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Implications of China's Nuclear Policy for Other Countries

The primary focus of this study has been China's recent reactions and possible future responses to the 1998 South Asian nuclear tests. This chapter briefly considers the implications of China's nuclear policy for four other countries, each of which has substantial interaction with China on national-security issues.

JAPAN

Although Japan is commonly regarded as an economic, not a military, powerhouse, the country's conventional forces actually rank among the best in the world. The Japanese navy projects formidable power in the South China Sea, passage for more than 80 percent of Japan's oil supplies. Close ties to Indonesia assure access to other key sea lanes in Southeast Asia.

The 1998 Indian nuclear tests are a potential threat to Japan's strategic interests. Some analysts suggest that if India were to develop a fleet of nuclear-armed submarines, for example, it could project greater force throughout the region, possibly preventing the passage of Japanese oil ships at the Andaman Sea or the Strait of Malacca (which would force costly rerouting elsewhere).¹⁵⁶ It was not surprising, therefore, that Ryutaro Hashimoto, Japanese prime minister, condemned the Indian blasts as "extremely regrettable" or that Japan shortly thereafter imposed economic sanctions on India.¹⁵⁷

Japan also joined the United States in seeking China's intercession to prevent the subsequent Pakistani nuclear tests.¹⁵⁸

The Sino-Japanese relationship, however, is much more complex than any other bilateral relationships of the two countries. Although it is unthinkable that China would use nuclear weapons against Japan, Japan feels extremely uneasy with the status quo; it advocates a faster pace of disarmament leading to a nuclear-weapon-free Asia and, in the meantime, a missile-defense system for itself.

The deepening economic recession in 1998 seemed to weaken Japan's international political standing as well. The country was rebuffed in its request to participate in a June 1998 meeting in Geneva, when the foreign ministers of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council attempted to coordinate a response to the South Asian nuclear tests. Many Japanese felt that their country had been slighted and blamed China in particular for excluding Japan from this meeting.¹⁵⁹

At present, the Japanese-Chinese bilateral relationship remains stable and the two countries have not entered any kind of arms race. Japan possesses the upper hand in high-tech conventional forces, while China's advantage lies in its nuclear weapons. (This balance of power may shift if Japan deploys a missile-defense system. And Japan has the technical potential to become a nuclear-weapon power, if it so chooses.) In principle, both countries agree on the desirability of eliminating nuclear weapons worldwide.

RUSSIA

Sino-Russian relations have improved throughout the 1990s. The two countries signed a series of agreements to settle their border disputes; bilateral trade increased and broadened; and their top leaders held summits almost every year. The armed forces of both countries have left only limited defensive troops along the borders, have stopped targeting nuclear weapons at each other, and have mutually agreed on no first use of nuclear forces.

As China modernizes its military, it will continue to look to Russia for assistance. Chinese purchases of Russian military technology include Mi-8 transport helicopters, Mi-17 transport and assault helicopters, S-300 PMU surface-to-air missiles, Kilo-class submarines, Sovremenny-class guided-missile destroyers, Su-27 fighters, Il-76M

transport aircraft, and Phalcon/Beriev AWACS (airborne warning and control system) aircraft.

Russia and China coordinated their responses after India and Pakistan conducted nuclear tests, when both countries urged New Delhi and Islamabad to enter into the CTBT and the NPT unconditionally. Russia and China also refused to acknowledge the South Asian countries as nuclear-weapon states.¹⁶⁰ There are, however, potential frictions between the two over future developments in South Asia. In June 1998, Russia signed a \$2.6 billion agreement to build two Indian nuclear-power reactors, sending what many observers called the wrong signal at the wrong time.¹⁶¹ Russia is also helping India develop nuclear-powered submarines. Although Russia may not be motivated by an anti-China strategy, its support for India's nuclear power program will most likely become an issue between Beijing and Moscow.

NORTH KOREA

Two days after India's tests, North Korea caught the world's attention by threatening to revive its own nuclear program. The North Korean ambassador to China told reporters in Beijing that some officials in his country had called for the reopening of nuclear facilities that had been closed in 1994 according to an agreement between North Korea and the United States.¹⁶² On August 31, 1998, North Korea launched an IRBM with what it called a satellite over Japan's territory, prompting Keizo Obuchi, Japanese prime minister, to say that Japan might launch a reconnaissance satellite of its own over North Korea.¹⁶³

Despite China's reaction to South Asia's nuclear tests and its confirmed commitment to non-proliferation on the Korean Peninsula, it is unclear how much influence China can actually exert on its North Korean ally. It is suspected that Chinese leaders did not receive any prior notice of the August launch and were not even sure whether North Korea launched a missile or a satellite.¹⁶⁴

In the future, China will continue its policy of trying to persuade North Korea to give up its nuclear-weapon program, while also cautioning other countries against using North Korean developments as a reason for building missile-defense systems in East Asia.

UNITED STATES

One of the few positive consequences of the 1998 South Asian nuclear tests is the opportunity it presents for a new strategic partnership between the United States and China. China has long exerted diplomatic pressure on New Dehli to work with the United States to terminate India's nuclear-weapon development. In early June 1998, the foreign ministers of China and the United States met in Geneva with their counterparts from Russia, France, and Britain (the other three declared nuclear-weapon states) to discuss the nuclear crisis in South Asia. Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan chaired this meeting. Its final communique urged India and Pakistan to sign the CTBT unconditionally and to refrain from deploying nuclear-armed missiles.¹⁶⁵

U.S. President Bill Clinton visited China in late June–early July 1998, at which time a Sino-U.S. Presidential Joint Statement on South Asia was released. Among its key assertions are the following:

“Our shared interests in a peaceful and stable South Asia and in a strong global non-proliferation regime have been put at risk by these tests, which we have joined in condemning. . . . China and the United States remain firmly committed to strong and effective international cooperation on nuclear non-proliferation, with the NPT as its cornerstone. . . . We reaffirm that our respective policies are to prevent the export of equipment, materials, or technology that could in any way assist programs in India or Pakistan for nuclear weapons, and that to this end, we will strengthen our national export control systems.”¹⁶⁶

During the Jiang–Clinton summit in Beijing, the two leaders also signed a pledge not to target strategic nuclear weapons at each other. In late July, Foreign Minister Tang gave Madeleine Albright, U.S. Secretary of State, new assurances that his government would follow through on this promise. Both sides also renewed their commitment to press India and Pakistan to stop developing nuclear armaments.¹⁶⁷

The recent increase in Islamic activities against the Chinese government in Western China highlights another area where U.S. and

Chinese interests in non-proliferation coincide. With tensions growing on its own borders, China does not want to see a nuclear-armed Pakistan. At Clinton's request, President Jiang urged the Pakistani government not to go ahead with its tests a few days before Pakistan exploded nuclear devices in May.¹⁶⁸ China continues to pressure that country not to transfer nuclear weapons or technology to other Central Asian and Middle Eastern nations.

Throughout the 1990s, China has also distanced itself from North Korea, a historic ally, and has quietly pressured Pyongyang to give up its nuclear-weapon program and to engage in peace talks with South Korea and the United States.¹⁶⁹ Shortly after the South Asian nuclear tests, the North Korean regime threatened to reopen nuclear power facilities it closed under international pressure in 1994 (and which were later reported to be a cover for a nuclear-weapon program).¹⁷⁰ In late 1998, the United States, China, and the two Koreas began a third round of negotiations on procedures that could lead to a peace treaty to replace the armistice that has existed since the end of the Korean War in 1953.¹⁷¹

Relations between the U.S. military and the PLA have also improved in recent years, as exemplified by high-level military visits, professional and educational exchanges, and increased consultation on maritime military security. U.S. warships and aircraft continue to berth in Hong Kong since its return to China from Britain in July 1997.¹⁷² And, according to an interview in Beijing in October 1998, the United States and China are actively considering a joint sea exercise in the near future.

Despite these favorable developments, a number of sore points exist in the developing Sino-U.S. strategic partnership. As recently as October 1998, representatives of all of the major civilian and military Chinese institutes voiced suspicion that the United States had helped India conduct its nuclear tests in May to constrain the growth of China's power. These experts also did not believe that the Central Intelligence Agency could have failed to detect preparations for the tests. Chinese analysts also pointed to several U.S. government documents that continue to describe China as a potential threat, not an ally.

China and the United States have profound conflicts of interest on the Taiwan issue. While the mainland Chinese are supportive of the NPT and CTBT, most of them argued that the United States

must reduce its arms sales to Taiwan, which they view as another kind of proliferation, before China will sign the MTCR. The Chinese also are aware of statements by U.S. officials like John Holum, acting undersecretary of state for arms control and international security affairs, who testified before the U.S. Senate that, "the United States has a very strict policy, secured in a bilateral technology safeguards agreement between the U.S. and China, designed to prevent the transfer of sensitive missile technology to China that could assist its space launch vehicle program."¹⁷³

Finally, U.S. and Chinese domestic politics will continue to play a role in Sino-U.S. relations. Many policy makers in Washington argue that China will use the developments in South Asia as an excuse to build up its own nuclear forces. From the perspective of non-proliferation, however, the current state of Sino-U.S. relations presents a rare opportunity for an improved partnership between these two major powers. Future debates on promoting both U.S. and Asian security should consider the following factors:

- The current Chinese debate on the South Asian nuclear tests is not about a new nuclear doctrine or proliferation policy, but about the appropriate Chinese response to India's nuclear-weapon development. At a time when China's civilian and military policy makers seem divided over what to do, the United States should try to help China regain a sense of confidence in its own security environment so that it will not reverse its commitments to nuclear regimes or increase its nuclear forces.
- China is facing a dilemma in its relations with Islamic countries. Despite traditionally close relationships with countries such as Pakistan and Iran, China is trying its best to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons to the Islamic world (and to North Korea).
- The United States can use cooperation on non-proliferation as a testing ground for an expanded Sino-U.S. strategic partnership. A genuine partnership cannot develop if both countries are still at odds over the nuclear issue, but a comprehensive strategic partnership could lead to important new areas of cooperation on non-proliferation and other pressing issues.