

Strategizing Test Ban Diplomacy: China's Play

by Emily Warren, Ting Xu and David Santoro

Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa recently announced at the United Nations nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference that Indonesia will immediately begin work to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). Indonesia's laudable statement illustrates for the international community its strong commitment to reducing the global threat posed by nuclear weapons.

China now has a unique opportunity to show leadership by publicly committing to ratify the CTBT as soon as the US has done so.

The nonproliferation regime has many holes, but it has helped to slow and even prevent numerous nuclear weapon programs. The Test Ban would make it illegal for any country to test nuclear weapons, improving the regime's strength and relevance in the 21st century and enhancing China's security. Though 151 countries have already ratified the treaty, Indonesia, the US, China, India, Pakistan, Egypt, Israel, Iran, and North Korea must still ratify it before it will become international law. Chinese nuclear policy experts have for years privately assured US experts that Beijing will ratify as soon as Washington has done so and some Chinese analysts have even pressed China to ratify before the US. Last year, US President Barack Obama increased the prospects that the US will ratify in the coming years with his public commitment to bring the treaty before the US Senate. Chinese experts have responded positively to this development.

China has important strategic concerns that necessitate waiting for final ratification until after the US ratifies. If the US Senate fails to ratify the treaty while Obama is president, the US could decide to resume testing and increase the size of its arsenal. The US-India nuclear deal may also enhance India's ability to enlarge its nuclear arsenal. Although China has traditionally emphasized the strategic leverage provided by a small arsenal sheathed in ambiguity, expansion on India's part could pressure China to increase the size of its arsenal, a costly endeavor at odds with China's economic development goals.

Once the US and China have ratified the CTBT, they may be able to pressure India to follow suit, thereby dampening China's concerns. Timing is vital. Obama would likely put significant pressure on India to also ratify. Such an opportunity for China to cooperate with the US on Indian ratification may not exist with a future US administration.

A statement by the Chinese government would help clarify China's intentions for the US Senate. Obama is strongly committed to trying to secure ratification, but will face a tough fight getting the 67 votes necessary in the Senate, particularly if more Republicans enter office in 2011. Though many Americans want the US to ratify the CTBT, others are concerned China could resume testing, increase the quality and size of its nuclear stockpile, and become a strategic competitor. But as long as India's nuclear stockpile remains constrained, China has less strategic need to test. A Chinese public commitment to eventual CTBT ratification would dampen these US concerns and pressure Obama to devote the political capital necessary to ratify the treaty.

Some Chinese analysts have suggested that China cannot make a strong executive branch commitment to ratify the CTBT because it would imply that the People's Congress is irrelevant to this process. At the same time, US analysts worry that if China makes a commitment using language that is too soft, it might not make a difference in US debates. The following language could address these concerns:

"As an early signatory country to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, China encourages the US to redouble its efforts to ratify the Test Ban. Once the US has done so, the government of China will work actively with our People's Congress to ratify the Treaty as soon as possible."

This language would be politically useful in the US, while also clarifying for the international community that the People's Congress must make the ultimate decision on this matter. China would retain the option to adjust its strategy should the nuclear balance change significantly between now and final US ratification. Besides bettering the odds of US ratification, China would secure the moral high ground by putting the US's past on this contentious issue in the international spotlight. By making the statement at this month's Review Conference, it would help the conference succeed and demonstrate for the international community China's active leadership to reduce the global nuclear threat.

With a few words, China would achieve substantial security benefits for itself and the world.

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