NPT. Attaching more conditionality to the bilateral relationship may well help to address China's long-term energy security interests by reducing current and future insecurities in the Gulf.

Finally, noting the poor track record of diplomacy and the carrot and stick approach towards Tehran, it is prudent for all states to strengthen efforts to prevent Iran acquiring sensitive technology and materials for its nuclear and ballistic missile programmes. Slowing Iran's technical progress also buys time for diplomacy to work. In particular China and other countries need to enhance industry's compliance with UN imposed constraints on the trade in sensitive items to Iran. This is primarily a customs and border inspection resource issue, rather than a question of political willingness to prevent illicit procurement; the Chinese private sector is attracted to the lucrative nature of proliferation-related trade, and only an increased cost of involvement in illicit trade can eliminate it.