

BALANCING CHINESE INTERESTS ON NORTH KOREA AND IRAN

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China recently joined the international community in its response to North Korea's satellite launch and third nuclear test, and it also participated in talks on Iran's nuclear program. Analyses abound that Beijing's strategic calculations have changed. Yet, in China, nonproliferation continues to be framed as an excuse behind which Washington and its allies are able to engage in provocative and destabilizing acts, compromising Beijing's larger security interests and containing its growth. China is frequently reacting more to the United States than to the case of proliferation. And while Beijing may engage to curb instability, this does not necessarily mean that it seeks to find an enduring solution. Instead, China is more likely to continue to seek a balance between keeping the United States preoccupied and dissuading it from an extreme response that would harm Beijing's interests.

Key Themes

- The basic assumption in China when evaluating any U.S. action is that Washington seeks to maximize its national interests, whether resource exploitation, absolute security, or regime change.
- Washington should invest more time in defining the central factors that either compel or dissuade China's involvement in nonproliferation issues, namely Beijing's interest hierarchy.
- China is unlikely to sign onto sanctions that harm its companies' interests and national growth, but it will not necessarily block those that allow it to utilize U.S. isolation of a country to garner greater economic or political leverage.
- While China will not participate in military action to address proliferation, it may be compelled to participate in negotiations, sanctions, or even counterproliferation efforts to avert a destabilizing strike against a proliferant country.

Importance for U.S. Policymakers

- Interest hierarchies can serve as a foundation for an exchange of priorities, allowing Washington to achieve a specific goal in tandem with Beijing's realization of a high-ranking aim. This need not always lead to positive outcomes; often the goal is to simply avoid negative ones.
- On North Korea, Beijing's aversion to counterproliferation measures, including the Proliferation Security Initiative, could be mitigated through Washington's own efforts to engage China in information exchanges on ballistic missile defense.
- Beijing's cooperation on stricter measures to curb Tehran's program could result from enhanced guarantees on China's fuel supplies in the event of a crisis or a desire to reduce or prevent restrictions on Chinese companies.
- By better understanding China's interest hierarchy, Washington can begin to move away from a crisis-based, action-reaction relationship and engage in an exchange with Beijing that will be more predictable, equitable, and cooperative.

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