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China's Role in a Nuclear Middle East

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The US president's threats that the Iranian nuclear agreement has to be reevaluated, and Saudi Arabia's intention to continue the quest for nuclear capabilities if Iran persists in its efforts, are of great concern to the international powers. Here we examine possible responses of China to these issues.

During his presidential election campaign, then-candidate Donald Trump stated that it is necessary to reevaluate the great powers' agreement on the Iranian nuclear program that was signed in July 2015 (the JCPOA). Support for the agreement should be withdrawn, he said, if it does not undergo "significant changes". On January 13, 2018, now-President Trump warned that if the agreement was not corrected within 120 days, the US would withdraw from it. According to Trump, Iran "doesn't act according to the agreement". Moreover, "we shall not pursue a path that ends in even more violence, terror and the actual threat of a nuclear Iran".

Whether or not the agreement is changed or canceled, Tehran may well speed up its nuclear project. (In his shock revelation of April 30, Prime Minister Netanyahu argued that the thousands of Iranian documents spirited away by Mossad offer conclusive proof that Tehran had never ceased its quest for the Bomb.) One of the first countries to be threatened by the prospect of a nuclear Iran is its Sunni neighbor to the west, Saudi Arabia. In March 2018, the Saudi Crown Prince, Muhammad bin Salman, said that if Tehran persisted in developing nuclear weapons, Riyadh would do the same.

China was one of the six signatories to the JCPOA (though it was quite passive during the negotiations leading to the agreement). The starting point in assessing Beijing's perceptions regarding nuclear proliferation is the fact that China possesses such weapons, though its 270-strong arsenal of nuclear

warheads (according to the Federation of American Scientists) is much smaller than those of the US and Russia, which hold 6,450 and 6,600 nuclear warheads, respectively. Beijing is not a nuclear superpower, but it is sufficiently powerful so as not to feel threatened by newcomers to the nuclear club.

The nuclear arms race in the Persian Gulf in particular is not desired by the Chinese as it would almost certainly lead to tensions in the region that would increase oil prices and disrupt supply. China is the largest oil consumer in the world, and Middle Eastern oil accounts for over 50% of the oil imported into the country. Increased oil prices would lead to a jump in the prices of all commodities and instability in the markets, which could complicate the realization of China's growth goals.

Beijing maintains a good economic and political relationship with Tehran and Riyadh, both of which are involved in many plans with the Chinese government. First among them is President Xi Jinping's signature Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Saudi companies are building refineries along China's coasts, and the Iranian market holds China as its most important trading partner. These projects and plans could be damaged as a result of increased tension in the region.

Iran in particular plays a key role in the BRI, and threatening it could harm Xi and the project with which he is most closely identified. For its part, Tehran is not waiting for Trump's decision in May regarding the nuclear agreement. Chairman of the Iranian Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee Alaeddin Boroujerdi has declared, "We need to strengthen our relations with important countries like China and Russia, which are also subject to US sanctions and face significant challenges from that country."

During the last presidential election campaign in the US, the Chinese openly showed their contempt for candidate Trump, who was mocked as "reckless and irresponsible." Chinese propagandists went further: they used the fact that a person such as Trump was running for president to mock the democratic system in general and glorify China's political system, which trains future leaders over time and doesn't allow just anyone to "try their luck." Since then, and despite the respect the two sides have shown one another in face-to-face meetings, the contempt shown by the Chinese to the American president has worsened in the past several months as the trade war between the two countries has expanded.

The fact that Trump is thinking of withdrawing from the Iranian nuclear agreement strengthens the propagandists' message. They are attempting to portray democracy as an irresponsible, inefficient, and inconsistent political system, while China's government is more responsible, worthy, and rational.

Foreign Minister Wang Yi declared in January 2018 that Beijing promises to take on a “constructive role” in maintaining the nuclear agreement in case the US president decides to withdraw. He called upon Iran to remain stable and continue fulfilling its duties according to the deal.

The Saudi Crown Prince, meanwhile, stated outright last month that “We do not want nuclear weapons, but if Iran develops a nuclear weapon, we will act immediately to develop one.” This declaration, while startling, is not news. Riyadh has been researching ways to obtain nuclear weapons for years. These efforts appear to have started in 1987, when the kingdom purchased Chinese missiles that can carry nuclear weapons, and continued through 2015, when US officials warned about the Saudis’ long-term negotiations regarding funding the nuclear project in Pakistan – an investment they hope will eventually allow them to purchase nuclear weapons. Pakistan maintains close ties with China, and it is reasonable to infer that Beijing has the legitimacy to express an opinion to Islamabad on whether the sale of nuclear weapons to Riyadh should go forward.

It is difficult to know how Beijing would react to Riyadh’s interest in obtaining nuclear weapons, but it is probable that it would try to prevent this from happening. There are two main reasons: the regional impact such a scenario might have; and fear that during a period of instability in Saudi Arabia, such weapons might fall into the wrong hands.

With that said, if the Saudis insist on their right to build nuclear reactors for civilian purposes, there will be fierce competition between China and the US. Beijing might change its position on the nuclear issue in terms of both civilian and military usage.

On the issue of the JCPOA, one should expect Beijing to continue to keep a low profile, notwithstanding the Chinese Foreign Affairs Minister’s assertion of his country’s willingness to take a “constructive role” in the matter. It would suit China to watch the American president get dragged into a long confrontation with Iran while it stands on the sidelines and safeguards its own economic interests. After any future confrontation between the US and Iran is put to rest, China will likely find a way to enjoy the new order, just as it did during the sanctions regime imposed by the superpowers on Iran and after the lifting of some of those sanctions.

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