

The Rise of China and Its Effects on Regional Nuclear Orders: A Comparative Analysis of China's Foreign Policy toward Iran and North Korea

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This research looks into China's foreign policy behavior toward Iran and North Korea regarding these states' nuclear programs and examines what motivate Beijing to take a particular stance in handling the crises caused by these nuclear aspirants within two different multilateral formats in collaboration with other major powers. Despite its lack of substantial success, Beijing has played a constructive role as the chair of the six-party talks to curb Pyongyang's nuclear brinkmanship. On the other hand, China's role in Iran's nuclear negotiation under the framework of the P5-plus-1 has been lackluster, if not destructive, at most. In this research, I seek to investigate how a number of critical factors—such as China's unique historic, political, economic, strategic relations vis-à-vis these two different nuclear aspirants—have affected the Chinese government's complex thinking in determining its foreign relations and executing policies in the realm of the regional nuclear security and other directly and indirectly related issues in order to advance its own national interests and preferences.

After more than a century of humiliation caused by its struggle with economic weakness and political disorder, China has repositioned itself as *a rising power* at the center of debates in one of the most important realities in international affairs while experiencing a notable growth in economic power and military strength for the past three decades. There have been some alarming views that China's great power potential, combined with its latent expansionist and assertive foreign policy behavior, could be a threat to regional and global security as it might upset the balance of power and trigger major power realignments in East Asia as well as the world, which would in the end challenge American and Western predominance in the post-Cold War international system. Nonetheless, it is also important not to overlook that China growing integration into the global system, as shown in its increasing memberships in international security regimes, such as the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) regime, and economic institutions, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), has created "constraints on its foreign

conduct as well as incentives to adapt to the prevailing norms in contemporary international relations” (Hu, Chan, and Zha 2000: 2).

With an eye on the debate, this research seeks to explore China’s foreign policy behavior toward Iran and North Korea concerning these states’ nuclear activities and to examine what motivate Beijing to take a particular stance in the two different multilateral nuclear negotiations to handle the crises caused by these two distinctive nuclear aspirants. The structure of this paper is as follows: First, I briefly discuss competing theoretical perspectives in international relations and develop a theoretical framework with relevance to the Chinese context to lay out the analytical foundation for this study. Then, I examine China’s foreign policy behavior toward North Korea and Iran. In particular, I try to investigate a number of critical factors—such as China’s unique historic, political, economic, strategic interests vis-à-vis these two different nuclear aspirants—that can shed some light on the Chinese government’s complex and dynamic thinking in determining its foreign relations and executing power politics in the realm of the regional nuclear security and other directly and indirectly related issues. The last section recapitulates the major findings of the research along with a brief discussion of policy implications for China that has special capabilities *and* responsibilities to change the course of establishing and sustaining the nuclear security in the 21st century in a more constructive way.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY AND CHINESE FOREIGN POLICY: PRAGMATIC REALISM

Based on which theoretical framework can we best explain the Chinese government’s foreign policy toward Iran and North Korea vis-à-vis the issue of these states’ controversial nuclear activities and shed light on Beijing’s unique position in the multilateral negotiations, dealing with the two different nuclear crises caused by Tehran’s policy of nuclear ambiguity and

Pyongyang's nuclear brinkmanship? Luckily, both for the academics and policy makers, a great deal has been known about China, including its history, resources, culture, and politics, and much has also been grasped about the dynamics of international relations (IR). The key task, however, is to find the link between *IR theory* and *China* and to investigate how this linkage that binds the two can account for the essential role played by the most populous country in the world, the significance of which is further enhanced by its standing as the world's fastest-growing and second largest economy. Placing China in a larger theoretical context would also allow us to better trace causation and assess how diverse factors contribute to the events and trends of importance, including its foreign policy behavior toward Iran and North Korea vis-à-vis the issue of these states' nuclear development and other related agendas.

As aptly pointed out by Rosenau (1998: 524), some might think that exploring IR theory "for an understanding of Chinese foreign policy is wasted effort," especially given China's unique 3,000-year history of essential isolation, which places the country "outside the purview of any general theory that might be applicable to other states." Yet, for all its uniqueness, China has long been an essential player in the international scene and has thus been subject to the same dynamics and constraints, embedded in the international system, which affect every other state. Moreover, it is only through a resort to theorizing can we better "sort out the competing dynamics that differentiate the important from the trivial dimensions of China's role and thereby clarify the interplay of the sources which underlie its conduct" (Rosenau 1998: 528).

I acknowledge that there is no single theoretical perspective, with which one can successfully explicate the enormous complexities about China, especially given the inexhaustible detail that might be relevant to the country's foreign policy making. Nonetheless, it still requires efforts to identify the most appropriate of the competing theories. For this, I take the traditional

‘realists’ framework in order to explain China’s foreign policy behavior with an international system-centered approach, which assumes that state behavior is influenced by the logic of national interests, the priorities of which include security, power, regime preservation, and relative capacities.

As asserted by many China experts, “interpreting Chinese foreign policy as *a rational pursuit of national interest* is preferable to seeing a major role of ideology in Chinese foreign policy-making” (Jisi 1998: 498, italics added; also see Zhi 1982; Zhao 2004). For example, Beijing views human rights concerns as a camouflaged American and Western foreign policy under which these governments seek to maximize their political influences over China. Nor do the Chinese treat communist ideology as sacred and immutable; rather it is something that can be modified and adjusted, as shown in its acceptance of market economy, in order to advance national interests and to preserve the existing regime under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

There are several important reasons that allow us to draw a parallel between traditional realist thinking and the analysis of Chinese conceptualizations of international politics and foreign policy. First of all, the Chinese mostly maintain a view that states as coherent and unified entities are the dominant actors in world politics (Hao and Huan 1989). This view is in contrast to domestic-centered approaches that examine key decision-makers’ ideological preferences and objectives and their factional conflicts or bureaucratic politics in explaining Chinese foreign policy behavior, which is essentially seen as an extension of domestic politics (Zhao 2004).

The rationale for the domestic-centered approaches, which have gained increased attention in recent decades, is provided partially by the trend that “as compared to Chinese foreign policy in the Maoists era, the domestic context of Chinese foreign policy today has

become both more important and more complex,” and partially by critical shortcomings of state-centered approaches which treat the policy-making process as a “black box” and reduce foreign policy to a predictable outcome based solely on the national interest or on the logic of *realpolitik* (Fewsmith and Rosen 2001: 151). Nonetheless, the rationale for domestic-centered approaches by no means trumps the merits of state-centered approaches in traditional realist thinking when it comes to explaining the logic of Chinese foreign policy, especially given the particular nature of the state and the ways in which Beijing perceives the workings of the international system and prioritizes its foreign policy agendas.

For example, the Chinese seem to follow a hierarchy of issues in global politics, headed in several occasions by questions of military security and in other cases by questions of national sovereignty, economic independence, or internal political stability, even without being aware of (or using IR) concepts like ‘high politics’ and ‘low politics.’ Moreover, similar to Western realist views, force is considered a usable and effective instrument in China’s foreign policy making. According to Jisi (1998: 498), “the Chinese believe using or threatening force to be the most effective means of wielding power” in order to address “their deep concern about the revival of Japanese militarism” or to maintain their stance not to “repudiate forceful means in settling the Taiwan issue” despite their recognition that other means can also be employed.

What is also critical to Beijing’s incentive structure in formulating its foreign policy is to preserve the political system of the CCP through maintaining domestic political order. Unfortunately, the new effort of political reform in China, initiated to make the CCP more adaptive and better governing, has yet to fully assuage the sense of the preservational necessity for Beijing. Under the circumstances:

Tangible and continued economic prosperity has become *the* avenue to reach that goal; international acceptance and approval have become major sources of legitimacy for the CCP at home, whereas

nationalistic demands for more Chinese power and prestige have presented Beijing with an additional opportunity for, and a new challenge to, its political preservation. (Wang 2005: 19)

Against this backdrop, China's foreign policy has been motivated by a peculiar incentive structure that pursues a combination of preservation, prosperity, and power/prestige.

In order to make this happen, the Chinese leaders have adopted a policy of *pragmatism*, which is defined as behaviors that are "disciplined by neither set of values nor established principles" (Pye 1999: 38). Rather, pragmatism in policy behavior is firmly goal-fulfilling and interest-driven, conditioned extensively by China's national needs, political objectives, and geostrategic ambitions. As elucidated by Zhao (2004: 5), China's "pragmatic strategic behavior is flexible in tactics, subtle in strategy, and avoids appearing confrontational, but it is uncompromising with foreign demands" that undermine its vital national interest or disrespect its historical sensitivities. China's pursuit of pragmatism has allowed it to work with its neighbors and the major powers while complying with some established international norms beneficial to its foreign policy objectives but ignoring others if those are against its national interests.

In short, linking analysis of Chinese foreign policy with IR theory is a daunting task for all who make the effort, given that "the dispute between the generalist in theory and the specialist in area studies is too long-standing to recapitulate" (Whiting 1998: 507). Under the condition, each questions the utility of the other while both sides continue to take largely separate paths of enquiry. Yet, theory *is* a sustainer of enquiry that helps us select some aspects of the story as important and dismiss others as trivial through its mechanisms of tracing causation and evaluating diverse contributing factors to interesting events in the real world. Thus, we often fall back on some theoretical notions, which would guide us to a better understanding of reality.

At the same time, it is still desirable to continue to make efforts to understand the Chinese mindset by studying the uniqueness of Chinese thinking of world affairs, without learning much of which one cannot successfully explain or forecast China's international behavior. It is in this spirit that Shambaugh (1990, 133) eloquently puts: "no doubt there is a need for Western sinologists to escape their ethnocentrism and attempt to crawl inside the mindset of the Chinese elite and mass, but not at the cost of scholarly objectivity or universal standards of human rights."

What I have tried to do here is to build a theoretical framework based on logics from traditional 'realist' approach to international politics with sense of pragmatism in order to better investigate Chinese foreign policy. In what follows, I shall use pragmatic realism as an analytical foundation to examine China's foreign policy toward North Korea and Iran over the issues of these states' controversial nuclear policies and other related matters that directly or indirectly affect China's national interests.

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY BEHAVIOR VIS-À-VIS NORTH KOREA AND IRAN

While North Korea has overtly asserted its development and possession of nuclear *weapons* as a mechanism to protect the country from the alleged threats from the United States and its allies, Iran has claimed that its nuclear program is for *peaceful civilian purposes*, aiming at generating electricity. Against this backdrop, the major powers, including China, have launched diplomatic initiatives to resolve these nuclear problems through multilateral negotiating mechanisms under the framework of the six-party talks and the P5-plus-1. With regard to the North Korean nuclear crisis, Beijing has played a constructive role as the chair of the six-party talks to curb Pyongyang's nuclear brinkmanship to a certain extent. On the other hand, China's role in Iran's

nuclear negotiation under the framework of the P5-plus-1 has been lackluster, if not destructive, at most. This section is designed to explicate how a number of critical factors—such as China’s unique historic, political, economic, strategic interests vis-à-vis these two different nuclear aspirants—have shaped the Chinese government’s foreign policy thinking in addressing these nuclear issues of regional and global importance and in advancing Beijing’s own national goals and preferences.

China’s Relations with North Korea

For centuries, history and geostrategic location have combined to make the Korean Peninsula essential to China’s security and national interests. “The importance lies not only in the peninsula’s long common border with [China]...but also in the convergence—and often the clash—of the interests” that China has had with Russia, Japan, and the United States in Korea: consequently, “Korea has served as an area of conflict and an invasion corridor” to satisfy these major powers’ policy goals and hegemonic ambitions throughout history (Hao 2009: 155). China was involved in the Korean War, supporting North Korea against the United Nations (UN) allied forces led by the United States on behalf of South Korea. This, along with the close relations between the party organs of each country (the Chinese Communist Party and the Korean Workers Party) as well as among the senior cadre in both militaries, has reinforced the importance of North Korea in China’s foreign policy calculations.

Even after the end of the Cold War, Beijing has sustained “a leading international position in relations with North Korea” (Sutter 2008: 238). At the same time, the international confrontation caused by Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons development, together with the North’s poor economic conditions and political uncertainty that revolves around its power succession, has added elements of anxiety and unpredictability into Beijing’s foreign policy stance toward

the North. In this section, I seek to shed light on China's foreign policy toward North Korea vis-à-vis the issue of the latter's policy of nuclear brinkmanship and its implications for Chinese national security interests and other related agendas.

China has positioned itself at center stage in the nuclear negotiations, while exploiting its status as a new economic guru to exert its influence over the region and beyond. In the immediate aftermath of the revelation of the North's secret uranium enrichment program that initiated the second Korean Peninsula nuclear crisis,¹ Washington urged Beijing to take a leadership role in getting Pyongyang to accept multilateral negotiations. Yet, up to that point, assuming a sustained leadership position in Northeast Asia seemed out of character for China at best, given that the country had usually been passive in diplomatic situations and more inclined to react to crises rather than playing an active role in leading other countries toward resolution.

However, the North Korean nuclear crisis became a major turning point for igniting Beijing's strategic ambitions to regain its regional preeminence. Thus, Beijing played a major role in launching the trilateral talks among China, North Korea, and the United States in April 2003. Even after the failure of the three-way talks held in Beijing, the Chinese sought to initiate another bargaining process which would soon evolve into the format of the six-party negotiations, beginning with the first round of the talks in Beijing in August 2003.

As a rising power, China has great interests in reshaping the region away from the domination of the U.S.-Japan alliance and toward its growing influence. In this sense, the six-party talks can be considered the first major test since the nineteenth century for Beijing to regain its centrality "with responsibility for molding the regional structure weighing the fate of its

¹This so-called "the Second North Korean nuclear crisis" has started with the revelation of North Korea's secret nuclear program, based on highly enriched uranium (HEU) technology, in October 2002 (see Kelly 2005; Funabashi 2007). During the first nuclear crisis in 1993-1994, the focal point of contention had been the North's plutonium-based nuclear weapons program, which was later frozen under the 1994 Agreed Framework (See Cumings 2004).

buffer state, North Korea, and ties with the lone superpower, the United States” (Rozman 2007: 7). Since 2003, China has played a key role in steering the multilateral forum that became the primary mechanism for addressing the crisis over North Korea’s nuclear weapons development. As the chair of the six-party talks, the Chinese standing as a major diplomatic force has also greatly increased from its position during the first North Korean nuclear crisis of 1993-4.

Under the circumstances, Beijing has officially assumed the role of a neutral mediator, positioning itself between the two adversaries—Washington and Pyongyang. As North Korea’s most important strategic ally and main trade partner, Beijing has often used its influence over Pyongyang to bring the recalcitrant Kim Jong-il regime to the six-party negotiating table. The United States and other major powers have also acknowledged that China’s active engagement and cooperation are essential to accomplishing the goal of complete and verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

However, proliferation has never been Beijing’s major concern due to its historically cordial relations with Pyongyang and the extremely low probability that the North will transfer nuclear weapons to groups that threaten China’s national security. As succinctly put by Wang (2005: 469), “DPRK’s nuclear program imposes a threat to the U.S., not to China.”

Even so, the longer-term consequences of failure to solve the North Korean nuclear problem could possibly move the proliferation issue to China’s top priority list of vital national interests. For instance, if it appeared that North Korea sought to keep its nuclear weapons program indefinitely, causing Japan to pursue a nuclear weapons capability, China might alter its own stance toward the North and begin to impose a greater pressure on Pyongyang than what it is currently exerting. Furthermore, if the pending nuclear crisis ignited Taiwan’s nuclear

ambitions, China would most certainly take stronger measures to end Pyongyang's nuclear program, which would, by extension, lessen Taiwan's rationale to go nuclear.

Yet, more often than not, the Chinese reasoning on the nuclear talks still leans toward the logic of Pyongyang, its long-standing communist ally. The Chinese government has been resistant toward imposing harsh UN sanctions on North Korea. Pyongyang's ideological affinity—however distorted it is from the original communist ideology—with Beijing can partially account for China's empathetic stance toward North Korea. This is not necessarily because communist ideology per se has absolute sanctity in China's foreign policy thinking but because preserving the ideological pillar adds greater justification for the CCP to maintain their grip on power in the current system despite the country's recent history of successful economic reform and market liberalization.

Accordingly, the convergence of interests in maintaining the communist ruling system has worked as a mechanism that continues to unite Beijing and Pyongyang in the post-Cold War international environment. Over the years, the relationship between China and North Korea has often been described as being as close as "lips and teeth." Although their intimate diplomatic relations have been somewhat diluted since the end of the Cold War, there are still elements of closeness especially between the leadership of the CCP and the Korean Workers Party (KWP). Even Chinese diplomats have consistently described the Sino-North Korean ties as important at least for historical and geographical reasons, despite the fact that they usually share little sense of closeness toward Pyongyang and depict their nuclear bargaining with the North exasperating (Pritchard 2007: 91).

Another crucial and more pragmatic reason that Beijing does not put too much pressure on Pyongyang to curb Kim Jong-il's policy of nuclear brinkmanship is because the stability of

the North is significant to China's national interests given that the country serves as an important geostrategic buffer between China and American troops stationed in the South. If the Pyongyang regime collapses, it could mean a blow to the national security of the Chinese communist government as the leadership in Beijing "probably feels that an unstable or collapsed North Korea on their border would be a problem for their border stability" (Bechtol 2010: 139).

Furthermore, a collapsed North Korea could lead to Korean unification, which would effectively end the Korean War with the possible withdrawal of U.S. forces from the Korean Peninsula that had been stationed in the South since the armistice in 1953. Yet, a sudden change in North Korea could also create an environment to necessitate security operations by the U.S. (or U.N.) troops in the North. As asserted by Stares and Wit (2009: 20), however, China's foremost strategic desire vis-à-vis the Korean Peninsula would be "to prevent the United States from establishing military bases in the North or stationing troops, if only temporarily, near its border." Thus, China would do anything to protect its interests on the peninsula.

Also, Beijing's top domestic policy objective is to maintain the one-party political system of the CCP. As asserted by Wang (2009: 50), "tangible and continued economic prosperity has become *the* avenue to reach that goal," especially without effective political reforms to produce better governance. In order to maintain political preservation and facilitate economic prosperity, Beijing prefers not to disturb the status quo in the region even while it seeks denuclearization of North Korea. In this sense, China doesn't fear North Korea *per se* but that country's potential to be disruptive in the region, which by extension would undermine Beijing's interests for continuing its economic development and socio-political stability, together with fulfilling its larger strategic ambitions in the region.

Accordingly, Beijing's policy preferences have led it to make diplomatic initiatives to tackle the North Korean nuclear crisis through peaceful negotiations within a multilateral format of the six-party talks that involves participation of key regional players—Moscow, Tokyo, and Seoul—together with Washington, all of which share the official goal of denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula. At the same time, despite its status as North Korea's most important political and economic ally and patron, China's high priorities of preserving regional stability and its lack of better alternative than supporting the continued survival of the regime in Pyongyang made Beijing inept, even though it might have been strategically intentional, to quell the North's nuclear brinkmanship by any measure other than diplomacy. This situation can be described as the so-called "tyranny of proximity," which allows China and other conventionally powerful states in the region and beyond *not to have many viable alternatives but dialogue* to deal with Pyongyang's development of nuclear weapons.

In addition, China has provided substantial energy and food assistance to North Korea, fearing a large influx of North Korean refugees across its border in case of a sudden collapse of the regime in Pyongyang. To Washington's chagrin, Beijing was increasing its oil and food exports (crude oil exports by 45% and cereal exports by 96%) to North Korea even during the six-month period from January to June 2005 when Pyongyang declared itself a nuclear weapons state and Washington was strongly pushing Beijing to put greater pressure on the North (Xinhua News Agency 2005).

The fundamentals of the Sino-North Korean relationship have not been altered even after the North's missile and nuclear tests in 2006, even though the latter event was particularly considered as the Chinese "red line."² The Chinese did participate in the unanimous approval of UN Security Council Resolution 1695 after the July 4 missile test and in the imposition of

² For a report on China's displeasure caused by North Korea's nuclear testing, see Moore (2008).

unanimously passed sanctions on North Korea under UN Security Council Resolution 1718 after the October 9 nuclear test. Yet, it was also China that pressured the Security Council members to eliminate the possibility of using armed force should North Korea fail to respond to the resolution by exercising its veto power to make sure the resolution passed under Chapter VII, Article 41, of the UN Charter.

All in all, despite its lack of substantial success to achieve the official goal of disarming North Korea's nuclear program, Beijing has played a positive role as the chair of the six-party talks to curb Pyongyang's nuclear brinkmanship and persuade the recalcitrant Kim Jong-il regime to return to the bargaining table, frequently using its power and influence, derived from its unique historic, political, economic, strategic relations with the communist North. In this sense, it is not quite accurate to assert that China does not have significant clout over North Korea. However, "Beijing may avoid applying too much leverage on Pyongyang" for denuclearizing the North, which is only a second-tier security interest for China, "because it fears that doing so could have a negative impact on its top national security priority (regional stability)" (Pritchard 2007: 91).

This is where Beijing and some other members of the six-party talks, notably Washington and Tokyo, have struggled to adjust their policy preferences toward Pyongyang to be more compatible than conflictual. Nonetheless, it doesn't appear that China would change its unique policy stance toward North Korea in the near future, especially considering the relatively low priority that Beijing places on dismantling the North's nuclear weapons program. Nor would Beijing pursue any radical policy path that might destabilize the current regime in Pyongyang, the effects of which could prevent China from achieving its top national priorities of maintaining

regional stability and preserving domestic legitimacy of the CCP based on the country's impressive economic growth and rising power in international affairs.

Sino-Iranian Relations

Unlike North Korea, Iran has never caused security concerns for China in any direct way due to its geographical distance from Chinese territory. Yet, there is a long tradition of cooperation between China and Iran that dates back over many centuries, during which ancient kingdoms of the two lands were connected via the Silk Road. In modern period, Sino-Iranian cooperation has continued based on their shared interests in important issues: “containing the Soviet Union in the 1970s, countering U.S. hegemonism in the 1990s, developing the economies and military forces in their own countries, supplying and consuming energy, and so on” (Garver 2006: 3). In particular, Sino-Iranian relationship has become even more valuable for both as the energy equation between the two countries intensified in the course of China's growing demand for oil as a rising power and an economic dynamo of East Asia and Iran's supplying that demand. It was these practical interests and policy compatibilities that primarily motivated Beijing and Tehran to cooperate with each other.

Among other issue areas, China's support for Iranian nuclear program was a crucial element of Beijing's foreign policy efforts to strengthen its relations with Iran in the 1980s and the 1990s. Beijing was Tehran's major nuclear partner from 1985 to 1997, during which China by far played a role as Iran's most important, though not the only, foreign nuclear partner. This was because China helped Iran circumventing U.S.-led international opposition to halt Iran's nuclear efforts in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and the ensuing Iran hostage crisis. However, the Sino-Iranian nuclear cooperation was initially denied by both parties until it was publicly acknowledged beginning in 1991. Even then, many aspects of the previous

relationship remained underground and were revealed only more than a decade later when China and Iran provided important documentation on the relationship to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in 2003 after the disclosure of Iran's covert efforts to enrich uranium for nearly 20 years (Garver 2006).

In this sense, China's early policy toward Iran in the area of nuclear nonproliferation was not positive. Yet, Beijing eventually decided to stop its nuclear cooperation with Iran under intense U.S. pressure (Hibbs 2003). The key reason that Beijing agreed to drop most outstanding nuclear commerce with Tehran was to safeguard its vital relation with Washington as China's close ties with Iran complicated its efforts to stay on good terms with the United States and other developed countries important in Chinese foreign policy especially for continuing its notable economic growth. Thus, the Chinese became "more reluctant than in the 1990s to take strong public positions against the United States and its allies in dealing with Iran" as they put high priority on convincing Washington and others of Beijing's "avowed intention to develop peacefully and in a way seen as responsible and attentive to international norms," including nuclear nonproliferation (Sutter 2006: 357).

However, the Chinese pursuit of pragmatic strategic behavior led them to formulate subtle ways of demonstrating China's friendship with Iran and its support for Tehran's nuclear efforts even after its 1997 nuclear disengagement from the Islamic Republic. A clear example of this occurred during the 2004 IAEA debates over Iran's controversial nuclear activities. Beijing accepted Tehran's position that its nuclear efforts were peaceful with energy-oriented purposes. During the 2004 debates, Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing asserted that his country was confident of Iran's peaceful intentions when he was asked about China's position on the Iranian nuclear issue (IRNA 2004a). Beijing also maintained its view from the initial assumption that

Tehran was meeting its essential obligations under the NPT and was entitled to enjoy an “absolute right” to pursue peaceful nuclear activities (IRNA 2004b).

There are several important reasons why China has taken more subtle and far less antagonistic foreign policy behavior toward Iran, unlike other major powers especially the United States and the European countries, vis-à-vis the issue of the Iranian nuclear program. First of all, Beijing basically sees Tehran more as a partner, with whom it seeks to advance its key policy objectives, rather than a trouble maker who poses a serious security threat to its internal and external environments. Thus, despite Iran’s refusal to submit to U.N. demands for years, China has often used its influence as a permanent member of the UN Security Council to prevent other major powers from threatening Iran with harsh international sanctions.

Overall, China has taken a relatively nonchalant stance regarding concerns over Iran’s nuclear ambitions and insisted on diplomacy as the best option to address the Iranian nuclear impasse. With the tacit protection of China, Tehran has continued its nuclear activities, in the belief that it could proceed with impunity from any serious international repercussions (Blank 2007: 69). Despite the fact that China joined other permanent members of the U.N. Security Council in passing a number of U.N. Security Council resolutions targeted at Iran, it was largely due to Beijing (along with Moscow) that sanctions, taken under Article 41 of Chapter VII of the UN Charter, never included calls for the use of armed force. Even the latest round of UN sanctions (Resolution 1929) in June 2010, hailed by President Obama as delivering “the toughest sanctions” ever imposed against the Islamic Republic, was made possible only after being watered down during negotiations with Beijing, together with Moscow (MacFarquhar, 2010).³ As a result, a series of UN resolutions stressed the importance of continuous commitments of

³ Due to their oil and gas interests in Iran and their shared view of acknowledging the Islamic Republic not as a strategic threat, China and Russia blocked any move to act against imposing crippling economic sanctions and oil embargo (Richter 2010).

major powers to *a negotiated solution* to the Iranian nuclear issue and encouraged Iran to accept these countries' offer of "substantial opportunities" for political, security and economic benefits in return for its compliance with Security Council demands to suspend all enrichment and reprocessing related activities.

The more conciliatory stance of China (combined with the similarly less confrontational position of Russia) toward Iran notably weakened the cohesion among the six major powers of the P5-plus-1 and granted Iran a free pass to violate the UN Security Council's legally binding demands without serious consequences. As Iran's confrontation especially with the United States escalated, Tehran found itself further away from the P5-plus-1 forum and pushed into closer association with its non-Western partners, notably Beijing and Moscow. Meanwhile, despite the fact that China agreed with other members in the P5-plus-1 on the goal of curbing Iran's controversial nuclear ambitions, the effectiveness of this supposedly "major power coalition" was marred by the issues of incompatibility of policy preferences between Beijing and some of the coalition members and by convergence of interests that Beijing (and Moscow) shared with Tehran. What China, together with Russia, could also contrive to do was to satisfy its growing hegemonic ambitions and economic appetite by engaging in the multilateral diplomatic efforts that would grant the Chinese some maneuvering room to prevent Western dominance in foreign affairs and security policy of Iran, in which they found great economic and strategic interests.

Overall, China's role in the Iranian nuclear talks has been lackluster, if not destructive, at most. This is largely because Beijing does not perceive great political costs from failing to exert any considerable diplomatic leverage over Iran concerning that country's nuclear development. Nor does Beijing have great interest in resolving the Iranian nuclear issue in general. Iran poses no credible and direct threat that would undermine China's security and stability. Moreover,

contrary to the United States and other Western countries, the problem of radical Islamic terrorism, especially with linkages to the regime in Tehran, is of relatively little concern for the Chinese government.⁴ Therefore, China has little reason to see Iran as a mortal enemy. What's more, Beijing has found an attractive economic partner in Tehran, which not only possesses important natural resources to satisfy China's growing energy demands but also has an authoritarian theocratic regime that, unlike its Western trading partners, would hardly put pressure on China to deal with such issues as human rights, corruption, environmental conditions and regulatory controls.

Against this backdrop, the trade volume between Iran and China reached \$3.3 billion in 2001. Then, China's exports to Iran increased by 360% between 2000 and 2005 (Habibi 2006). China took the second rank, after Germany, among top exporters to Iran in 2005, representing 8.3% of the total import market in Iran, and the total volume of Sino-Iranian trade stood at \$9.2 billion. As aptly pointed out by Ali Akbar Saheli, Iran's former representative to the International Atomic Energy Agency, in an interview with *The Washington Post*, Iran and China "mutually complement each other" in the sense that the Chinese have industry and the Iranians have energy resources (Wright 2004).

The rapid economic development of China has particularly increased the country's demands for oil and gas, of which Iran has plenty. As discussed by Shenna (2010: 354-355), "over the past five years, China's state-run energy companies have committed investments of \$120 billion to Iran's energy sector, and China has hugely profited from Iran's trade shift towards Asia as a result of Western sanctions." In October 2004, Beijing and Tehran signed a

⁴ Although China has its own problem in the Western provinces of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, the tensions in the region are largely caused by *ethnic conflicts* between the Uyghur plurality and Chinese authorities. Thus, the nature of these ethnic tensions is different from the one of radical Islamic terrorism despite the fact that the Chinese government has been trying to label these protestors of the regional independence movement as "separatists" and "Islamic religious extremists."

preliminary deal worth \$70 billion to \$100 billion by which China would purchase Iranian oil and gas and help Iran to build its Yadavaran oil field, located near the Iraqi border. Earlier that year, Zhuhai Zhenrong Corporation, a Chinese state-run company, signed a contract to import 110 million metric tons of liquefied natural gas worth \$20 billion from Iran over a quarter-century. In 2007, China ranked as Iran's second largest oil client followed by Japan, with roughly 16% (411,000 barrels a day) of Iran's oil going to China. In addition, China imported roughly 15% of its oil (or 544,000 barrels a day) from Iran in 2009, thus making the Islamic Republic of Iran China's second largest provider of oil after Saudi Arabia. In addition, China National Petroleum Company (CNPC), the country's biggest and most prominent national energy company, entered Iran's upstream oil sector by signing a contract with the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) in 2009 to lead the development of the North Azadegan oil field (Shenna 2010).

All in all, China's bilateral trade with Iran has increased six-fold over the last decade with an estimated \$25-30 billion per year. Accordingly, China's growing energy demand and Iran's resource availability to satisfy that demand have further fueled Tehran's defiance in the nuclear negotiations given that Beijing "needs Iran's oil too much to support sanctions that might actually bite" despite growing pressure from the Western powers (Hargreaves 2009).

In addition to trading with each other for comparative economic advantage, both China and Iran have also strengthened their ties for strategic reasons. Along with Russia, China, with its status as a veto yielding permanent member of the UN Security Council, has been a valuable partner for Iran that can sidetrack America's calls to diplomatically and economically isolate Iran. Meanwhile, Beijing has provided advanced military technology, including advanced missile technology to Tehran despite the warnings from Washington and the imposition of the American

sanctions on Chinese manufacturers of equipment which could be used to build weapons of mass destruction. The expansion of Sino-Iran ties in recent years can be seen partly as a reaction to Washington's strategy, especially during the Bush administration, to contain both China and Iran that made these two states become natural allies. Also, both countries have a common concern over the increasing presence of American and other Western militaries on their doorsteps, including Central and South Asia and the Middle East (Wright 2004).

China's growing trade with Iran has weakened the impact of various U.S. economic embargoes against that country. To be more exact, China has become "even more active in the energy sector" after the imposition of a series of UN sanctions, "scooping up deals left by others" so that it can face the task of feeding and supplying its vast population (Richter 2010). As blunt as it may sound, the importance of national interests in continuing economic development would trump in all Iran-China ties, especially as "Iranian crude accounts for one-third of imports for the energy-hungry Chinese economy" and "the Iranian-Chinese Chamber of Commerce estimates that bilateral trade will continue booming in 2010, and show a 50% year-on-year increase in monetary terms" (Mazaheri 2010).

Yet, in the end, Beijing's strengthening ties with Tehran have undermined the ability of the major powers of the P5-plus-1 as a whole to effectively pressure Iran to relinquish its dubious nuclear ambitions. However, Beijing does not consider these consequences as problems of great concern. For China, the Iranian nuclear talks offer a great opportunity to strengthen its image as a superpower that strives to solve global problems, while having to deal with an issue of relatively little importance.

Beijing looks on Tehran not only as an important trade partner but also as a key strategic balancer in the Middle East where it finds a major source of its growing need for energy. In

addition, Beijing's unenthusiastic stance on sanctions generally reflects anger with Western sanctions that the country has faced, especially since its military crackdown on the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989. It also reflects Beijing's longstanding policy of "non-interference" in other states' domestic affairs—a stance often taken to insulate its economic interests from diplomatic tensions in the course of pursuing its pragmatic foreign policy.

After all, Beijing has found a valuable partner with compatible interests in Tehran. Despite their political and ideological differences, they have more attuned governing styles, which are usually denounced by the democratic West. Therefore, the Chinese have been highly reluctant to support any harsh measures, including economic and military sanctions, especially if such measures would damage their economically profitable and strategically preferable relations with Iran. Moreover, it doesn't appear that China would ever agree on banning the export of refined petroleum to Iran without clear evidence of Tehran's nuclear breakout attempt of converting low-enriched uranium to the weapons-grade level.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this research, China's foreign policy behavior toward Iran and North Korea concerning these states' nuclear development has been examined. Using an analytical framework derived from logics of pragmatic realism, I have looked into various factors that motivated Beijing to take a particular stance, dealing with these different nuclear aspirants. In both cases, Beijing has largely refrained from officially rebuking the respective states for violating the international norm of nuclear nonproliferation and causing wide spread global concerns for nuclear security, despite its engagement with other major powers in the efforts to solve these nuclear crises through multilateral diplomatic dialogue. On the other hand, there are some notable differences in Beijing's foreign policy behavior toward Pyongyang and Tehran. These differences can be

explained by a number of critical factors such as China's unique historic, political, economic and geostrategic relations vis-à-vis these two distinct nuclear aspirants, the masterful balance of which would either advance or undermine the Chinese national interests and policy preferences.

With regard to North Korea, China has more immediate concerns, due to its geographical proximity, over such issues as the Pyongyang regime's potential collapse or the possible domino effect of regional nuclear proliferation, neither of which would advance China's key policy objectives of maintaining regional stability as a necessary condition for its continuation of economic development and preservation of power under the leadership of the CCP. Therefore, Beijing has played a constructive role to maintain the regional peace and stability. In particular, China has sought to curb Pyongyang's nuclear brinkmanship by serving as the chair of the six-party talks, notwithstanding the lack of substantial success in preventing the North from conducting nuclear tests and in bringing the recalcitrant Kim Jong-il regime back to the negotiating table.

On the other hand, despite Iran's dubious nuclear ambitions, Beijing does not perceive Tehran as a threat that could undermine China's security in East Asia or its strategic interests in the Middle East in any direct way. Rather, Tehran is largely viewed as a sovereign state being engaged in legally granted activities as a member of the NPT. At the same time, Beijing's growing energy demands caused by its remarkable economic growth and Tehran's capacity to supply the necessary resources have made these two countries valuable partners whose cooperative relations would not be easily damaged by any Western pressure. China has also helped Iran avoid being a target of strong economic and security sanctions from the West by using its power as a veto yielding permanent member of the U.N. Security Council. As the result, Iran has been able to continue its nuclear enrichment activities without serious consequences

despite a series of U.N. resolutions, calling on Iran to stop uranium enrichment and to show greater transparency in terms of demonstrating its nuclear intentions. In this sense, China's role in dealing with Iran's nuclear issue can be considered as lackluster, if not destructive, at most.

In both cases, Beijing has special capabilities *and* responsibilities to change the course of regional nuclear security in East Asia and the Middle East in a more constructive way. First of all, China is in a relatively more favorable position to influence North Korean and Iranian foreign policy than other major powers seeking to curb Pyongyang's nuclear brinkmanship and to verify Tehran's peaceful nuclear intentions. This is partly because of Beijing's distinctively cordial relations with each of these nuclear aspirants in various important issue areas and of its widely professed stance that neither of these states is an enemy of the Chinese government. Thus, it seems that Beijing could bring certain elements of trust and goodwill—crucial factors for successful negotiations that are largely missing in both cases—to the bargaining table when it comes to the multilateral diplomatic efforts to handle the regional security crisis in East Asia and the Middle East caused by North Korea and Iran's controversial nuclear activities.

Moreover, the fact that the Chinese tend to see such issues as human rights abuses and other violations of human freedom as interference in domestic affairs can better place China to deal with these uniquely nondemocratic countries. Unlike the democratic West, the Chinese government is far less burdened by having to balance between condemning human rights violations of the North Korean and the Iranian regimes on one hand and coaxing Pyongyang and Tehran into meaningful dialogue on the nuclear issue on the other hand. Through flexing its diplomatic muscle to strengthen regional confidence and security building measures under the framework of the six-party talks and the P5-plus-1, China could also advance its important strategic objectives to avert a crude exercise in balance of power diplomacy by the United States

and other Western powers in areas where it finds great national interests. At any rate, China needs to find a foreign policy strategy that would serve its growing desire to be recognized as a respected global player and a responsible supporter of one of the most widely subscribed-to international treaties in the area of disarmament, the NPT. Appearing to abet nuclear proliferation would certainly not satisfy this objective.

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