



China-US Nuclear Security Deal: Collaboration or Balancing?

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China-US, on the sidelines of the fourth Nuclear Security Summit 2016, Washington, issued a Joint Statement, on March 31, 2016 on Nuclear Security Cooperation, continuing the new hope in their relationship that started since signing the bilateral climate deal. The new-found mutual compatibility, despite several irritants between the two, indicates that both countries are trying to maximize their interests by finding mutual ground to cooperate with their own set of agendas.

China has 30 operational nuclear power generating units, with a total installed capacity of 28.31 GW. Another 24 units with a total installed capacity of 26.72 GW are under construction.¹ It is also expected that 30-40 nuclear power plants will be operational by 2020.² The recently approved 13th Five-Year Plan will ensure successful completion of this ambitious work by the end of plan year. This is also the first time when China has included this into its five year plan, aiming to become world's largest producer of nuclear power.

Driven by both domestic compulsions and external business opportunities, China would invest heavily in nuclear power generation during the 13th five year plan. Firstly, to combat the deteriorating air quality, China plans to increase the share of non-fossil energy to 15 percent by 2020 and 20 percent by 2030. Moreover, China is also struggling to reduce coal consumption and aims to reduce it to 62 percent of energy use by 2020.³ This year alone, China will invest 31.4 billion yuan (4.8 billion U.S. dollars) in nuclear power projects.⁴ Secondly, nuclear power is also a promising business opportunity, thereby, China also wants to be a leading exporter of nuclear technology. The recently concluded strategic investment deal with Britain and France in Hinkley

Point nuclear power station⁵ in the UK opens the door for China's nuclear facilities to high-end markets in Europe and provides opportunity for Chinese companies to fully involve in the construction and management of British nuclear power plants.⁶

The withdrawal of North Korea from 'six party talk' since 2009 left North Korea without any check. North Korea's frequent nuclear tests undermine the security of China and threaten the peace and stability in the region. Speaking at bilateral US-China meeting on the sidelines of Nuclear Security Summit 2016, President Obama's remarks "of great importance to both of us is North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons, which threatens the security and stability of the region. And President Xi and I are both committed to the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and full implementation of U.N. sanctions,"⁷ suggests that US wishes to rope in China to deter and control North Korea. On the other hand, China also realises the potential threat North Korea poses, seeing the growing estranged bilateral relationship and defiant behaviour of Kim Jong-Un.

With the lifting of nuclear related sanctions on Iran under the Iran Nuclear Deal, China, as mentioned in China-Iran Joint Statement issued during President Xi Jinping's visit to Iran in January 2016, hopes to assist Iran in the "use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes and renewable energies"⁸ and reiterated that China and Iran will "strive to advance the process of modernization of the Arak heavy-water reactor". Moreover, the Iran Nuclear Deal was also an outcome of US-China cooperation⁹ and Chinese media highlights that this deal is one step further in boosting new major power relations¹⁰.

In this scenario, the China-US nuclear security deal becomes an instrument of both collaborating and balancing. On one hand, given the rise of terrorism in China¹¹ and beyond, China is collaborating with US to learn safety techniques and security measures to prevent terrorists, criminals from acquiring nuclear or other radioactive materials, The US, on the other hand, is trying to balance China to bring it into a loop to restrict and check nuclear leakage to unwanted actors. The US also succeeded in pushing China to convert its remaining MNSR reactors at Shenzhen University and to support the conversion of MNSR reactors in Ghana and Nigeria. These reactors have cores consisting of about one kilogram of HEU, enriched to 90 per cent or greater.¹²

The last and but not the least, US leadership is constantly trying to bring China under existing liberal international order. The underlying assumption is if China is "brought into this

liberal order, the rules and institutions will shape Beijing more than they will be shaped by it". These deals nuclear security, climate change, etc, therefore, are the instruments to pull China into the existing international liberal order.

China has participated in all the Nuclear Security Summit (NSS) since its inception in 2010. At the first NSS, President Hu Jintao had called on all states to "work together to address nuclear security challenges and jointly promote peace and development"¹³ and at the second NSS, Seoul President Hu Jintao emphasised the need "to deepen cooperation to improve the level of nuclear safety".¹⁴ President Xi put forward a four-pronged strategy to achieve the overall goal of nuclear security at the third NSS, Hague¹⁵. Firstly, place equal emphasis on development and security, and develop nuclear energy on the premise of security; secondly, place equal emphasis on rights and obligations, and push forward the international nuclear security process on the basis of respecting the rights and interests of all countries; thirdly place equal emphasis on independent and collaborative efforts, and seek universal nuclear security through win-win cooperation; and lastly, place equal emphasis on treating symptoms and addressing causes, and advance the nuclear security endeavour in all respects with the goal of removing the associated risks at the root. In addition, he also promised to continue China's efforts for nuclear security in the four areas.¹⁶

Speaking at the fourth NSS, President Xi stated that at Hague he has called for building of a global nuclear security architecture featuring fairness and win-win cooperation. Although, Nuclear Security Summit comes to the end, President Xi hoped that spirit of the summit must not end and the journey must continue. He emphasised that 'fairness secures a strong foundation, a cooperative approach generates momentum for development, while a win-win prospect gives us greater confidence. Together, they will provide strong and sustainable institutional guarantee for mankind to benefit from nuclear energy with security'¹⁷. He therefore, suggests, four tools to achieve overall goal of nuclear security. Firstly, stepping up political input and sticking to the direction of addressing both symptoms and root causes, secondly, stepping up national responsibility and tightening up a line of defense that is sustainable, thirdly, stepping up international cooperation and enhancing the momentum of coordination for common progress and lastly, stepping up the culture of nuclear security and creating an atmosphere of joint efforts and shared benefits¹⁸.

It is clear from his speech at the third NSS, Xi Jinping emphasised the need for building an

international consensus for nuclear security and advocated respecting the rights and interests of all countries for nuclear energy. At the fourth NSS, he sought to strengthen global nuclear security architecture and called for global nuclear security governance. At both the NSS, he suggested the need for addressing the symptoms and causes to ensure sustainable nuclear security.

Further, Xi also stated at the fourth NSS that China has “always been committed to development and utilization of nuclear energy while ensuring security in the first place” to “bridge the gap in energy supply and address the challenges posed by climate change.”¹⁹

Commenting on the China-US nuclear cooperation, Thomas Countryman, Assistant Secretary of State, International Security and Non-proliferation, US, said on March 28, 2016 that “it is vital that China and the United States understand each other and cooperate with each other when it comes to nuclear non-proliferation.” He goes on further to remark, “So we cooperate and we are becoming ever closer in our cooperation in preventing the spread of the technology that enables a regime like North Korea to threaten its neighbours. That’s how important the relationship with China is”.²⁰ People’s Daily commentary emphasised that the NSS has ushered “Sino-US nuclear security cooperation into a new chapter.”²¹ The commentary further notes that as “permanent members of the UN Security Council and major nuclear states, China and the US share common interests and responsibility in global governance,” therefore, this nuclear cooperation “aids the building of a new model of major-power relations.”

American scholar, Jordon Ryan, Vice President, Peace Programme, Carter Centre, describes this partnership as a “joint quest for global peace” which is keeping bilateral relations on course.²² Moreover, this also serves the purpose for both China and the US. On one hand, the US, through bilateral engagement, brought China to participate in the discussion and shoulder the obligations. China, on the other hand, is trying to showcase its sincerity and enthusiasm to participate in multilateral negotiations. Zhou Hong, Deputy Director, Division of International Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, noted that as “China continues to grow from strength to strength, it is able to make more contributions to global issues. ... China helped define the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development during the UN summits in 2015. While at the Paris Climate Change Conference, China made crucial contributions to the ‘Paris Agreement’, which divided up responsibility between developed and developing countries.” Zhou further points out that China uses “multilateral events to advocate approaches that differ from those promulgated by

the loudest voices in the room” and counter the western powers that have created the “current diplomatic systems and dominate multilateral meetings.”²³ Chinese analyst is of the view that China’s “participation in all four summits is not to endorse the US ... it not only serves domestic security and development, but also expresses China’s voice and influence in global nuclear security governance.”²⁴ Both Chinese and American experts, nevertheless note that China-US nuclear cooperation will have a “spill over effect”, driving Sino-US cooperation in other area²⁵. They also point out that China and the US will minimise differences, helps build trust in relations and promote development of constructive bilateral relations²⁶.

It is pertinent to note that the changing contours of Sino-US partnership indicates that both countries are searching for new grounds of co-operation to “enhance mutual understanding and respect and take care of each other’s core interests and major concerns to appropriately address disputes and reduce frictions”²⁷ as envisioned by President Xi Jinping. This relationship also indicates that the US is reluctantly accommodating China as a rising power and China is maximizing its stake in world politics while working with the US. Another striking facet of this emerging partnership is that bilateralism is setting the agenda for multilateral engagements and commitments.

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Endnotes:

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