China: A Crucial Bridge for the 2005 NPT Review Conference

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China’s unique nuclear philosophy, nuclear arsenal, and attitude toward nuclear nonproliferation mean that Beijing is likely to play a critical role at the 2005 nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference, serving as a vital bridge between the nuclear “haves” and the “have-nots.”

Among the five recognized nuclear-weapon states, China has the longest and deepest commitment to nuclear disarmament. For decades, Beijing has pressed for “a complete and thorough elimination of nuclear weapons” and consistently stressed the illegitimacy of the permanent existence of these arms, insisting that they will disappear if all the people in the world strongly oppose them.[1]

China has also sought to minimize the role of nuclear weapons in its military planning and diplomacy, contending that nuclear weapons have little military significance and the sole legitimate role of nuclear weapons should be the prevention of nuclear blackmail. For this reason, China has unconditionally committed not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states and has repeated the pledge at the preparatory meetings for the review conference. [2] Indeed, until recently, the Chinese government even challenged the legitimacy of nuclear deterrence, and it still criticizes the policy of nuclear deterrence based on the first use of nuclear weapons. And even though China has the smallest and least sophisticated arsenal of the five declared nuclear powers, China’s leaders have largely contended that efforts to significantly improve the quantity and quality of its nuclear weapons were not warranted.

China’s doctrine and practice in many ways echoes demands that non-nuclear-weapon states have long made: that the nuclear-weapon states need to do more to meet their commitments under Article VI of the NPT to make good-faith efforts toward disarmament. China’s doctrine also reflects the country’s unique status as the least wealthy member of the nuclear five and its sympathy to countries not aligned with either the United States or the Soviet bloc.

At the upcoming conference, the non-nuclear-weapon states, as they have done at every previous review conference, are sure to raise questions about how much the nuclear-weapon states have done to meet their Article VI commitment. If the nuclear “have-nots” are not satisfied with the explanations offered by the nuclear “haves,” their interest in abiding by and strengthening the nuclear nonproliferation regime might waiver. Coupled with technical and economic developments that have made it far easier to acquire nuclear capabilities, the possibility of widespread nuclear proliferation might become more likely.

On the other hand, if the five nuclear-weapon states are able to convince the non-nuclear-weapon states that they have indeed been meeting their commitments, a successful conference could ensure strengthening support for nonproliferation norms. China’s credibility with the non-nuclear-weapon states in this regard could play a crucial role in tipping the conference’s outcome toward success.

To be sure, China is still likely to feel some heat at the conference, even if the conduct of its nuclear weapons program is highly defensible. For example, China signed the Comprehensive Test Ban...
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Treaty (CTBT) in 1996 but has yet to ratify the treaty. China's hesitancy stems less from technical than political obstacles. Chinese lawmakers would like to follow the example of the U.S. Congress in the late 1990s when it provided its advice and consent to ratification of the Chemical Weapons Convention and approved implementing legislation. During consideration of that treaty, the U.S. Congress approved some treaty reservations and conditions that convinced Beijing that similar cautions might not be a bad idea when it comes to the CTBT.

China's lack of transparency about its nuclear weapons program will certainly prompt some scrutiny. But China's behavior is not without cause as it is in a more difficult position than some of the other nuclear powers: its small and lightly deployed nuclear force makes an easy target for an enemy armed with the right intelligence. This is why China is nervous about nuclear transparency, particularly public declarations about the number of nuclear weapons in its arsenal or the locations in which they are deployed. In the not-too-distant future China might be able to tackle this problem head on; efforts to make China's nuclear force less vulnerable to a first strike through increased mobility may soon allow China to offer more quantitative transparency.[3]

Nonetheless, at the conference China will surely be pressed to explain whether its nuclear modernization program is aimed at building a large force with strong offensive and war-fighting capabilities—including multiple types of weapons with the ability to launch quickly—or retaining a small force while enhancing its safety and survivability. At the preparatory sessions for the review conference, China indicated that it had chosen the latter course and claimed that the Chinese nuclear program has been cut in the last decade. Such transparency is certainly welcome; as China has emerged in recent years as a major economic power, international concern has risen that it will devote substantial resources to boosting the size of its nuclear arsenal. China's recent announcement that it has reduced its nuclear program, however, indicates that the size of China’s force is being dictated by political rather than economic judgments.

China’s emergence on the international stage is reflected in the evolution of some of its views on nuclear nonproliferation. China used to take a quite radical position on nuclear nonproliferation. Although it has been defined by the NPT as a nuclear-weapon state for decades, China did not accede to the treaty until 1992, calling it discriminatory for establishing a distinction between the nuclear-weapon and non-nuclear-weapon states.

In 1995, at its first NPT review conference after its accession, China began to coordinate its positions with the other nuclear parties. Since then, China’s nonproliferation policy has evolved. On the one hand, China still shares most views with the non-nuclear-weapon states on nuclear issues and supports almost all of their proposals in various disarmament and nonproliferation forums. It has also offered support for various nuclear-weapon-free zones. On the other hand, China has begun to feel that it is part of the nuclear club. It is now quite eager to join various export control regimes, which it previously labeled as unfair. It joined the Nuclear Suppliers Group in January 2004 and is seeking admission to the Missile Technology Control Regime. One likely side effect of this change is that China can no longer be expected to take the lead in pushing for some radical disarmament measures. For example, China will likely not press for nuclear disarmament within a particular timeframe, which could embarrass the other nuclear-weapon states.

At the conference, China can be expected to restate its traditional support for complete disarmament, its no-first-use pledge, and its assurances that it will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon states. The fifth traditional policy is opposition to the weaponization of outer space.

But China can also be expected to advance some positions different from those it advocated at the 2000 NPT Review Conference. A significant change is that in 2003 China agreed on the establishment of the ad hoc committees at the Conference on Disarmament (CD) on a multilateral, nondiscriminatory and effectively verifiable treaty banning the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons or other explosive devices. If the United States had not concluded in July 2004 that effective international verification of a fissile material cutoff treaty could not be realistically achieved, there would now be a great opportunity to bring the CD out of a deadlock that has stalled progress in that forum for many years.
In the documents issued by China and the speeches presented by Chinese officials, there appear new offers of nuclear disarmament. One is China’s opposition to tactical nuclear weapons and, indirectly, U.S. research on low-yield nuclear weapons. In a Chinese working paper, China suggested that “no state should research into and develop low-yield easy-to-use nuclear weapons.” The above statement is the first time China formally and explicitly expressed its position on this matter and also represents a major step toward nuclear transparency.

China also has sought a ban on new nuclear weapons designs. At a 2003 conference aimed at bringing the CTBT into force, the head of the Chinese delegation, Ambassador Zhang Yan, suggested that the nuclear-weapon states should refrain from conducting research on new weapons designs. At a NPT-related workshop in April 2004, Liu Jieyi, director general of the Arms Control and Disarmament Department of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, was more explicit. He called on nuclear-weapon states “not to research into or develop new types of nuclear weapons.” China clearly is open to accepting a constraint over new nuclear weapons design, should the other nuclear-weapon states agree, or accepting such an interpretation of the CTBT.

Another proposal is China’s support for de-alerting nuclear weapons. In its working paper, China suggested that “the nuclear-weapon states should take all necessary steps to avoid accidental or unauthorized launches.” China did not specify how this would be done, but a rational way to do this is by de-alerting nuclear weapons. This is also in compliance with China’s nuclear philosophy. If China’s appeal receives positive feedback from the other nuclear states, it is possible that China would go further to issue a more explicit statement about its own nuclear weapon readiness.

China’s unique nuclear philosophy imposes some limitations. For example, China cannot join phased quantitative nuclear reductions. Since it already has a very small nuclear force, it does not make much sense to cut its arsenal step-by-step even if it has the political will to do so. For China, a more feasible approach might be to set a ceiling to be later followed by complete elimination. Still, China’s unique history—and future—means that its views and actions might prove important to making the 2005 NPT Review Conference a success rather than a failure.

ENDNOTES


mobile land-based, long-range ballistic missiles and is working to replace liquid-fuel ballistic missiles with solid-propellant models. The Pentagon estimated in May 2004 that China’s current estimated force of roughly 20 ICBMs could triple by 2010.

**Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty:** Signed September 24, 1996. Chinese government officials have stated they fully support the treaty and are waiting on the National People’s Congress to approve the accord.

Fissile Material Production for Weapons: China has reportedly ceased production of fissile material for weapons purposes, although it has made no official announcement. China publicly supports negotiation of an “effectively verifiable” fissile material cutoff treaty (FMCT). In October 2004, a high-ranking Chinese arms control official said Beijing was “studying in a serious manner” the U.S. proposal to negotiate an FMCT without verification mechanisms.

**Nuclear Use Doctrine:** China is the sole nuclear-weapon state to declare publicly that it will not be the first to use nuclear weapons.

—**COMPILED BY WADE BOESE**