

Iran's Nuclear Ambitions Test China's Wisdom

The Iranian nuclear issue has reached a turning point. Iran claims that it is entitled to nuclear sovereignty over civilian nuclear power and has denied that it has had a nuclear weapons program. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has not been able to present definitive evidence of an Iranian nuclear weapons program over the past two decades¹ or for the UN Security Council to take action until March 2006.² Meanwhile, in his 2002 State of the Union speech, President George W. Bush signaled his intention to keep a spotlight on Iran when he labeled it part of the “axis of evil,” alongside North Korea and Saddam Hussein’s Iraq.³ In the years since, however, Washington has not been able to thwart Iran’s pursuit of uranium enrichment diplomatically⁴ or to reach a political consensus to use force. For the past two years, the European Union-3 (France, Germany, and the United Kingdom) have been making reconciliatory efforts with Iran but have met with little success. The EU-3 have proposed to offer Iran a light-water reactor (LWR), nuclear fuel, and technology, but such offers are contingent on Iran suspending its uranium conversion.⁵ Otherwise, the EU-3 will not help to resolve this issue within the IAEA. Efforts to deal with the Iranian nuclear issue through an even broader concert of global powers, the permanent members of the UN Security Council (P-5) and Germany, could lead the Security Council to consider the matter in March unless a settlement can be reached, such as the Russian enrichment offer.⁶

In the face of these past failures and present challenges, China, a P-5 member, could be forced to consider acting with the other major powers to curb Iran’s nuclear ambition. The Iranian nuclear case thus presents China’s

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leaders with a prime opportunity to demonstrate their ability to balance their domestic interests with their responsibilities as a growing global power. China's rise has brought its multifaceted national interests to the fore and into competition with one another, including securing stable and cooperative relations with other major powers; developing peaceful relations with neighbors and nearby states, including Iran; and gaining access to sufficient and reliable resources to sustain the nation's growing economy.

On one hand, China has been increasingly supportive of the nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction, eager to be viewed as a "responsible stakeholder" within the international community.⁷ At the same time, however, China's economic boom has resulted in an energy thirst that is now affecting Beijing's foreign policy. Conventional wisdom holds that the friendly relationships that Beijing is cultivating with Iran, Myanmar, Sudan, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe, among others, all of which have strained relations with the United States, are more or less tied to its petroleum needs.

Five main considerations shape China's thinking on the Iranian nuclear issue: respecting Iran's right to a civilian nuclear program, perpetuating the nuclear nonproliferation regime, maintaining bilateral energy and economic ties with Iran, protecting relations with the United States, and promoting China's international image. How does China perceive its interests in this balance between energy security and nonproliferation? How would Beijing vote if the UN were to take action, given its difficult choice between risking its energy security or its relations with Washington? The first question to address is whether Tehran will force China and the world community to face such a dilemma. To answer that, however, requires understanding Iran's nuclear motivations and aspirations before discussing Beijing's calculations.

Iran's Nuclear Ambitions and Motivations

Iran has a long history of nuclear interest and development.⁸ As early as 1957, Iran and the United States signed a civil nuclear cooperation agreement as part of the U.S. Atoms for Peace program, which provided technical assistance, leased several kilograms of enriched uranium, and called for cooperation in research on the peaceful uses of nuclear energy.⁹ As a member of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) since its opening for signature in 1968, Iran claims the unalienable right to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. Given the country's natural endowments of fossil energy, however, Iran would appear to be one of the few countries with less of a need to seek alternative energy sources in the foreseeable future.¹⁰ Iran's proven oil reserves have risen to 19.5 billion tons since the discovery of a new oil field in 2003, accounting for 13 percent of the world's total oil re-

serves. Iran is also home to 17–18 percent of the world's total gas reserves. Iran has the right to undertake research on nuclear science and technology, but to apply such research to real-world nuclear power generation while it still possesses seemingly unlimited fossil fuel seems only to discredit its motives, especially without informing the world's nuclear watchdog of its past clandestine nuclear activities.

The IAEA pointed out in findings published in November 2004 that Iran has neglected to report on its nuclear program “in a number of instances over an extended period of time,” thereby failing to meet its obligations under its safeguards agreement with respect to reporting nuclear material, its processing, and use, as well as the declaration of facilities where such materials had been processed and stored.¹¹ Although the IAEA still has not concluded that Iran must have been pursuing

a nuclear weapons program, many within the international community take it as further proof that Iran has, for a long time, engaged in a secretive nuclear program that could quickly be diverted to military purposes.

Especially after Iran's submission to the IAEA in October 2005 of its nuclear history of the quantity of centrifuges and other nuclear technologies that it purchased from the nuclear black market in the 1980s, Tehran's position is growing increasingly vulnerable. In an attempt to justify Iran's nuclear moves, former Iranian president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani indicated in March 2005 that Iran indeed had engaged in an intentional clandestine nuclear buildup. After the United States sanctioned Iran after Tehran's 1979 revolution, Iran had to seek nuclear technology from the black market. He reinforced the claim, however, that it was only for peaceful purposes.¹²

If Tehran does indeed have a covert military nuclear program, three possible security factors might have caused Iran's leadership to proceed down this path. First, Israel's acquisition of a nuclear deterrent is an open secret. Although Tel Aviv may feel safer with this ultimate security guarantor, it has had the opposite effect on its Arab and Persian neighbors. Iran's development of a counterbalance in kind could be a natural response. Second, Iraq was developing nuclear weapons in the 1980s. Although the Israeli air force bombed the Osiraq nuclear reactor in 1981, Saddam was able to revive his country's nuclear weapons program; it only faced complete dismantlement after the Persian Gulf War in 1991. A further catalyst for Tehran could have been Iraq's use of chemical weapons against Iran in 1983, during their bitter eight-year war. Finally, Iran and the United States have been at odds since Tehran's revolution in 1979. The United States' “preemptive” war against

Proliferation in the Middle East would complicate and likely harm China's interests.

Iraq could have further justified Iran's quest for a nuclear deterrent. Given these incentives and if more evidence is revealed, Beijing may be increasingly inclined to doubt Iran's nuclear innocence.

Even if Iran has a nuclear program capable of quick conversion from civilian to military ends, it remains possible that Tehran may not have had enough opportunity to secure the nuclear wherewithal for a robust underground military program without being detected. This assumption may lead Beijing to continue to stress the need to seek a peaceful resolution to the current diplomatic impasse.

Beijing's Considerations

In regard to Iran's nuclear development, Beijing may have a host of complex, interwoven interests. China shares some common concerns with Iran about the sovereignty issue. Moreover, Iran can provide China with energy, which would serve Beijing's core national interest. A closer relationship with Tehran, however, has the potential to irritate the United States, the other driving force of China's economic modernization, at a time when China really cares about its global image.

RESPECTING SOVEREIGNTY

Recurring foreign intrusions since the mid-nineteenth century have made the current Chinese government particularly sensitive to the importance of sovereignty and independence. Its inability even today to reunify the country has reinforced this psyche, increasing Beijing's sensitivity to external interference in its internal affairs. Therefore, from a legal point of view, if Iran is genuine in its support of nonproliferation, China will support Tehran's right to civilian nuclear energy based on the principle of sovereignty. The only complication would occur if Iran violates its commitment to the NPT and develops nuclear weapons. For the United States, however, concerns that a civilian nuclear program could be diverted to nonpeaceful purposes on short notice justify the denial of such rights to an independent nuclear fuel cycle. Beijing has supported the IAEA view that, before Tehran would ever be granted rights to a full nuclear fuel cycle, it has to accept accountability for its past nuclear program.

Even if Iran had never joined the NPT, China would still have no reason to oppose Iran's civilian nuclear program. No international laws have ever prohibited any states, whether or not they possess nuclear weapons, from the peaceful use of nuclear energy. The only restraints imposed on civilian nuclear facilities of non-nuclear NPT member states are the IAEA's nuclear safe-

guards. In fact, all states that have civilian nuclear programs, even those outside the NPT regime, are expected to allow IAEA safeguards to be placed on their domestic civilian nuclear facilities. The United States and other nuclear export-capable states expanded the safeguard requirement by founding the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) in 1974 after India's nuclear test, denying the export of nuclear material by NSG member states to non-NPT states. This is just a collective action, however, not a universally imposed law. According to current international legal arrangements, Iran has the right to harness nuclear power for peaceful purposes regardless of its nuclear weapons' pursuit and status. Even if, in the worst case, Iran has already developed nuclear weapons, it is still entitled to civilian nuclear energy as long as it has not done so while verbally committing to nuclear nonproliferation as an NPT member.

Iran in particular has become indispensable to China's energy security.

Furthermore, no states are involuntarily banned from developing nuclear weapons as part of its national defense, with the exception of Iraq, which was deprived of the right to develop and possess nuclear weapons by UN Security Council Resolution 687 in 1991. Although the norm of nuclear nonproliferation is nearly universal, the decision to join the NPT remains a sovereign matter, and participation in the treaty is voluntary. Article X of the NPT was specifically created to protect national sovereignty through the right of withdrawal, in case a member state came to believe that remaining in the treaty would harm its national interests. As a member of the NPT, Iran cannot build nuclear weapons when it still openly and officially commits to nuclear nonproliferation. If Iran is found to have violated its commitment and yet refuses to abandon its nuclear weapons program, the international community will be forced to take action. Yet, Iran can technically develop nuclear weapons legally if it withdraws from the NPT.

PROMOTING NONPROLIFERATION

As a member of the NPT, China is obliged to support the nonproliferation of nuclear weapons. It has committed not to transfer nuclear weapons to non-nuclear-weapon states and nonstate actors, not to assist any non-nuclear-weapon states and nonstate actors in developing nuclear weapons, and to discourage or even oppose the acquisition of nuclear weapons by non-nuclear-weapon states. Since the early 1990s, China has made remarkable progress in nonproliferation. It joined the NPT in 1992 and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in 1996. Throughout the past decade, China strengthened national export control systems for nuclear, chemical, and biological

weapons, as well as for missiles. China also joined the NSG in 2004, cutting nuclear relations with those refusing to join the NPT.

Regionally, as the Chinese economy continues its rapid growth, Beijing's interest in the Middle East is also expanding. Because it promotes a smooth, predictable relationship with the region, China needs a peaceful and stable Middle East. A more proliferation-prone environment complicates and likely harms China's interests. Beijing appears to believe that the emergence of a regional nuclear power or a nuclear arms race in the region would destabilize the Middle East and undercut China's pursuit of energy security.

The risk of the transfer of nuclear technologies by Iran is also a major concern. After his first speech at the United Nations on September 14, 2005, the new Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, met with Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and offered to share "peaceful nuclear energy" with Islamic countries.¹³ Today, ample evidence indicates that Iran has acquired centrifuges from the A. Q. Khan network.¹⁴ The threat of Iranian transfer of such technology to other Islamic actors worries both Beijing and Washington.

BILATERAL ENERGY AND ECONOMIC TIES WITH IRAN

Given China's increasingly closer energy and economic ties with Iran, Beijing is caught in a dilemma *vis-à-vis* Iran's uranium conversion. On one hand, Iran's uranium conversion raises the issue of the necessity of such nuclear fuel independence, especially considering Iran had tried to cover up this program. On the other hand, because Iran has a higher stake in trade with China, Beijing now has a greater ability to influence Tehran if it is willing to exert its leverage. Because Iran's nuclear program seems to be of vital interest to Tehran, China must now decide whether to risk its energy and economic interests and join the international pressure group.

China's sustained, rapid economic growth for nearly three decades has resulted in significant challenges, including social and ecological tension and a strong demand for resources. In 1993, China became a net oil importer. In recent years, China has been increasing the amount of its energy imported from abroad, currently importing more than 40 percent of the oil it consumes.¹⁵ In 2004, China imported 122.7 million tons of crude oil, surpassing Japan to become the world's second-largest energy-consuming state.¹⁶

The Middle East has been the major source of China's energy imports. From 1998 to 2003, crude oil from the Middle East accounted for 50.9 percent of China's total energy imports. Iran in particular has become indispensable to China's energy security. During this period, Iran accounted for 13.6 percent of China's oil imports, second only to Saudi Arabia's 16.7 per-

cent. In 2004, China imported 130 million tons of crude oil from Iran, accounting for 15 percent of its total imports of crude oil.¹⁷

China and Iran are also preparing for various other forms of closer energy cooperation. On October 28, 2004, China signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Iran that awarded Sinopec, China's second-largest oil giant, the rights to participate in developing Yadavaren, an Iranian oil field, in exchange for an agreement to purchase 10 million tons of liquefied natural gas (LNG) over 25 years.¹⁸ Yadavaren, as one of the world's largest undeveloped oil fields, would have a total production capacity of around 300,000 barrels per day, half of which would eventually be exported to China. It was understood that this deal, also covering the LNG construction on-site, could be as large as \$70 billion. Only half a year earlier, in March 2004, state oil trader Zhuhai Zhenrong also signed a preliminary deal to import more than 110 million tons of LNG from Iran over 25 years for \$20 billion.¹⁹

Iran should be more open and cooperative with the IAEA about its nuclear past.

Beyond the energy sector, China's total trade with Iran in 2004 reached around \$7 billion, a 25 percent increase over 2003. At present, Iran is an important source of outsourcing for China. Ninety-five percent of Iran's motorcycles, for example, are manufactured in China. Iran is also China's biggest overseas market for large projects and labor export. Currently, about 120 Chinese projects are being implemented in Iran, totaling \$6 billion. Hundreds of new projects are currently being negotiated between the two countries, involving tens of billions of dollars.

BALANCING THE UNITED STATES AND IRAN

The challenge of the Iranian nuclear issue must also be viewed in the context of Sino-U.S. relations. The United States has had fundamental problems with Iran's government since the 1979 revolution. In 1996, Congress sought to step up the international pressure on Tehran by passing the Iran and Libya Sanctions Act, threatening to sanction foreign companies if they invest more than \$40 million in Iran's oil and natural gas industries. After Bush further enhanced the rhetorical pressure by branding Iran part of the axis of evil in 2002, the administration placed Beijing in a precarious position, forcing it to balance its relationships with Washington and Tehran.

In terms of economic development, including investment, technology transfers, and exports, the United States is China's single-most important partner. There are some predictions that China's trade surplus with the

United States for 2005 will reach \$200 billion,²⁰ a figure vastly greater than the volume of Chinese-Iranian trade. Although Washington is also Beijing's most robust partner in the energy arena, as the two largest energy consumers in the world they may also compete for fuel in the near future. The unsuccessful bid by the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) for Unocal in the summer of 2005 reflected Washington's caution. The Chinese oil company's attempt alarmed Washington, which eventually dissuaded the deal, primarily because CNOOC is largely a state-sponsored entity. This in turn raised Iran's value to Beijing in its search for energy security.

Although Tehran is an energy source that Beijing cannot refuse and the protection of China's energy relationship with Iran is of vital importance, China must balance this relationship with its relations with the United States, its larger economic partner. This is not the first time that Beijing has faced pressure from Washington over Iran. In 1997, China's earlier agreement to build an LWR in Iran did not materialize because of U.S. pressure.²¹ At the time, relations with the United States were even more tense than they are now, with some unconfirmed speculation that China had agreed to the sale in retaliation for the U.S. decision to provide Taiwan with 150 F-16A/B jet fighters in the early 1990s. More recently, Deputy Secretary of State Robert B. Zoellick cautioned on September 6, 2005, that, "[i]f China continued to seek energy agreement with such countries as Iran, more conflicts will arise between China and the U.S."²²

A Responsible Stakeholder with Multiple Interests

The Iranian case presents China with a challenge and an opportunity to be proactive. The Iranian nuclear issue is in some ways comparable to the North Korea case: both are states with past suspicious behavior, calling for nuclear sovereignty and insisting on their rights to acquire civilian nuclear power.

China's policy vis-à-vis North Korea's nuclear weapons development has demonstrated that Beijing might be giving nonproliferation a higher priority over sovereign justification and bilateral relations. Because China does not want to see nuclear proliferation in Middle East, this shift may apply to the Iranian case. Nevertheless, China has been unwilling to pursue the North Korea case through the UN Security Council for fear that a UN sanction may disturb regional stability. Under the same logic, China prefers a peaceful settlement of Iran's nuclear case. China's leaders will also try their best to avoid bringing Iran to the UN Security Council.

Some differences between the North Korean and Iranian cases, however, are obvious. Pyongyang has acquired nuclear weapons openly and legally outside of the NPT by withdrawing from the treaty. In contrast, Iran re-

mains in the NPT and still accepts IAEA safeguards. Beijing's role as host of the six-party talks seems natural, as it has a vested interest in maintaining stability in its immediate neighborhood. European powers (the EU-3 and Russia), however, have already been engaging Iran. In this case, China's foremost concern and interest is energy security.

China's leaders have also tried to triangulate their various interests with Washington and Tehran and do not want to have to choose between the two. If the Security Council debates the Iranian nuclear issue, China will be forced to make a difficult choice: support sanctions on Iran, damaging Beijing's energy ties with Tehran; veto any measure, frustrating and angering Washington; or play a passive role of abstention without a clear position, diminishing China's newfound role as a gradually more influential actor on the world stage. Even in the case of abstention, if a sanctioning resolution were passed, as a responsible stakeholder China would have to observe it. In the end, the only way for Beijing to gain immunity from these pressures is by keeping the Security Council from taking action in the first place. The only way to do that is by getting Iran to be more open and cooperative with the IAEA about its nuclear past.

To this end, China and Iran recently have consulted fairly frequently on bilateral ties and Iran's nuclear program. Iranian deputy foreign minister Gholamali Khoshroo visited China on August 11, 2004, to give a briefing on Iran's nuclear position. Iran's new foreign minister, Manouchehr Mottaki, visited Beijing on October 13–14, 2005, to launch talks between the new Iranian government and Beijing on the nuclear issue. In between, Chinese foreign minister Li Zhaoxing reciprocally visited Iran on November 6, 2004, where he was quoted as saying that China was "opposed to" referring Iran's case to the UN Security Council for fear of complicating the issue.²³ On August 12, 2005, China again expressed that it would not support moving Iran's nuclear case from Vienna to New York. According to China's UN ambassador, Wang Guangya, who also did not consider the Security Council the appropriate place to resolve this dispute, "[t]he Security Council has too many issues to add Iran."²⁴

In addition to the energy incentives, China's leaders fundamentally believe that conflicts should be resolved through a political and consultative manner, considering the legitimate interests of all concerned parties. If the IAEA could not resolve the Iranian or even the North Korean nuclear issue, these same issues likely could not be peacefully resolved in the Security

China's leaders do not want to have to choose between Tehran and Washington.

Council. Therefore, the much higher stakes that would be raised in New York are not in China's interests, given Beijing's conflicting priorities.

On September 20, 2005, the EU distributed a draft resolution to the IAEA, threatening to bring the Iranian nuclear issue before the Security Council. Private consultations found China and Russia opposed to such action, and they insisted that the matter be settled within the IAEA framework. After the wording of the draft resolution was watered down, in part to address China's concerns about escalating the diplomatic conflict, the EU decided not to bring the case to the UN for the time being. Subsequently, on September 24, the revised resolution was put to a vote in the IAEA, passing 22-1, with China among 12 countries abstaining.²⁵ Tehran's retaliatory reaction to the vote has perhaps given Beijing further pause. Iran has reportedly notified India, which voted for the resolution, that it was canceling an energy project between the two countries worth \$22 billion.²⁶

Running Out of Options

The rise of China is a phenomenon of globalization that has its roots in China's welcomed opening in 1978. Yet, as China has become an increasingly powerful presence on the world stage, the international community has grown wary of its future direction. The Iranian nuclear issue is testing Beijing's wisdom, its responsibility as a major global power, and ultimately its ability to balance its domestic and global interests.

Beijing's delicate range of policy choices will be exhausted if Tehran refuses to be more flexible. If Iran were to declare an end to diplomacy, it would grow increasingly difficult for Washington to be tolerant. Although there is still some room for maneuvering in the short run, the White House may be pressed to take a harder position toward Iran. Beijing will then be forced to develop a more active diplomacy, as it has done with the North Korean nuclear issue. Beijing might send a special envoy to Tehran, asking Iran to follow various IAEA resolutions that require it to detail its past nuclear activities. Given China's past experience and initiative handling the North Korean nuclear issue, it could also take other preventive measures, such as approaching EU member states for consultation and to exchange policy views as well as coordinate policy action. The EU and Russia would likely welcome China's proactive stance if Beijing would take this initiative. Such a concerted and coordinated action could also strengthen the global concert of powers beyond the existing Western coalition on this issue.

If Iran continues to refuse to implement existing and future IAEA resolutions demanding that it clarify its nuclear history, China would be tested. Beijing's ability to block Security Council debate or action would become increasingly

difficult if Iran continues its lack of compliance with the IAEA mandate. China possibly would be forced to abandon Iran in its defense of its claimed rights.

Nevertheless, even though nuclear proliferation has become an increasingly higher priority in Chinese foreign policy, Beijing likely believes that the existing international monitoring and spotlight on Iran would make it virtually incapable of developing any existing clandestine nuclear programs further. For this reason, because of its emphasis on peaceful methods of resolving the dispute and because China's growing energy demand forces it to value Tehran, Beijing likely would still not support a largely Western action to sanction Iran. If China is reluctant to support a Western sanctioning effort, it would not imply Chinese support for Iranian proliferation or Chinese cowardice or unwillingness to act in the face of a nuclear threat. Rather, it would result from Beijing's philosophy of peaceful conflict resolution coupled with its need for energy cooperation.

It is likely that Beijing would not support a largely Western action to sanction Iran.

Notes

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