

Martyna Szoja

CHINESE NUCLEAR POLICY

ANALYSIS OF CHINESE
NON-PROLIFERATION
ACTIONS: 1964-2024



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Chinese Nuclear Policy

Analysis of Chinese Non-Proliferation Actions: 1964-2024

Martyna Szoja

Acknowledgements

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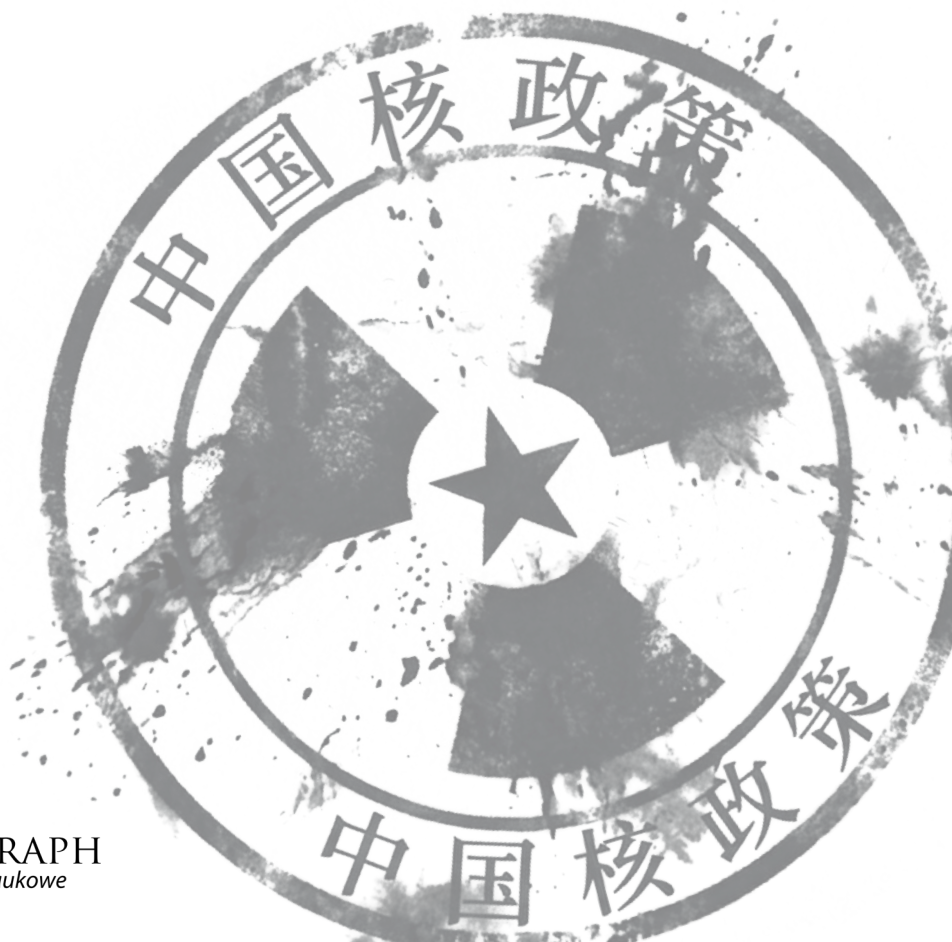
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Contents

Introduction	8
Theoretical Framework	9
Methodological approach	12
1. PRC and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Regime	13
1.1. History of the Global Non-Proliferation Regime	13
1.1.1. Beginning of the Non-proliferation and disarmament	15
1.2. Nuclear Development in the PRC	24
1.3. Joining the Non-Proliferation Efforts	26
2. Actual Situation of the PRC Non-Proliferation	32
2.1. PRC Nuclear Capacities	33
2.2. PRC Nuclear Doctrine	37
2.3. International Treaties	39
2.3.1. Partial Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (PNTBT)	41
2.3.2. Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)	43
2.3.3. Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT)	48
2.3.4. Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW)	51
2.3.5. UN Security Council Resolution 1540	52
2.3.6. Seabed Arms Control Treaty	53
2.3.7. The Outer Space Treaty	55
2.4. Official Discourse and Xi Jinping	56
2.5. PRC as a New „Rule Maker”	64
2.6. Xi Jinping's Perspective on Nuclear Non-Proliferation	66
3. “Non-Proliferation: Awareness, Knowledge, Influence” –	
Author's Research	68
3.1. Survey Methodology and Objectives	68
3.2. Survey Outcomes and Analyses	70
3.3. Conclusion	76

4. Concerns over the PRC's Nuclear Non-Proliferation Practices	78
4.1. Doctrine and Transparency.....	80
4.2. Corruption.....	81
4.3. Dual-use.....	82
4.4. Escalating PRC's Nuclear Stockpile.....	83
4.5. Ties with Nuclear-Destabilizing Nations.....	84
4.5.1. Islamic Republic of Pakistan.....	86
4.5.2. Islamic Republic of Iran.....	90
4.5.3. Democratic People's Republic of Korea.....	93
4.6. Summary.....	98
Conclusions	100
Bibliography	103

List of Abbreviations

ABM: Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty
BWC: Biological Weapons Convention
CAEA: China Atomic Energy Authority
CCP: Chinese Communist Party
CD: Conference on Disarmament
CTBTO: Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization
CTBT: Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty
IAEA: International Atomic Energy Agency
ICAN: International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons
NFU: No First Use
NPR: Non-Proliferation Regime
NPT: Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons
NWS: Nuclear Weapon State
NNWS: Non-Nuclear Weapon State
NSG: Nuclear Suppliers Group
NWFZ: Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone
PNTBT: Partial Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty
PRC: People's Republic of China
PRIO: Peace Research Institute Oslo
SASTIND: State Administration of Science, Technology and Industry for
National Defense
SIPRI: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
SMS: The Science of Military Strategy
TPNW: Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons
UNODA: United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs
VCLT: Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties

Introduction

Nuclear non-proliferation is a critical aspect of global security, aiming to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and reduce the risk of nuclear conflict. According to the United Nations (UN) this regime – called non-proliferation regime (NPR) – is a key for maintaining international peace, preventing conflicts, protecting civilians, and promoting sustainable development (UNODA 2024).

The People's Republic of China (PRC) – official Nuclear Weapon State (NWS) – has a complex history of nuclear weapons development and non-proliferation efforts. Historically, the PRC pursued nuclear capabilities, achieving its first successful test in 1964. Initially opposed to global non-proliferation norms, the PRC's stance evolved over time and by the 1990s the PRC had signed several key treaties. Moreover, it began to portray itself as a stable supporter of international non-proliferation institutions such as the United Nations and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the non-proliferation regime itself (PRC MOFA statements, China Atomic Energy Authority). Gradually the PRC has started to manifest and strengthen its status as the potential global non-proliferation leader.

Scholars and policy experts remain deeply divided over the role of the PRC in nuclear non-proliferation. These disagreements do not fall neatly along a simple “China versus the West” divide. Some analysts argue that the PRC has, over time, become a responsible actor that largely fulfills its international commitments. Others contend just as strongly that Beijing continues to enable proliferation, whether directly or indirectly.

This book enters that debate with a clear purpose: to move beyond polarized interpretations and provide a critical, evidence-based assessment of the PRC's record. I wanted to trace how the PRC's approach to nuclear non-proliferation has evolved from its first nuclear test in 1964 to 2024, connecting historical developments with contemporary policy and behavior.

The central argument is straightforward but contentious: despite its official commitments and rhetoric and increasingly active role in the non-proliferation regime, the PRC's policies often reveal tensions between declared principles and strategic interests. Understanding this gap requires looking beyond formal policy statements. It demands a broader perspective that considers national strategy, international engagement, and, where relevant, societal attitudes.

To do so, I draw on a wide range of sources and methods, including original empirical research based on surveys and expert interviews. By combining these perspectives, this research offers a more comprehensive account of the PRC's behavior than studies that focus solely on specific events, time periods, or policy dimensions.

Ultimately, this work seeks to fill a critical gap in the existing literature. Rather than treating the PRC's non-proliferation record as either a success story or a failure, it examines the tensions, contradictions, and gradual shifts that have shaped its trajectory over the past six decades.

Theoretical framework

This book is grounded in debates about the nature of global order and the PRC's place within it – focusing on the role that the PRC is envisioning for itself. That's why this work is set within Henry Gao's theory of "rule makers, takers, and shakers" (Gao 2011).

This book does not assume a single, stable international system, but engages with competing interpretations of how order is formed, maintained, and contested. According to some scholars, a single international order does not exist (Cooley/Nexon 2020: 32). To some, it is not order but disorder, characterized by a lack of norms (McKeil 2020, in: Lascurettes/Poznansky 2021: 3).

One useful way to conceptualize this complexity is to distinguish between different types of international order based on how power is distributed and whether the system is intentionally designed or emerges spontaneously. From this perspective, global order can be categorized into four types: hegemonic (intentional, concentrated power), centralized (spontaneous, concentrated), negotiated (intentional, dispersed), and decentralized (spontaneous, dispersed) (Lascurettes/Poznansky 2021).

This book adopts a perspective broadly aligned with neo-realist approaches to international relations. States are understood to cooperate and support international norms primarily when doing so serves their national interests.

From this viewpoint, national interest remains the central driver of foreign policy, while international institutions and norms, though important, play a secondary role (Rashid/Ullah 2023: 60).

The analysis draws on Rosemary Foot and Andrew Walter's book *China, the United States, and Global Order*. These authors support the view that states operate within an international order that includes spheres of authority beyond their actions and behaviors. They highlight the work of Andrew Hurrell (b. 1955), a prominent British scholar of international relations, who distinguishes three conceptions of global order: minimalism, pluralism, and solidarism. Minimalism, akin to realism, focuses on power and interest. Pluralism emphasizes maintaining the society of states by regulating violence to manage differences peacefully. Solidarism, similar to institutionalism, advocates for a broad consensus on core principles among state and non-state actors and stresses the importance of processes to implement these principles effectively (Foot/Walter 2010: Introduction).

These perspectives do not exist in isolation. Rather, they coexist in tension – what has been described as an “unhappy coexistence” between power-based and norm-based visions of international order. This tension is particularly visible in areas such as nuclear non-proliferation, where ethical objectives often clash with the strategic interests of powerful states. (Foot/Walter 2010: Introduction). This understanding and theory will be utilized in this work.

Within this broader framework, the PRC's position on international order appears inherently dualistic – both dissatisfied with it and deeply engaged in institutions. And process of transforming it what is enabled by the PRC raising confidence and resistance on the international stage (Clegg 2011: 447).

This duality lies at the heart of ongoing debates about the PRC's role in the international system. Realist scholars tend to view the PRC as a rising challenger to existing power structures, particularly those associated with the United States. In contrast, liberal institutionalists and constructivists often interpret the PRC's behavior as increasingly cooperative, emphasizing its gradual integration into established norms and institutions (Clegg 2011: 447).

Indeed, the PRC increasingly positions itself as a strong advocate for developing countries' rights and interests. However, due to its economic and political power, it doesn't fit the typical profile of a developing nation. Therefore, the PRC occupies a unique position, not fully aligning with either developing countries or major powers – for this reason is called the “bridge-builder” between them, influencing the international order. The PRC also wants to promote

its own security system and perception of it (Clegg 2011: 448) indicating the PRC's ambitions to change the current global order.

In this book, the concept of “global order” theory is connected with Henry Gao’s framework of “rule makers, takers, and shakers” theory. Gao offers a useful lens for understanding how states shape, adopt, and challenge international norms. In this framework, rule makers define and promote norms, rule takers accept and follow them, and rule shakers contest or undermine them (Gao 2011).

Applied to the case of nuclear non-proliferation, this perspective reveals a dynamic and evolving role for the PRC. Over time, the PRC has occupied all three positions. In its early years as a nuclear power, it rejected key non-proliferation norms. It later moved toward formal acceptance of these rules, integrating into major international agreements. Yet this shift has not been linear or complete: in important instances, the PRC has acted as a rule shaker, selectively interpreting or inconsistently implementing its commitments.

Today, the PRC appears to be moving beyond this reactive posture. It is increasingly seeking to position itself as a rule maker – an actor that not only participates in the existing regime but also shapes its future direction.

This shift is central to the argument of this book. If the PRC succeeds in consolidating a rule-making role, its influence over the global non-proliferation regime will expand significantly. In turn, this will have broader implications for the evolution of global order itself, as the norms governing one of the most critical areas of international security are redefined.

This work is structured to highlight this theory and the PRC’s evolution. The first chapter explains nuclear non-proliferation and provides historical background on the PRC’s nuclear development, showcasing its role as a rule shaker or opponent and its eventual acceptance as a rule taker. The second chapter focuses on the current state of the PRC’s non-proliferation efforts, examining its nuclear capacities and doctrine, analyzing international nuclear treaties, and presenting official statements from PRC officials, culminating in Xi Jinping’s perspective. This chapter portrays the PRC as a rule taker, showcasing its aspirations to become a rule maker, particularly by criticizing the US, the current leader of the nuclear non-proliferation regime.

The third chapter presents the author’s research, a survey titled “Non-Proliferation: Awareness, Knowledge, Influence.” The goal is to shift the focus from a macro to a micro perspective and to examine the influence of nuclear weapons and non-proliferation on society, comparing responses from the PRC and non-PRC participants. The fourth chapter discusses concerns over the PRC’s

nuclear non-proliferation practices, with a focus on major proliferator countries like Pakistan, Iran, and North Korea (DPRK) – portraying the PRC again as the rule shaker – in contrary to the promoted official image of potential rule maker. This book concludes with a summary of the findings that problematize the actual situation and prospects for the PRC's leadership.

Methodological approach

This book employed both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative data on the PRC missile numbers, nuclear infrastructure, and signed treaties were summarized and analyzed. Qualitative research involved analyzing treaties, statements as well as official documents and unclassified reports.

Additionally, I prepared and conducted a survey to add a micro-scale perspective to the research. Its goal was to explore the social implications of nuclear weapons and assess public knowledge and awareness on the topic. I also interviewed Dr. Gregory M. Reichberg¹, a researcher at PRIO, who greatly helped me to understand the global non-proliferation regime. The outcomes and methodology of the survey are presented in a separate chapter of this book.

The sources used in this work are in English, Chinese, and Russian. I especially tried to verify American sources which, “can be institutionally biased and reflect a mind-set of worst-case thinking rather than the most-likely scenario” (Kristensen/Korda/Johns/Knight 2024: 51). Lastly, I had a privilege of using UNODA internal training materials provided during the *Youth Leaders Fund* project “World without Nuclear Weapons 2024”.

¹ Gregory M. Reichberg (b. 1956) – researcher at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), interviewed by the author on 6th June 2024 in Washington D.C. during the international conference “Can the war be just?” at the Catholic University of America (CUA).

PRC and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Regime

This chapter explores the global non-proliferation regime and its impact on the People's Republic of China (PRC). It covers the history of nuclear weapons, the PRC's nuclear development, and is framed by Henry Gao's theory of "rule makers, takers, and shakers" (Gao 2011).

The nuclear bomb's invention was a revolutionary moment in military history, leading to the Cold War arms race. Initially opposed to the non-proliferation regime, the PRC eventually accepted international norms, becoming a rule taker. However, the process was not fully smooth, characterized by partial adherence and actions that undermined non-proliferation goals – that often cast the PRC as a rule shaker.

1.1. History of the Global Non-Proliferation Regime

After the first detonation of the nuclear weapon, known as "The Gadget," during the Trinity test in New Mexico, at a site located some 340 kilometers south of Los Alamos, on July 16, 1945, humanity faced the Atomic Era (Brown/Borovina 2021: 4-23, Gowing 1981: 681-686). The most powerful weapon in history was introduced to the world.¹

Nuclear weapons were used in warfare twice: first on August 6, 1945, when the US dropped the atomic bomb "Little Boy" on Hiroshima, and then on August 9, 1945, when "Fat Man" was dropped on Nagasaki. These bombings

¹ For more details from the scientific perspective, see: Chadwick, M. B., M. W. Paris, G. M. Hale, J. P. Lestone, S. Alhumaidi, J. B. Wilhelmy, and N. A. Gibson (2024), "Early Nuclear Fusion Cross-Section Advances 1934-1952 and Comparison to Today's ENDF Data." *Fusion Science and Technology* (April 2024), pp. 1-63.

killed approximately 140 000 people in Hiroshima and 74 000 in Nagasaki and left survivors known as *hibakusha* (Brown/Borovina 2021: 4-23).²

The advent of nuclear weapons revolutionized geopolitical thinking. It introduced the threat of nuclear war, with potential global consequences such as widespread destruction, radioactive fallout, and long-term environmental damage like nuclear winter (Turco 1983: 1283-1292).

During the Cold War (1947-1991), nuclear weapons were poised for use. Initially, the US was the sole nuclear power, but only for four years, when the Soviet Union conducted a nuclear test on August 29, 1949, at Semipalatinsk-21 in Kazakhstan, named “First Lightning” (RDS-1). The Soviet bomb, based on the American “Fat Man” design, was likely obtained through intelligence on the Manhattan Project (Gordin 2009: 118-120, 165-170).

Both the US and the USSR shared a common interest in preventing horizontal proliferation – and thus keeping the “nuclear monopoly” – their nuclear arsenals bolstered their international position. Therefore, the nuclear order of the 1960s, provided some kind of stability. Especially through a controlled deterrence and a managed abstinence system where other states renounced nuclear development for benefits (Walker 2004: 25 in: Foot/Walker 2010: 137). On the other hand, the Cold War era was marked by military tensions and huge risks, exemplified by e.g. the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 or false missile detection in 1983.

The nuclear proliferation continued. Countries that joined the nuclear club include the UK (October 3, 1952), France (February 13, 1960), the PRC (October 16, 1964), India (May 18, 1974, officially 1998), Israel (estimated around 1979, undeclared), Pakistan (May 28, 1998), and North Korea (October 9, 2006) (Charnysh 2006). Since the first explosion on July 16, 1945, at least eight nations have conducted their own nuclear tests across various terrains, including deserts, lakes, and oceans, depicted in the table below.

Country	1945-49	1950-59	1960-69	1970-79	1980-89	1990-99	2000-09	2010-26	Total
United States	6	188	428	232	155	21	0	0	1,030
USSR/ Russia	1	82	232	227	172	1	0	0	715
United Kingdom	0	21	5	5	12	2	0	0	45

² As states in Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum and Nagasaki Museum of A-Bomb. These numbers include these who died till the end of 1945 in the result of the bombing.

Country	1945-49	1950-59	1960-69	1970-79	1980-89	1990-99	2000-09	2010-26	Total
France	0	0	31	69	92	18	0	0	210
PRC	0	0	10	16	8	11	0	0	45
India	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	3
Pakistan	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	2
North Korea	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	4	6
Totals	7	291	706	550	439	57	2	1	2,056

Table 1. Atom Archive (n.d.) updated by the author.

1.1.1 Beginning of the non-proliferation and disarmament

The Oxford Essential Dictionary of the U.S. Military defines *non-proliferation* as:

the prevention of an increase or spread of something, especially the number of countries possessing nuclear weapons (Oxford Dictionaries 2001)

Oxford *Dictionary of Sociology* explains the *disarmament* as:

The process or policy of reducing levels of armaments, especially in the nuclear age, with the implication that possession of arms itself stimulates conflict. It is distinct from arms control—the negotiation of limits on armaments by participant states. Variants of the policy include unilateral and multilateral, partial and complete, nuclear and conventional disarmament. (Scott/Marshall 2009)

In response to nuclear risks, the concept of nuclear ethics emerged, focusing on non-proliferation and disarmament. This reflects a moral imperative to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and aim for their eventual elimination. The nuclear weapons prompted ethical debates on their possession, use, and control (Nye 1988). There are countries especially devoted to nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament such as: Costa Rica promoting absolute nuclear disarmament; Marshall Islands – with the legacy of the annihilated islands after the Bravo test at the Bikini Atoll (1954); Japan Hiroshima and Nagasaki – with well-developed and active grass root movements. These actors propose nuclear abolition.

When mentioning individuals, two outstanding examples can be added. Gareth Evans – a former Australian Foreign Minister (1988-1996) – founder of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network (APLN) who has argued that nuclear weapons are both immoral and incompatible with the fundamental right to life, providing a basis for legal arguments that their use would be unlawful under

international law.³ Similarly, Josei Toda, the second president of Soka Gakkai, declared nuclear weapons an “absolute evil” that threatened humanity’s right to live and called for their abolition before 50,000 young people on 8 September 1957.⁴ These debates build upon the longstanding ethical concerns that have accompanied nuclear weapons since their inception.

In April 1945, the United Nations Conference on International Organization took place in San Francisco. It resulted in the *UN Charter*, which opened for signature in June 1945. The *UN Charter* contains four guiding principles which can be summed up with the four pillars of the UN: peace and security, human rights, the rule of law, and development. Disarmament is included in the first pillar and therefore is told to be “at the heart of the United Nations system of collective security” (UNODA internal training materials 2024).

Over time, the nuclear disarmament doctrine evolved, leading to various international treaties. Non-proliferation schemes were proposed by countries like Sweden and the Irish Republic (Charnysh 2006: 6). In 1957 the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was established, as an effect of the American president Dwight D. Eisenhower⁵ (1953-1951) proposal entitled “Atoms for Peace” (National Archives. Dwight D. Eisenhower) presented at the 8th session of the UN General Assembly (UN 2015). Nowadays, the visible change and development of the nuclear disarmament doctrine is visible and with time more international treaties were signed and proposed – especially the Treaty to Prohibit Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). Already in the 1980s, Western societies in Europe and the US openly expressed opposition to nuclear weapons and supported disarmament (Mandelbaum 1984: 24-32). As stated by Egeland Kjølvi: “The goal of abolition commands large popular support across continents” (Kjølvi 2022: 106-133).

Within the UN system, disarmament and non-proliferation are managed by several bodies collectively known as the Disarmament Machinery. These include the General Assembly, the United Nations Disarmament Commission (UNDC), and the Conference on Disarmament (CD), which operates independently but receives UN support. The main treaty remains the Nuclear Non-Proliferation

³ For more see: “Threat or Use of Weapons of Mass Destruction and the Right to Life. Comments and Proposal of International Association of Lawyers Against Nuclear Arms (IALANA) and Swiss Lawyers for Nuclear Disarmament (SLND)” on Human Rights Committee, Draft general comment No. 36, Article 6, Right to Life (CCPR/C/GC/R.36/Rev.3), para. 15.

⁴ For more see the Soka Gakkai official website: <<https://www.sokaglobal.org/resources/study-materials/commemorative-dates/september-8-declaration-calling-for-the-abolition-of-nuclear-weapons.html>>. Accessed: 2026-06-22.

⁵ For more on president Eisenhower’s nuclear policy see: Chernus, Ira (2002), *Eisenhower’s Atoms for Peace* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press).

Treaty (NPT) with Review Conferences and Preparatory Committees happening every five years. Other entities involved in disarmament matters include the UN Security Council, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO) (UNODA internal training materials 2024).

Nuclear disarmament aims to enhance global security and stability by reducing nuclear conflict and proliferation risks. Its primary goals are to maintain international peace, prevent conflicts, protect civilians, and promote sustainable development. This involves measures to eliminate, regulate, or reduce armaments and military expenditures and to limit the development, testing, and use of arms (UNODA internal training materials 2024). Non-proliferation is now a well-respected global norm (Gavin 2010: 415, in: Foot/Walter 2010: 134).

To halt nuclear armament, the UN proposed the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), which remains central to global non-proliferation efforts. Opened for signature on July 1, 1968, and in force since March 5, 1970, the NPT marked a significant step in nuclear disarmament.

Notably, South Africa independently dismantled its nuclear arsenal in 1989, becoming the only country to do so after developing nuclear weapons (Burgess 2010: 524-525). The changed security environment, cost calculation and future prospects played a decisive role in this process. Moreover, the crucial development came in 1991 when Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine relinquished their nuclear weapons following the USSR's collapse. In 1992, the PRC and France signed the NPT, and in 1995, the Treaty was extended indefinitely (UNODA n.d. c).

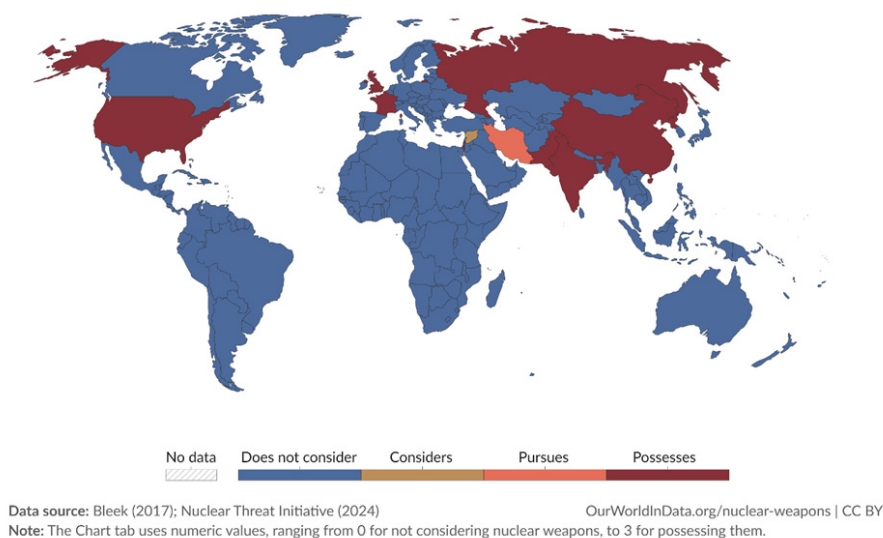
The post-Cold War era saw significant non-proliferation progress, with arms reduction agreements and many countries joining the NPT. As of June 2026, 191 states are parties to the NPT, including the five recognized nuclear-weapon states: the PRC, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The NPT remains the primary multilateral commitment to disarmament and is one of the most widely ratified treaties in international peace and security (UNODA n.d. c).

The NPT has three main objectives: advancing nuclear disarmament, preventing the spread of nuclear weapons and related technology, and promoting peaceful nuclear energy use (UNODA n.d. c). Article IX, paragraph 3, defines “nuclear-weapon States” as conducted nuclear tests before January 1, 1967 – the PRC is included as it conducted test in 1964. All other signatories are considered “non-nuclear-weapon States,” including India, Israel (undeclared),

Pakistan, and North Korea. The Treaty includes a safeguards mechanism, managed by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), to prevent the diversion of nuclear materials or technology (UNODA n.d. c).

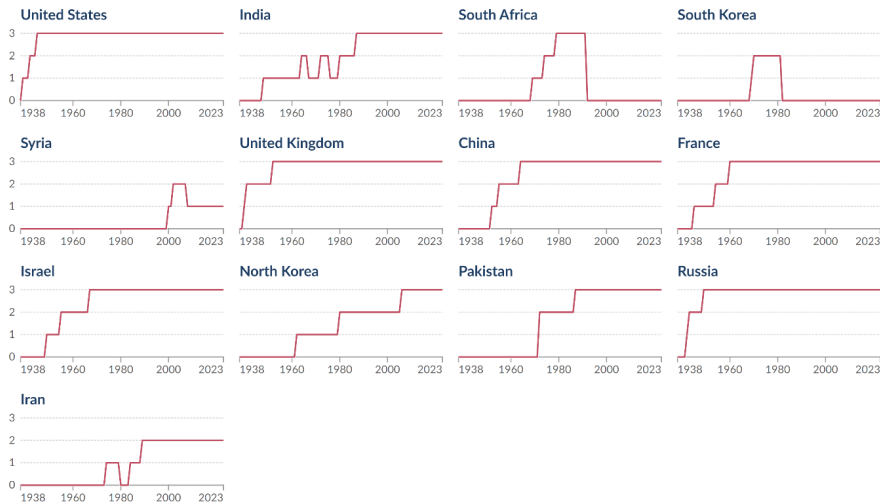
The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) are the primary independent institutes that estimate and track which countries possess nuclear weapons and the size of their stockpiles. As of June 2026, nine countries are known to possess nuclear weapons: France, India, Israel, North Korea, Pakistan, the PRC, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Israel's status remains unofficial. Those countries are illustrated on the map below.

Country position on nuclear weapons, 2023

Our World
in Data

Map 1. Herre/Rosado/Roser/Hasell (2024).

Country position on nuclear weapons, 1938 to 2023

 Our World
in Data


Data source: Bleek (2017); Nuclear Threat Initiative (2024)

OurWorldInData.org/nuclear-weapons | CC BY

Note: The Chart tab uses numeric values, ranging from 0 for not considering nuclear weapons, to 3 for possessing them.

Chart 1. Herre/Rosado/Roser/Hasell (2024)

The chart above depicts the nuclear status of 13 countries: the United States, India, South Africa, South Korea, Syria, the United Kingdom, China, France, Israel, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, and Iran. The chart categorizes these countries into four sections:

- 0 – Not Considering Nuclear Weapons: Countries that neither consider, pursue, nor possess nuclear weapons.
- 1 – Considering Nuclear Weapons: Countries where leaders contemplate obtaining nuclear weapons or pursue capabilities without a dedicated program.
- 2 – Pursuing Nuclear Weapons: Countries with active programs aimed at acquiring or being able to quickly develop nuclear weapons.
- 3 – Possessing Nuclear Weapons: Countries with deliverable nuclear-explosive devices.

Currently, nine countries fall into category 3, indicating they possess nuclear weapons: the USA, Russia, the UK, France, the PRC, India, Israel, Pakistan, and North Korea. Iran is classified as category 2, actively pursuing nuclear weapons, while Syria is in category 1, considering nuclear weapons. Notably, visible is already mentioned example of South Africa, which voluntarily dismantled its

arsenal in 1989. South Korea had a status 2 only from 1970 to 1981 (when the American nuclear arsenal was deployed in the country) and as for now, the same as the South Africa, is classified 0 – *not considering nuclear weapons*. The chart does not separately categorize Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine, despite these states having previously possessed nuclear warheads. The authors excluded them from the Nuclear Weapon Possessor (NWP) category because they lacked sovereign control over the nuclear arsenal, which was managed politically and militarily by the Soviet Union (Herre/Rosado/Roser/Hasell 2026).

The fluctuations in the nuclear weapons stockpiles are visible in the chart 2.

The nuclear weapons race, started in 1945 after the Second World War is clearly visible. The global peak (red color) was reached in 1986 when the world's number of nuclear warheads jumped to 70 374. The single state individual stockpiles were as follows: Russia – 40 159, the US – 23 317, France – 255, UK – 350, the PRC – 224, Israel – 44, South Africa – 3).

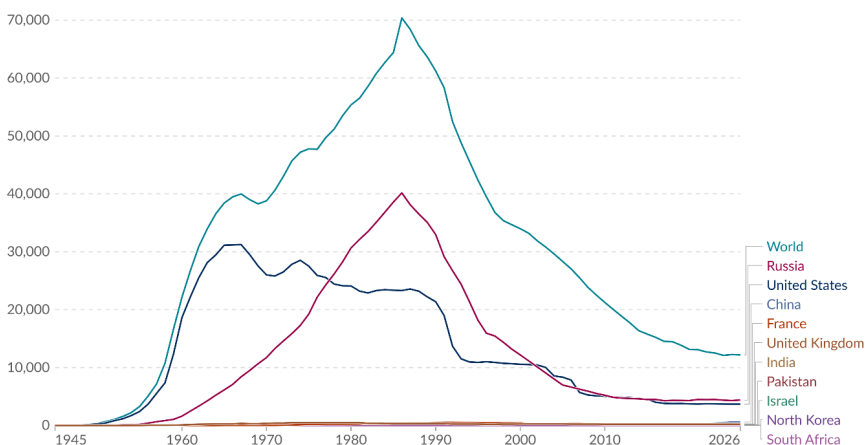
As Russian and American arsenals were multiple times bigger than the rest of the world, only their stockpiles are clearly visible.

In the next chart the newest estimations on the actual (2026) nuclear stockpile are presented.

Estimated nuclear warhead stockpiles

Stockpiles include warheads assigned to military forces, but exclude retired warheads queued for dismantlement. The latter are only included in the global total.

Our World
in Data



Data source: Federation of American Scientists (2026)

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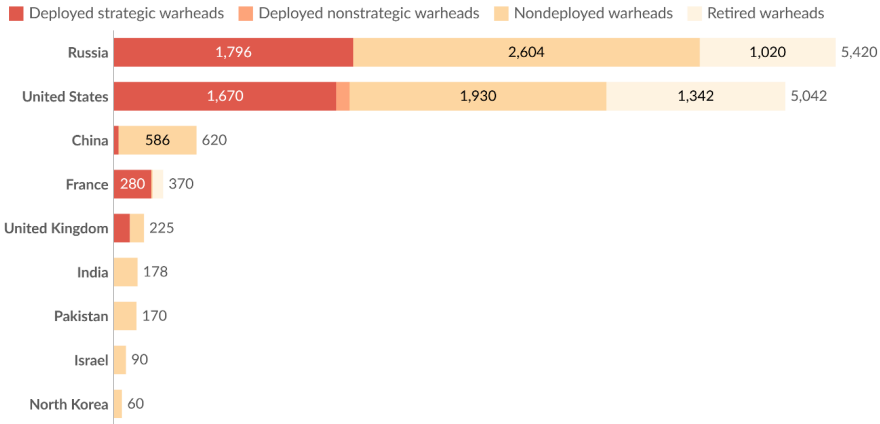
Note: The exact number of countries' warheads is secret, and the estimates are based on publicly available information, historical records, and occasional leaks. Warheads vary substantially in their power.

Chart 2. Herre/Rosado/Roser/Hasell (2026).

Estimated nuclear warhead inventories, 2026



Strategic warheads are designed for use away from the battlefield, such as against military bases, arms industries or infrastructure. Deployed are those on ballistic missiles, submarines, or bomber bases. Retired are those queued for dismantlement.



Data source: Federation of American Scientists (2026)

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Note: The exact number of countries' warheads is secret, and the estimates are based on publicly available information, historical records, and occasional leaks. Warheads vary substantially in their power.

Chart 3. Federation of American Scientists (2026).

The „Estimated Nuclear Warhead Inventories, 2026” chart categorizes warheads into deployed strategic, deployed nonstrategic, nondeployed, and retired. Russia and the US are the top nuclear powers, with Russia holding 1,796 deployed strategic, 2,604 nondeployed, and 1,020 retired warheads, totaling 5,420. The US has 1,670 deployed strategic, 1,930 nondeployed, and 1,342 retired, totaling 5,042. The PRC follows with total 620 warheads – 586 nondeployed. The chart underscores the significant disparity between Russia and the US compared to other nations, reflecting their major roles in global nuclear disarmament (Federation of American Scientists 2026).

The presence of nuclear arsenals in various countries highlights the ongoing need for non-proliferation treaties and international diplomacy. International law, particularly through multilateral agreements, remains crucial in controlling nuclear weapons. Key non-proliferation treaties include the Non-Proliferation Treaty, the Partial Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, and the Nuclear Prohibition Treaty. The approval rates of these agreements are shown in the chart 4.

Between 1963 and 2026, the number of states approving nuclear weapons treaties increased for all four key agreements. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) leads with 191 signatories, followed by the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban

Treaty with 178. The Partial Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty has been signed by 125 countries since 1994. The Nuclear Prohibition Treaty, the most recent, has the fewest signatories – 95, with 74 Parties. Although the TPNW represents the most comprehensive legal prohibition of nuclear weapons, its relatively low level of support reflects the reluctance of nuclear-armed states and many of their allies to join. These states argue that nuclear deterrence remains essential for national and international security, particularly in an increasingly unstable geopolitical environment.

Despite its noble goals, nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament face criticism. Importantly, critics do not necessarily oppose disarmament as a goal. Rather, they question whether existing approaches are capable of achieving it. Scholars argue that the dynamics of disarmament are under-theorized and methodologically weak, particularly regarding the role of non-nuclear weapon states (NNWS) in influencing nuclear policy (Kjølvi 2022: 106-133; Sagan 2009: 157-168, in Burford 2016: 1-3). Others contend that nuclear weapons continue to serve a stabilizing function through deterrence, reducing the likelihood of large-scale war between major powers. From this perspective, maintaining nuclear arsenals is viewed not as desirable in itself, but as a pragmatic necessity until credible alternative security arrangements can be established. The discussion whether the world without nuclear weapons is achievable divides into two main groups: pessimists (e.g. Thomas Schelling⁶, Kenneth Waltz⁷, John Mearsheimer⁸) and optimists (e.g. Joseph Rotblat⁹, Jacques Maritain¹⁰, Gregory M. Reichberg¹¹).

⁶ Thomas Schelling (1921-2016) – author of the terms like “Game Theory,” “Nuclear Taboo,” the book “Strategy of Conflict” (1960).

⁷ Kenneth Neal Waltz (1924-2013) – American political scientist, founder of neorealism in international relations theory, author of the “Theory of International Politics” (1979).

⁸ John Mearsheimer (b. 1947) – American expert of political science and international relations, founder of the offensive realism.

⁹ Joseph Rotblat (1908-2005) – Polish-British physicist, key figure in the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs, awarded with the Nobel Peace Prize in 1995.

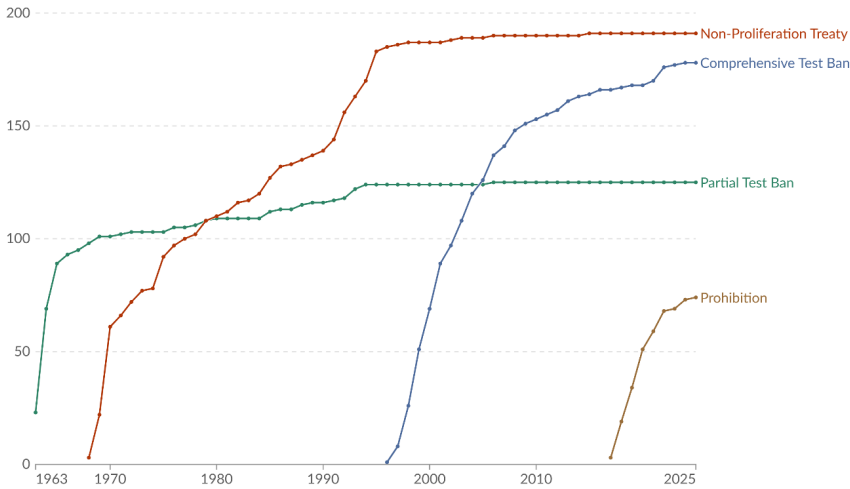
¹⁰ Jacques Maritain (1882-1973) – French philosopher, who described the global nuclear disarmament as the “concrete historical ideal.”

¹¹ Gregory M. Reichberg (b. 1956) – American researcher at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), interview by the author on 6th June 2024 in Washington D.C. (USA) during the international conference “Can the war be just?” at the Catholic University of America (CUA) in Washington D.C.

Number of countries that approve of nuclear weapons treaties



Countries that approve¹ of the Partial Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty², the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty³, the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty⁴, and the Nuclear Prohibition Treaty⁵.



Data source: United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (2026)

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1. Country status "Approved" on a treaty This status means that the country has legally committed to a treaty.

This status comprises one of the following actions defined by UNODA:

- "Ratification" is an act of formal confirmation, where a country consents to be legally bound to a treaty.
- "Accession" means that a country accepts to become a party to a treaty that has been signed by other states, not by the country itself. It has the same legal effect as ratification.
- "Succession" means that a newly formed country adopts the treaty obligations of a predecessor state.

2. Partial Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty The treaty's objective is to stop nuclear weapons tests in the atmosphere, in outer space, and under water.

3. Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty The treaty's objective is to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, to promote cooperation in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy, and to pursue nuclear and general disarmament.

4. Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty The treaty's objective is to stop nuclear weapons tests in the atmosphere, in outer space, under water, and underground.

5. Nuclear Prohibition Treaty The treaty's objective is to stop developing, testing, producing, acquiring, possessing, stockpiling, deploying, using, and threatening to use nuclear weapons, as well as assisting other countries in these actions.

Chart 4. United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (2024).

The post-Cold War era, often seen as a period of global nuclear disarmament, has seen reductions mainly due to the dismantling of retired warheads by the US and Russia. However, reductions in operational warheads have stalled, and numbers are rising again (Kristensen/Korda 2023: 247, SIPRI 2026). The NPT faces criticism for its perceived unequal bargain, where nuclear-weapon states were expected to eventually disarm. This imbalance has undermined the treaty's status and legitimacy, with India and Pakistan refusing to join, citing asymmetries and security concerns. Israel, an undeclared nuclear state, is also not a member (Foot/Walter 2010: 133, 140). In January 2003, North Korea became the first state to withdraw from the NPT – using the Article X and to conduct nuclear tests in 21st century (Zhang/Wen 2013: 2941-2946). Moreover, one of the greatest challenges is the current deadlock in the NPT reviewing process. Since

2010 none of the Review Conferences managed to reach consensus and produce an outcome document, with the last being the 11th NPT Review Conference held in New York City, the US in 2026. That signals the broader crisis the non-proliferation regime is facing.

1.2 Nuclear Development in the PRC

The PRC developed its own approach to achieve nuclear capabilities. During his lifetime (1893-1976), Mao Zedong's military thinking emphasized manpower over weaponry, with nuclear weapons as the sole exception. Arguably at the beginning, Mao was skeptical about their significance, referring to them as "paper tigers" e.g. in 1946. That was understood as a signal that nuclear weapons were only useful for deterrence (Deshingkar 1995: 103, Mao 1946: 100). However, he later acknowledged their destructive power. Mao contextualized nuclear weapons ideologically, initially viewing them as tools of imperialist intimidation. Later, he suggested that nuclear war survivors would eradicate imperialism, paving the way for a socialist reality (Garver 2016: 126-127).

Mao famously explained it as follows: "Let us imagine how many people would die if war breaks out. There are 2.7 billion people in the world, and a third would be lost. If it is a little higher it could be half. [...] I say that if the worst came to the worst and one-half dies, there will still be one-half left, but imperialism would be erased and the whole world would become socialist. After a few years, there would be 2.7 billion people again," written originally in "Mao Zedong's speech at the Moscow Conference of Representatives of Communist and Workers' Parties, November 18, 1957 (*Collected Works of Mao Zedong* 1999: 326 in: Pan 2016: 54).

Mao actively advocated for the PRC's pursuit of nuclear weapons (Dikötter 2010: 13), denying them to countries like North Korea and Albania (Deshingkar 1995: 105-106), which can undermine the "socialistic solidarity theory" that the PRC was believed to follow (Foot/Walter 2010).

The Soviet Union played a crucial role in the PRC's development of its nuclear arsenal. On October 15, 1957, the PRC and the Soviet Union signed an agreement to share defense technology. However, tensions between these two eventually led to a split. This rift was partly due to differing interpretations of communist doctrines as the Soviet Union's move toward peaceful coexistence with the West, including the de-Stalinization initiated in 1956 by Nikita Khrushchev – the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the USSR from 1953 to 1964.

Mao strongly opposed these changes and had a confrontational attitude towards nuclear weapons (Garver 2016: 114-115, 128). Tensions escalated on June 20, 1959, when the PRC accused the Soviet Union of unilaterally ending their agreements. Four years later, on July 31, 1963, the PRC criticized the Moscow Partial Test Ban Treaty as deceptive (Chiu 1965: 96-107).

The PRC's decision to develop nuclear weapons was driven by three main reasons: 1) American nuclear a threat, 2) a desire to increase strategic autonomy from the Soviets, and 3) a need to build national and international prestige after the "century of humiliation" (百年国耻, 1839-1945). According to Chinese scholars, in the 1950s, during the Korean War, the US posed nuclear threats to the PRC (Chang 1988: 1287). In the early 1960s, Presidents John F. Kennedy (1961-1963) and Lyndon B. Johnson (1963-1969) considered pre-emptive strikes on Chinese nuclear facilities. The Soviet Union also threatened to destroy the PRC's nascent nuclear capabilities due to the Sino-Soviet split. As a result, the PRC viewed non-proliferation not as a positive measure but as a form of control and oppression (Foot/Walter 2010: 165-166).

Also in the current PRC's military narratives, the development of nuclear weapons is framed as a response to international threats, aimed at "smashing the nuclear blackmail and nuclear monopoly of the nuclear powers," representing a typical existential deterrent strategy (SMS 2013: 217).

On October 16, 1964, the PRC declared the successful detonation of an atomic device. So called Project 596, known also as Miss Qiu, (邱小姐) was the first nuclear test of the PRC, detonated at the Lop Nur test site. Lop Nur was the place of all nuclear tests of the PRC, located in the southeastern part of the Xinjiang Autonomous Region, northwestern part of the PRC (Chiu 1965: 96-107). Following the detonation of the nuclear bomb, the PRC conducted its first hydrogen bomb experiment in 1966. In 1966, a commemoration of the PRC nuclear missile trials occurred at Tiananmen Square in Beijing. Testing persisted until 1996 when the PRC endorsed, though did not formally ratify, the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) (Hui Zhang 2024: n.p.). Importantly to the non-proliferation regime, during the day of its first nuclear test, the PRC government issued a statement calling for the global nuclear abolition. It was preceded in the Premier Zhou Enlai's letter to global governments on August 2, 1963. Moreover, also on October 16, 1964 the PRC declared its adherence to the No First Use policy – not to be the first country to use nuclear weapons – the policy the PRC is promoting till today on international arena (PRC MOFA 2024).

1.3 Joining the Non-Proliferation Efforts

The global order is a complex system of interconnected relationships among countries, shaped by the distribution of power and principles of conduct established through consensus (Patrick 2023: 4). The bilateral relations between the United States and the PRC exemplify how policies and actions of these two nations influence the international arena. This relationship is central to the global order due to economic, political, and military significance, including for the non-proliferation (Foot/Walter 2010: 1-30). While the US played a significant role in the PRC's adaptation to non-proliferation regime, the PRC also influenced American decisions and approaches in this field.

This chapter, however, primarily focuses on the PRC's history of non-proliferation, with the PRC's influence on other states, such as the US, not being the main object of research. The theory of "rule makers, rule shakers, and rule takers" (Gao 2011: 137-163) is applied here, proving the evolutionary character of the PRC's path to the adherence to the global non-proliferation norm.

At the very beginning, the PRC was reluctant to join the non-proliferation regime and could be perceived as a "rule opponent." However, as this subchapter demonstrates, the PRC eventually adapted to the non-proliferation norm, becoming a "rule taker." Due to its incomplete adherence to the rules, it was often seen as a "rule shaker." The emerging aspiration to become a "rule maker" will be explored in more detail in the second and third chapters of this book.

Beginning – PRC as the "Rule Opponent"

During the Maoist era, the PRC's participation in the global non-proliferation norm was unlikely, as there was no inclination towards non-proliferation discussions. The PRC actively developed its nuclear capabilities in response to threats from the US and the Soviet Union. Non-proliferation goals were perceived as tools to maintain strategic disadvantages for the PRC and other states, controlling weaker nations while reinforcing the position of contemporary world hegemons.

The emergence of the PRC's nuclear power was a key factor in shaping early American discussions on non-proliferation and accelerated the US's engagement with the NPT. This engagement was likely driven more by a desire to curb the nuclear ambitions of other nations, such as the PRC, rather than a "noble goal" of making the world safer (Foot/Walter 2010: 165).

Becoming the Rule Taker

The PRC's increased adherence to the non-proliferation norm, despite its previous dismissal during the Maoist era, largely stems from international factors. Strategic, political, and economic factors encouraged the PRC to sign treaties and join international institutions focused on non-proliferation. National security concerns played a significant role, as the PRC recognized the threat posed by both transcontinental and continental nuclear proliferation. The potential strategic challenge of continental nuclear proliferation to the PRC's dominant position in Asia was a key consideration (Yuan 2000). Participation in these institutions prompted domestic changes and the adoption of new ideas.

These factors supported the PRC's role as a responsible state adapting to global norms and offered strategic, political, and economic incentives to advance non-proliferation efforts (Foot/Walter 2010: 138, 161-164). The PRC undertook these actions to enhance its international image and promote itself as a supporter of non-proliferation and arms control – a “rule taker,” rather than a “rule shaker” (Yuan 2000).

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the US policies, including both incentives and pressures, were crucial in shaping the PRC's non-proliferation stance. The 1981 bilateral nuclear cooperation agreement provided the first major opportunity to discuss non-proliferation in detail, focusing on Chinese exports to potential proliferators, which positioned the PRC as a “rule shaker.” Despite significant disagreements, by the late 1990s, the PRC and the US policies began to converge, as evidenced by their cooperation in condemning nuclear tests by India and Pakistan (Foot/Walter 2010: 168).

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) played a crucial role in reforming policy-making structures and fostering scholarly research on nuclear strategy and non-proliferation. In April 1997, the MOFA established the Department of Arms Control and Disarmament, highlighting the growing importance of arms control and non-proliferation in the PRC foreign policy (Gill/Medeiros 1998). The Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation and China's Atomic Energy Agency (国家原子能机构) were also involved, although resistance persisted within various domestic sectors. The MOFA often faced opposition to its policy positions, as promoting the PRC's image as a “responsible great power” was seen as conflicting with its core policy of economic development and immediate strategic concerns (Johnston 2008: Chapter 3 in: Foot/Walter 2010: 162). For instance, Zou Yunhua (邹云华, b. 1943) of the Commission on

Science, Technology, and Industry for National Defence (COSTIND, 国防科工委, now SASTIND) argued that a lack of testing would exacerbate the PRC's technical inferiority (Johnston 2008).

PRC as the Rule Shaker

During the presidencies of George H. W. Bush (1989-1993) and Bill Clinton (1993-2001), the US frequently used political and economic incentives and disincentives to encourage the PRC to expand its non-proliferation commitments and limit sensitive material exports, including through sanctions (Yuan 2000: section "Between Carrot and Stick"; Medeiros 2007). Negotiations between the PRC and the US on nuclear export controls in the 1980s and 1990s were marked by significant disagreements, often driven by financial motives that fueled the PRC's resistance (Foot/Walter 2010: 166).

PRC – an Official Rule Taker

In 1981, the first major opportunity for Sino-American discussions on nuclear non-proliferation emerged – the Nuclear Cooperation Agreement (NCA). The agreement experienced a tumultuous history: it was initially halted in 1982, later approved, but its implementation was delayed due to suspicions about continued Chinese assistance to the Pakistani nuclear program (Ming Zhang, Brzezinski et al. in: Burr 2004).

The PRC joined the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in 1984, officially committing to support nuclear non-proliferation (Foot/Walter 2010: 158). It did not happen without concerns, which arose over the PRC's vague adherence to IAEA safeguards and its narrow interpretation of instructions, that did not align with American priorities. In 1992, the PRC signed the NPT with various reasons attempting to explain that, including: 1) the revelation of Iraq's nuclear program, 2) revelation of the PRC's nuclear reactor's export to Algeria, as well as 3) France's willingness to join the Treaty (Davis 1995: 591 in: Yuan 2000). Despite joining the Treaty officially, the PRC's implementation faced skepticism. The PRC was supportive of preventing horizontal proliferation but showed reluctance to pressure countries like North Korea, Iran, and Pakistan. Moreover, it continued its nuclear trade with Algeria, Iran, and Pakistan (Foot/Walter 2010: 163-164; see also Ming Zhang, Brzezinski et al. in: Burr 2004).

By the late 1990s, the PRC and the US policies had aligned closely. The PRC supported the indefinite extension of the NPT in 1995 and pledged in 1996 to stop aiding unsecured nuclear facilities. The PRC also reaffirmed its non-proliferation commitment and agreed to discuss policy and export controls with the US (Foot/Walter 2010: 158-159, 167).

Membership in international bodies like the IAEA and the Conference on Disarmament (CD) positively influenced the PRC's policies, enhancing its expertise in nuclear safety and verification. Notable milestones include above signing the NPT in 1992, joining the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) in 1984, ratifying the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) in 1997, joining the Zangger Committee in 1997, and the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) in 2004 (Yuan 2000; Foot/Walter 2010: 159).

The US Both as Rule Maker and Rule Shaker

As it was mentioned earlier, the PRC's stance on non-proliferation was profoundly influenced by its relationship with the US. This has both encouraged and challenged the PRC's adherence to global norms. Series of events closely connected with the US preferences exposed other motives behind Chinese policies, weakening the non-proliferation norm (Medeiros 2007, Chu/Rong 2008).

There are many evidences of the US breaking the non-proliferation obligations.

At the time the NPT was being negotiated, the United States had secret nuclear weapons sharing agreements with other NATO states. In 2005 *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* estimated that the United States still provided about 180 tactical B61 nuclear bombs for use by Belgium, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands and Turkey. NATO officials deny violating the NPT and stress that no nuclear weapons have ever been given over to non-US control (Charnysh 2006: 17).

American double standards rise questions and frustration on the Chinese side (Foot/Walter 2010: 169). The argument that the PRC has double standards and is lenient for countries like Iran, Pakistan or North Korea can be applicable to the US policy, e.g. American undermining Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM), support towards Indian nuclear power, especially the US-India nuclear deal concluded with the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) waiver. Such actions fostered the PRC suspicions and victimization feelings. The PRC had perceived

itself as the subject that is sacrificing itself and is blocked by the stronger side (Foot/Walter 2010: 169). Below examples of the ABM and India-US cooperation are described in more details.

The Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty¹² was signed in 1972 to limit missile defense systems and prevent an arms race. The US withdrew from the ABM in June 2002 (Acton 2021). This move led to concerns about the US policy consistency and contributed to Russia's refusal to comply with START II (Boese 2002). In February 2023, Russia announced it would not adhere to START III¹³, exacerbating nuclear proliferation risks and tensions, with the PRC perceiving the US actions as undermining non-proliferation efforts (Acton 2021; US Department of State 2023).

The India-US Civil Nuclear Agreement is a signed *Agreement Section 123*¹⁴ of the United States *Atomic Energy Act* of 1954, a joint statement by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (2004-2014) and the US President George W. Bush (2001-2009). This agreement required India to separate its civil and military nuclear facilities and subject the civil ones to the IAEA safeguards, while the US agreed to full civil nuclear cooperation (White House 2005; Sultan/Mian 2008: 1-8).

Countries such as Austria, Canada, the PRC, Ireland, New Zealand, and Russia initially opposed this Civil Nuclear Agreement, with the PRC calling it "a major blow to the international non-proliferation regime" (Buckley 2008: n.p.). For the PRC it was a showcase that the US prioritize national interest over the global non-proliferation norm – undermining Article VI of the NPT (Foot/Walter 2010: 169-170). To answer these concerns Americans organized individual talks with the PRC (New Delhi TV 2008). President George W. Bush asked Hu Jintao to withdraw opposition, facilitating consensus (Srivastava 2008; Foot/Walter 2010: 170). In the end, the PRC accepted the NSG waiver for India in September 2008 and did not obstruct the agreement.

¹² Full text of the ABM treaty: US Department of State. Archived content. "Treaty Between The United States Of America And The Union Of Soviet Socialist Republics On The Limitation Of Anti-Ballistic Missile Systems," Available HTTP: <<https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/avc/trty/101888.htm#text>>, Accessed: 2024-06-21.

¹³ First ratification of the START II treaty was in the 2000. Russian declaration with information of the withdrawal (3rd paragraph from the end): Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. "О ратификации Договора между Российской Федерацией и Соединенными Штатами Америки о дальнейшем сокращении и ограничении стратегических наступательных вооружений" [On the ratification of the Treaty between the Russian Federation and the United States of America on the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms], 2000-05-04, Available HTTP: <https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/international_safety/1730169/>, Accessed: 2024-06-21.

¹⁴ Agreement Section 123 is titled „Cooperation With Other Nations” – a prerequisite for nuclear deals between the US and any other nation

Despite progress, in 2010s the PRC's adherence to non-proliferation norms was perceived as still inconsistent due to competing economic, strategic, and political interests (Foot/Walter 2010: 161). The PRC's nuclear modernization efforts do not fully align with non-proliferation standards, and its reluctance to ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) is influenced by perceptions of the US unilateralism (Foot/Walter 2010: 164). Nonetheless, the PRC's actions increasingly align with international norms, driven by significant external influences from the United States and other actors.

Actual Situation of the PRC Non-Proliferation

The PRC's non-proliferation efforts have evolved from the initial stance as a "rule opponent" to its current position as a potential "rule maker." This chapter examines this transformation, highlighting the PRC's increased adherence to non-proliferation norms through active measures like export controls and treaty consolidation. Notably, Beijing's 2005 paper on the UN reform advocated for strengthening the NPT's universality and authority, reflecting its current public stance (Foot/Walter 2010: 171).

The PRC's consistency in behavior is influenced by its need to adapt to existing normative structures upon entering international society. Domestic political and economic changes in the late 1970s exposed the PRC to unfamiliar international institutional arrangements and new ideas. Deng Xiaoping's (PRC's leader 1978-1989) reform and opening-up (改革开放) transitioned the PRC from the central planning to the market-oriented system. Economic and political incentives, along with concerns about international image, influenced embracing non-proliferation norms (Foot/Walter 2010: 170-173).

Notably, the PRC has also urged the United States to follow non-proliferation norms and exercising self-restraint. In a major speech at the UN in September 2009, President Hu Jintao supported nuclear disarmament, the ratification of the CTBT, and the negotiation of a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT)¹. Although the PRC continues to seek a ban on the weaponization of space, Hu Jintao dropped the earlier linkage of progress on the FMCT to the start of negotiations on a treaty preventing an arms race in outer space (PAROS) (Foot/Walter 2010: 171). Today, the PRC actively debate about the importance

¹ "A fissile material cut-off treaty (FMCT) is a proposed international agreement that would prohibit the production of the two main components of nuclear weapons: highly-enriched uranium (HEU) and plutonium." Arms Control Association "Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT) at a Glance," Available HTTP: <<https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/fmct>>, Accessed: 2024-06-27.

of avoiding nuclearization of outer space, addressing emerging technologies, promoting principles such as No First Use policy on the level of the UN P5.

2.1 PRC Nuclear Capacities

People's Republic of China is the nuclear-weapon state (NWP), one of five under the NPT. Due to limited public disclosure, estimates of the PRC nuclear capabilities come from international bodies like Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, and national sources, especially American. However, it is important to mention that the estimations based on American research “can be institutionally biased and reflect a mind-set of worst-case thinking rather than the most-likely scenario” (Kristensen/Korda/Johns/Knight 2024: 51).

The PRC's nuclear arsenal, controlled by the Central Military Commission, remains centrally stored and has never been used in combat. In wartime, these weapons would be deployed to the Second Artillery Corps for missile brigades (Kristensen/Korda/Reynolds 2023: 128). The PRC never publicly admitted the number of its nuclear weapons. This lack of transparency makes quantifying difficult, and can be purposely used to hide development of its arsenal, assumed to be the fastest-growing globally (Kristensen/Korda/Johns/Knight 2024: 51).

As informed by the Nobel prize awarded *International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons* (ICAN) the PRC has so-called nuclear triad – ability to launch nuclear warheads from missiles, submarines, and aircraft. Between 1964 and 1996, it conducted 45 nuclear tests on its territory. In 2022, the PRC spent an estimated \$11.7 billion to build and maintain its nuclear forces and in 2025 – approximately \$13.5 billion” (ICAN website).

Recent estimates show the PRC's nuclear arsenal has grown – as per January 2026 the number is estimated to be 620 warheads. It is also ranked on the third place globally after Russia and the US (SIPRI 2026: 279, 287). It depicts a broader increasing trend of the PRC stockpile. The PRC is significantly expanding its nuclear modernization program, which started in the 1990s and 2000s, by increasing both the types and numbers of its nuclear weapons. As for 2024 the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* and the Federation of American Scientists reported a stockpile of approximately 438 to 500 warheads as of January 2024 (Kristensen/Korda/Johns/Knight 2024: 51, 54). This expansion is driven by inventories of plutonium, highly enriched uranium, and tritium, and includes advancements in road-mobile ICBMs, new missile silos, and air-launched ballistic

missiles. Although the PRC has limited by plutonium supplies, it utilizes dual-use infrastructure to support this growth. Projections suggest the PRC's stockpile will continue to grow and could match the ICBM numbers of Russia or the US in the coming decade (Kristensen/Korda/Reynolds 2023: 108; Kristensen/Korda 2023: 247).

All figures are approximate and are estimates based on public information or assessments by the authors.

	First nuclear test year	Deployed warheads ^a		Stored warheads ^b		Military stockpile ^c		Retired warheads ^d		Total inventory ^e	
		2025	2026	2025	2026	2025	2026	2025	2026	2025	2026
USA	1945	1 770	1 770 ^f	1 930	1 930 ^g	3 700	3 700	1 477	1 342	5 177	5 042
Russia	1949	1 718	1 796 ^h	2 591	2 604 ⁱ	4 309	4 400 ^j	1 150	1 020	5 459	5 420
UK	1952	120	120	105	105	225	225	–	–	225	225
France	1960	280	280	10	10	290	290	..	80	290	370
China	1964	24	34 ^k	576	586	600	620	–	–	600	620
India	1974	–	12 ^l	180	178	180	190	..	..	180	190
Pakistan	1998	–	–	170	170	170	170	..	..	170	170
North Korea	2006	–	–	50	60	50	60	..	..	50	60 ^m
Israel	..	–	–	90	90	90	90	..	..	90	90
Total		3 912	4 012	5 702	5 733	9 614	9 745	2 627	2 442	12 241	12 187

Table 2. SIPRI 2026: Appendix 8A, p. 279.

In table 3 are detailed from the SIPRI 2026 Yearbook's chapter "World nuclear forces" by Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda.

These statistics show that the PRC has made significant advancements in its missile technology, resulting in a diversified and modernized arsenal. In addition to ICBMs, the PRC has developed intermediate-range and medium-range ballistic missiles. What was noticed already in 2023, was that the PRC's sea-based nuclear deterrent has been strengthened with the development of ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs). The country operates six Type-094 SSBNs, stationed at Yalong naval base near Longposan on Hainan Island, each capable of carrying 12 JL-2 or JL-3 submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs). The JL-3 SLBM, with a greater range than the JL-2, enhances the PRC's second-strike capabilities (Kristensen/Korda/Johns/Knight 2024: 65; Kristensen/Korda/Reynolds 2023: 125-126).

For air-based nuclear strike capabilities, the PRC has equipped its H-6K and H-6N bombers for nuclear roles. The H-6N variant is particularly notable for its ability to carry a potential nuclear-capable air-launched ballistic missile (Kristensen/Korda/Reynolds 2023: 127-128).

All figures are approximate and some are based on assessments by the authors.

Type/Chinese designation (US designation)	No. of launchers	Year first deployed	Range (km)	Total no. of warheads
<i>Aircraft</i>	20			20
H-6N (B-6N)	20	2020	3 100	20
<i>Land-based missiles</i>	775			509
DF-5A (CSS-4 Mod 2)	6	1981	12 000	6
DF-5B (CSS-4 Mod 3)	12	2015	13 000	60
DF-5C (CSS-3 Mod 4)	5	[2025]	13 000	5
DF-26 (CSS-18)	300	2016	>3 000	100
DF-31A/AG (CSS-10 Mod 2)	104	2007/2018	11 200	104
DF-31B (silo version) (CSS-10 Mod 3)	320	2023	11 200	150
DF-41 (mobile version) (CSS-20)	28	2020	12 000	84
<i>SLBMs</i>	72			72
JL-3 (CSS-N-20)	72	2022	>10 000	72
<i>Other stored warheads</i>				[19]
Total stockpile	867			620

[] = uncertain SIPRI estimate; SLBM = submarine-launched ballistic missile.

Notes: The yields of China's nuclear warheads are not known, except that older and less accurate missiles were equipped with megaton-yield warheads. Newer long-range missile warheads probably mainly have yields of several hundred kilotons, and a smaller number have multi-megaton warheads. It is possible that some warheads assigned to forces aimed at regional deterrence have even lower yield options.

Most of China's warheads are not thought to be deployed on launchers under normal circumstances but kept in storage facilities. However, intelligence reports from the United States claim that some of China's land-based missiles are in a state of heightened operational readiness during exercises. Moreover, US government officials privately suggest that nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) conducting deterrence patrols might be carrying nuclear-armed missiles. Partly based on these assumptions, SIPRI assesses that a small number of China's missiles might be equipped with nuclear warheads (c. 34 as of Jan. 2026), but this assessment comes with considerable uncertainty.

Figures are based on estimates of an average of 1 warhead per nuclear-capable launcher, except for the DF-5B and DF-41, which are assessed to have multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicle (MIRV) capability. The DF-5B is thought to carry up to 5 warheads while the DF-41 is thought to carry up to 3 warheads. SIPRI assesses that, as of Jan. 2026, one third of China's DF-26 dual-capable launchers had been assigned a nuclear role. China is introducing a new DF-27 (CSS-24) missile, which has a hypersonic glide vehicle and a range of 5000–8000 kilometres, but it is believed to have been assigned a conventional role.

The number of bombers includes only those estimated to be assigned a nuclear role.

China operates 6 SSBNs that can carry a maximum of 72 SLBMs. SIPRI assesses that, as of Jan. 2026, all 6 were carrying the JL-3 SLBM. China's SSBNs are thought to be conducting near-continuous deterrence patrols. The future Type 096 SSBN will be equipped with the new longer-range JL-4.

SIPRI's estimate of China's total stockpile includes c. 19 'other stored warheads' that might have been produced for missiles nearing operational status.

By Hans M. Kristensen, Matt Korda, Eliana Johns, and Mackenzie Knight

Type	NATO designation	Number of launchers ^a	Year deployed	Range (kilometers)	Warheads x yield ^b (kilotons)	Warheads
Land-based ballistic missiles^c						
<i>Medium/Intermediate-Range</i>						
DF-21A/E	CSS-5 Mods 2, 6	..	2000, 2016	2,100 ^d	1 × 200–300	.. ^e
DF-26	CSS-18	216 ^f	2016	4,000	1 × 200–300	108 ^g
<i>Subtotal:</i>		216				108
<i>Intercontinental Range</i>						
DF-5A	CSS-4 Mod 2	6	1981	12,000	1 × 4,000–5,000	6
DF-5B	CSS-4 Mod 3	12	2015	13,000	Up to 5 × 200–300	60
DF-5C	(CSS-4 Mod 4)	..	(2024)	13,000	1 × multi-MT	..
DF-27	CSS-X-24	..	(2026)	5,000–8,000	1 × 200–300	..
DF-31	CSS-10 Mod 1	..	2006	7,200	1 × 200–300	.. ^h
DF-31A	CSS-10 Mod 2	24	2007	11,200	1 × 200–300	24
DF-31A	CSS-10 (silo)	..	(2023)	11,200	1 × 200–300	..
DF-31AG	CSS-10 Mod 2 ⁱ	64 ^j	2018	11,200	1 × 200–300	64
DF-41	CSS-20 (mobile)	28	2020	12,000	Up to 3 × 200–300	84
DF-41	CSS-20 (silo)	..	(2025)	12,000	(Up to 3 × 200–300)	..
<i>Subtotal:</i>		134				238
<i>Total land-based</i>		350				346
Submarine-launched ballistic missiles						
JL-2	CSS-N-14	0 ^k	2016	7,000+	1 × 200–300	0
JL-3	CSS-N-20	6/72	2022 ^l	9,000+	("Multiple")	72
Aircraft^m						
H-6K	B-6	10	1965/2009	3,100+	1 × bomb	10 ⁿ
H-6N	B-6	10	2020	3,100+	1 × ALBM	10
H-20	?	..	(2030)	?	(bomb/ALCM?)	..
Total fielded		442				438
Other produced warheads						[62] ^o
TOTAL						500

^aThis table is based on U.S. government reports, work by non-governmental experts such as Decker Eveleth, Ben Reuter, and others who wish to remain anonymous, as well as the authors' estimates.

^bTwo dots (. .) imply the number is unknown or premature. Numbers between parentheses indicate weapons in the process of entering service but not yet operational.

^cThe Chinese nuclear testing program demonstrated a wide range of warhead yields. While older and less accurate missiles were equipped with megaton-yield warheads, new and more accurate missiles carry warheads with much lower yields, possibly in the few hundreds of kilotons. It is possible that some warheads have even lower yield options.

^dAlthough the DF-17 MRBM was previously claimed to possibly be dual-capable, this has not been substantiated and the 2023 US Department of Defense's report describes it as conventional. As a result, the DF-17 is no longer included in this table.

^eUS Department of Defense (DOD) lists the range of the DF-21A/E as 1,750 km, but the US Air Force has reported it as 2,150 km.

^fThe nuclear DF-21 is no longer mentioned in the 2023 DOD report and may have been retired.

^gUS Department of Defense lists 250 IRBM launchers, up from 200 in 2021, which is more than the known visible base infrastructure indicates. The DOD number may include launchers for bases that are upgrading to DF-26 but not yet fully operational as well as launchers in the final stage of production.

^hIf all deployed DF-26 launchers are assigned one nuclear warhead each, the total stockpile would include nearly 550 warheads, which is more than DOD lists. Moreover, that would mean each DF-26 brigade base was assigned several dozen warheads, which seems excessive. This table assumes that only half of the dual-capable DF-26 launchers are assigned a nuclear mission, but the actual number is unknown.

ⁱThe DF-31 is no longer listed in the annual DOD report and is thought to have been retired.

^jThe DF-31AG is thought to carry the same missile as the DF-31A.

^kAssumes possibly six brigades are operational with the DF-31AG.

^lIn November 2022, the commander of the US Pacific Fleet stated that China had replaced all of its deployed JL-2 SLBMs with JL-3s. The 2023 DOD report, however, describes the SSBNs as upgrading to the JL-3.

^mAlthough US officials have stated that the JL-3 has become operational on Type 094/A SSBNs, it is also thought to be intended to eventually arm the future Type 096 SSBN.

ⁿBombers were used to conduct at least 12 of China's nuclear test explosions between 1965 and 1979 and gravity bomb models are displayed in museums. The People's Liberation Army Air Force nuclear capability was dormant for years, but the mission has recently been reestablished.

^oAlthough the US Department of Defense lists only the H-6N as nuclear with an air-launched ballistic missile, we estimate a small number of gravity bombs were possibly retained in the stockpile for earlier versions. With the arrival of the ALBMs, however, those bombs will probably be retired, if it hasn't happened already.

^pIn addition to the 438 warheads assigned to operational forces, China probably has produced, or is producing, dozens of warheads for additional launchers, including those needed to arm its hundreds of new missile silos. DOD reported in 2023 that the Chinese stockpile as of May 2023 included over 500 warheads, which appears to include warheads for more than the observable force, such as new silo-based ICBMs.

Table 3. Kristensen/Korda 2026: 287.

The PRC's nuclear infrastructure has seen significant expansion, including the construction of new missile silo fields. These fields comprise about 320 new silos for both solid-fueled and liquid-fueled ICBMs, alongside 15 training silos in Jilantai (Kristensen/Korda/Johns/Knight 2024: 59–63, Kristensen/Korda/Reynolds 2023: 119). The PRC's current stocks of plutonium and highly enriched uranium (HEU) are sufficient to support a doubling of its nuclear warhead stockpile. Additionally, the PRC is boosting its tritium production and leveraging civilian reactors for plutonium production. New facilities, such as the CFR-600 fast-breeder reactor, are expected to further increase plutonium output (Kristensen/Korda/Johns/Knight 2024: 52; Kristensen/Korda/Reynolds 2023: 110–111).

2.2 PRC Nuclear Doctrine

The PRC's nuclear doctrine is detailed in the 2013 edition of *The Science of Military Strategy* (SMS). Unlike earlier editions (1987, 2001), the 2013 edition places significant focus on nuclear aspects. Chapter 9, „Military Struggle in the Nuclear Domain,” is divided into four sections: “New Trends in the Development of Nuclear Military Struggles,” “Nuclear Deterrence,” “Nuclear Real Combat,” and “Nuclear Arms Control and Disarmament” (Fravel 2016: 10; SMS 2013). The document explains the PRC's nuclear buildup as a response to international threats such as „nuclear blackmail” and „nuclear monopoly,” and notes that the nuclear security situation for the PRC is increasingly complex (SMS 2013: 217). It also criticizes the US for being „self-contradictory” in its nuclear policy and blames the US defense systems in East Asia for exacerbating these issues (SMS 2013: 214).

According to the SMS the characteristics of the PRC nuclear deterrence have three main points. Firstly, “[t]he directed [focused] quality of the objects of deterrence” – meaning that the PRC will not use or threat with usage of nuclear arsenal the non-NWS and NWFZ.

Secondly, “[t]he limited nature of the deterrence goal” meaning that development and application of nuclear weapons are primarily the moderate in number – not aspiring to the arms race or military hegemony.

Thirdly, “[t]he defensive nature of the deterrent mode” therefore that the PRC's nuclear weapons are intended only for self-defense and retaliation, emphasizing No First Use policy. The PRC is not drawn to initiating conflict. At the same time however, the SMS emphasizes that potential nuclear aggressor would undoubtedly receive severe consequences (SMS 2013: 216-215). This doctrine recognizes the positive aspects of nuclear weapons e.g. the ability to stabilize the security of the country by influencing military decisions of other states, especially can deter military actions from other nations.

In other words, the PRC's strategic approach to nuclear counterattack focuses on centralized command, protection, targeted strikes, and moderation. Decision-making for nuclear counterattacks is reserved for the highest authority, with integrated planning involving both nuclear and conventional forces. The doctrine permits counterattacks if enemy missiles are confirmed, while maintaining the No First Use policy and safeguarding its nuclear assets (SMS 2013: 220-221).

In case of an enemy nuclear attack, the PRC's strategy involves using all remaining nuclear forces together, with coordinated targets and timing to reach the maximum effectiveness. The plan of action involves using defense tactics,

including multi-location operations and maneuvers, to prevent the enemy from accurately locating launch sites. The PRC's attack would use the "limited forces" but aimed to have the "actual result." In the counterattack the PRC military doctrine would target places "which the enemy most fears will be struck" – military or urban (SMS 2013: 220-221). Therefore, some experts conclude that the PRC would rather attack urban areas (Kulacki 2015 in: Cordesman/Kendall/Colley 2024: 5).

The PRC's preparedness for nuclear actions emphasizes moderation and initiative. The primary goals are to strengthen nuclear deterrence and prevent nuclear war, while avoiding unnecessary confrontation and escalation (SMS 2013: 221).

The Science of Military Strategy 2013 also includes a section dedicated to nuclear arms control and disarmament. The definition given in the SMS is as follows:

Nuclear arms control and disarmament signify the limitation and reduction carried out by states or international organizations on research, testing, production, disposition, use, and transfer of nuclear weapons systems, or on the scale of nuclear forces. This includes the following content: prohibiting nuclear testing, halting nuclear proliferation, conducting nuclear inspections, implementing nuclear transparency and nuclear-domain confidence building measures, and limitation and reduction of nuclear weapons. Of these, the limitation or reduction of nuclear weapons mass and quantities is the core. (SMS 2013: 222)

The SMS 2013 notes that nuclear arms control and disarmament serve to achieve their goals while also maintaining the „superiority“ of nuclear weapons and nuclear-weapon states. The PRC's historical approach is simplified, starting with its 1960s NFU policy and evolving from the 1980s as starting point of more active non-proliferation efforts. The text emphasizes the PRC's unique and crucial role in international arms control and disarmament, describing it as an important driving force in this area: "[the PRC] has brought into play a unique role, to become an important driving force in international arms control and disarmament" (SMS 2013: 223).

The PRC nuclear doctrine is therefore highlighting the defensive character but not passive one. As given by Pan, "the active defense in China's strategy is fundamentally determined by its socialist nature and by its peaceful foreign policy, which is defensive and not offensive" (Pan 2016: 56). Nuclear arms control and disarmament are presented as the opportunity for the PRC to engage more at the international arena. Whether it can lead to a leadership role requires more studies.

2.3 International Treaties

International law governs the actions of states, organizations, institutions, and individuals, with its primary sources being custom and treaties. Customary law, an unwritten form, requires consistent practice and *opinion juris* (belief that a practice is legally obligatory). Treaties, formal agreements between states, are binding on parties that express consent through signature, accession, or ratification. Accession signifies acceptance of an offer to join a treaty, while ratification indicates consent to be bound by an existing treaty. The Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (VCLT), adopted on May 23, 1969, and effective from January 27, 1980, governs treaty law and is a key achievement of the International Law Commission (ILC) (Aust 2012: 709).

“Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties” stands as one of the most important references of understanding the legal language of the treaty’s documents. The most important terms for this book are listed with explanation below.

- “treaty” means an international agreement concluded between States in written form and governed by international law, whether embodied in a single instrument or in two or more related instruments and whatever its particular designation;
- “ratification,” “acceptance,” “approval” and “accession” mean in each case the international act so named whereby a State establishes on the international plane its consent to be bound by a treaty; [...]
- “reservation” means a unilateral statement, however phrased or named, made by a State, when signing, ratifying, accepting, approving or acceding to a treaty, whereby it purports to exclude or to modify the legal effect of certain provisions of the treaty in their application to that State (United Nations “Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties” 1969: 331)

The People’s Republic of China is a party to the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties. Interestingly, the United States has not ratified it but considers many of its provisions as customary international law on treaties (US Department of State. Diplomacy in Action “VCLT”).

Participation in non-proliferation treaties signals a commitment to global security and stability, contributing to peacekeeping and international cooperation. These treaties not only strengthen international law but also align with environmental protection efforts, as adherence to them can positively impact ecological sustainability.

According to the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs Treaties Database, the PRC is a participant in 12 disarmament treaties. These are, given in alphabetical order: 1925 Geneva Protocol (signed on August 7, 1929, deposited in France), Antarctic Treaty (signed on June 8, 1983, deposited in the United States), Arms Trade Treaty (signed on July 6, 2020, deposited in the United Nations), Biological Weapons Convention (signed on November 15, 1984, deposited in the United Kingdom, Russian Federation, United States), Chemical Weapons Convention (signed on January 13, 1993, deposited in the United Nations), Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (signed on September 24, 1996, deposited in the United Nations), Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (which includes several protocols: Protocol II (Amended) on Mines, Booby-Traps and Other Devices (signed on September 14, 1981), Protocol IV on Blinding Laser Weapons (signed on April 7, 1982), Amendment to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (signed on November 4, 1998), Protocol V on Explosive Remnants of War (signed on November 4, 1998), Protocol I on Non-Detectable Fragments (signed on August 11, 2003), Protocol II on Mines, Booby-Traps and Other Devices (signed on June 10, 2010), Protocol III on Incendiary Weapons (signed on April 7, 1982), deposited in the United Nations), Convention on Environmental Modification Techniques (signed on June 8, 2005, deposited in the United Nations), International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism (signed on September 14, 2005, deposited in the United Nations), Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (signed on March 9, 1992, deposited in the United Kingdom, Russian Federation, United States), Outer Space Treaty (signed on January 12, 1984, deposited in the United Kingdom, Russian Federation, United States), and Sea-bed Treaty (signed on February 28, 1991, deposited in the Russian Federation, United Kingdom, United States) (UNODA Treaties Database).

In this work, I analyze the most significant disarmament treaties, Partial Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (PNTBT), Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), UN Security Council Resolution 1540, Seabed Arms Control Treaty, and The Outer Space Treaty.

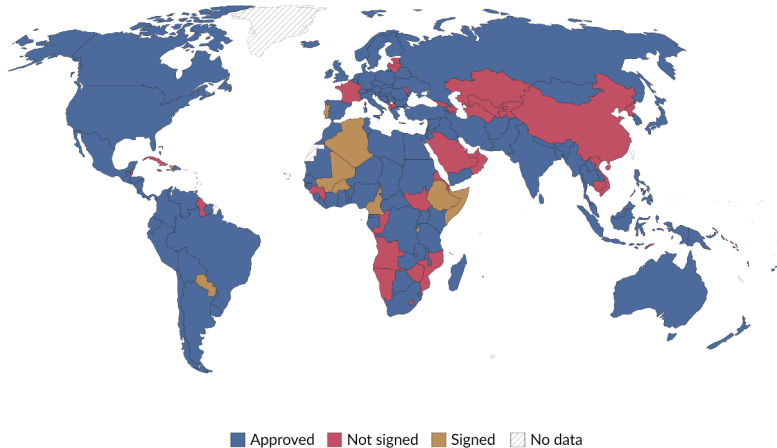
2.3.1 Partial Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (PNTBT) 《部分禁止核试验条约》

In 1954, India first proposed an agreement to ban nuclear weapons tests. In 1958, the US, the USSR, and the UK began a Conference on the Discontinuance of Nuclear Tests in Geneva, but it failed over verification issues. However, in 1963, the Partial Test Ban Treaty (PTBT) was signed by these three powers in Moscow. The date was very significant as it was just after the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 – the moment in the history, when the world came the closest to nuclear war. The goal therefore was to reduce tensions. The Treaty requires parties to prohibit nuclear tests in the atmosphere, outer space, underwater, or any environment that causes radioactive debris to spread outside their borders. Parties must avoid supporting or participating in such tests. The PTBT lacks international verification measures, relying instead on each party's national technical means for monitoring compliance. With the signing of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) in September 1996, the PTBT became redundant. However, if a party withdraws from or does not sign the CTBT, it remains bound by the PTBT (James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies PTBT 2008). The Treaty's effectiveness is disputable.

Country position on the Partial Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, 2023

The treaty's objective is to stop nuclear weapons tests in the atmosphere, in outer space, and under water. A country's position on a treaty can be "Not signed"¹, "Signed"², or "Approved"³.

Our World
in Data



Data source: United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (2024)

OurWorldInData.org/nuclear-weapons | CC BY

1. Country status "Not signed" on a treaty: This status means that the country has neither signed nor committed to a treaty.

2. Country status "Signed" on a treaty: This status means that the country accepts a treaty without a legal commitment.

3. Country status "Approved" on a treaty: This status means that the country has legally committed to a treaty. This status comprises one of the following actions defined by UNODA: - "Ratification" is an act of formal confirmation, where a country consents to be legally bound to a treaty. - "Accession" means that a country accepts to become a party to a treaty that has been signed by other states, not by the country itself. It has the same legal effect as ratification. - "Succession" means that a newly formed country adopts the treaty obligations of a predecessor state.

Map 2. Herre/Rosado/Roser/Hasell (2024).

As visible on the map the PRC did not sign the PTBT. On the UN official website two dates stand for China's dates of notification/deposit: China – signature – 23 August 1963; and Republic of China – ratification – 18 May 1964. That means that after *United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2758* (UN General Assembly 1971: 2) – recognizing the PRC as the sole legitimate China in the UN – the Chiang Kai-shek's (蔣中正/蒋介石, 1887-1975, leader of Nationalist government 1925-1948 and President of the Republic of China 1948-1975) did support the Treaty. The adherence of the treaty was relatively high but with one visible NWS outside the PTBT, namely France. The PRC openly criticized the discriminatory nature of the PTBT and perceived it as a direct attack against its nuclear ambitions (nuclear program was ongoing). It can be explained with the Chinese first “norm opposer” phase towards nuclear non-proliferation. When the Treaty was introduced, the PRC was actively developing its nuclear weapons program and conducted nuclear tests after PTBT entered into force, e.g. 22 atmospheric tests through 1980 (Burr/Montford 2003: n.p.). American and Soviet pressure to sign the treaty had a counter effect – 31 July 1963 the PRC announced it will not participate in the PTBT as perceived Americano-Soviet actions as anti-Chinese alloys (Crean 2024: 96). The PRC's researchers understood that goal of the PTBT to prevent Chinese attempt to acquire nuclear weapons (Tan Yan 2020: 58).

The fact that the PRC is not a member of the PTBT after it's shift towards nuclear non-proliferation regime can be explained with the emergence of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) in 1990s that was signed by the PRC.

Now, the statement entitled “中国政府关于全面禁止和彻底销毁核武器的声明” [Chinese Government statement on the Comprehensive Prohibition and Complete Destruction of Nuclear Weapons] is available on the PRC MoFA website. According to the article, one week after the UK, the USA, and the USSR signed the PTBT in 1963 the PRC issued an own statement respond – «中国政府主张全面、彻底、干净、坚决地禁止和销毁核武器、倡议召开世界各国政府首脑会议的声明» [The Chinese Government advocates the comprehensive, thorough, clean and resolute prohibition and destruction of nuclear weapons and advocates the convening of a summit of heads of governments around the world] (PRC MOFA 2000). It was a strong signal that when the PRC does not want to join the PTBT, it agrees with the objective of the eventual nuclear disarmament.

This text advocated for the complete destruction and prohibition of nuclear weapons, proposing the establishment of Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones (NWFZ) in Asia and the Pacific, Central Europe, Africa, and Latin America. It called for the cessation of nuclear testing, halting the export and import of nuclear weapons and related data, and organizing an international summit on nuclear prohibitions. On August 2, 1963, Premier Zhou Enlai invited government representatives to discuss this idea. Shortly after, in October 1964, the PRC conducted its first successful nuclear test and reaffirmed its commitment to nuclear prohibition, declaring a No First Use policy (PRC MOFA 2000).

2.3.2 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)

《不扩散核武器条约》

Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) was opened for the signature on July 1, 1968 and entered into force on March 5, 1970. On May 11, 1995 NPT was extended indefinitely. As per June 2026, the Treaty was signed by 191 states, including the five nuclear-weapon states: China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The Treaty stands as the sole binding commitment in a multilateral agreement towards the objective of disarmament by the nuclear-weapon states and one of the most ratified treaties in the area of international peace and security (UNODA n.d. c).

The NPT has three core objectives – so called pillars: 1) the prevention of nuclear weapon proliferation, 2) the pursuit of nuclear disarmament, and 3) the promotion of the peaceful utilization of nuclear energy. The treaty gives definitions of nuclear and non-nuclear-weapon states (NWS), as those that have developed and conducted nuclear explosive tests before January 1, 1967 (UNODA n.d. c, Article IX, par. 3). All other signatories are classified as non-nuclear weapon states (nNWS or NNWS). The Treaty institutes a safeguards mechanism, overseen by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), to identify and prevent the diversion of nuclear material or technology, along with undisclosed facilities and activities (UNODA n.d. c).

China's participation in the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons reflects the broader transition of international recognition from the Republic of China (ROC) to the People's Republic of China (PRC). The ROC signed the NPT in Washington, D.C., on July 1, 1968 and ratified it on January 27, 1970. However, following the adoption of United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2758 on October 25, 1971, and the growing

international recognition of the PRC as the sole legitimate government of China, the status of China's participation in the treaty required clarification.

The NPT was prepared in three authentic copies, deposited with the governments of the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union (now the Russian Federation), and the United States (UNODA n.d. d, Article IX, para. 3). In March 1992, the PRC formally acceded to the treaty by depositing instruments of accession with all three depositories. The deposits were made on 9 March with the United Kingdom, 12 March with the Russian Federation, and 17 March with the United States (UNODA n.d. c).

Before July 1, 1997, the treaty was applicable to Hong Kong. However, on July 1, 1997, the transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong from the United Kingdom to the PRC occurred. As a result of this transfer, the treaty ceased to apply to Hong Kong from that date onwards. After July 1, 1997, when Hong Kong became a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the PRC, the treaty started to apply to Hong Kong again, but now under the jurisdiction of the People's Republic of China. Secondly, on March 12, 1992 the PRC accessed the Russian language version.²

In its communication to the United States, the PRC emphasized that it was the sole legal government representing China and declared that the signing and ratification of the NPT by the authorities in Taiwan in 1968 and 1970 were "illegal and null and void" (UNODA n.d. c). This statement reflected Beijing's position that treaty rights and obligations relating to China should be exercised exclusively by the PRC rather than by the ROC authorities on Taiwan.

The accession documents also addressed the status of Hong Kong. Prior to July 1, 1997, the treaty applied to Hong Kong under British administration. Following the transfer of sovereignty from the United Kingdom to the PRC on that date, the NPT continued to apply to Hong Kong as a Special Administrative Region of China (UNODA n.d. c).

Alongside its accession, the PRC reaffirmed its support for the objectives of the NPT and declared its commitment to preventing nuclear proliferation, promoting the peaceful use of nuclear energy, and pursuing the ultimate goal of the complete prohibition and thorough destruction of nuclear weapons. Furthermore, it proposed several measures to advance nuclear disarmament, including the adoption of a No First Use policy by nuclear-weapon states, legally binding assurances not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against

² Russian text of Chinese accession, Available HTTP: <https://treaties.unoda.org/t/npt/declarations/CHN_moscow_ACC>, Accessed:2024-03-29.

non-nuclear-weapon states and Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones, the promotion of additional Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones, and the prevention of an arms race in outer space:

4. China maintains that in order to improve and strengthen the nuclear non-proliferation regime and help attain the goal of complete prohibition and thorough destruction of nuclear weapons, the following specific measures should also be taken:

(1) All nuclear-weapon states undertake not to be the first to use nuclear weapons at any time and under any circumstances, and an international agreement on the non-first-use of nuclear weapons should be concluded.

(2) All nuclear-weapon states undertake not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon countries or nuclear-free zones, and an international legal instrument on the non-use or non-threat of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon countries and nuclear-free zones should be concluded.

(3) All nuclear-weapon states undertake to support the proposition of establishing nuclear weapon-free zones, respect the status of such zones and undertake corresponding obligations.

(4) All states that have nuclear weapons deployed outside their boundaries withdraw all those weapons back to their own territories.

(5) The major space powers halt their arms race in outer space and cease the development of space weapons, the nuclear-related in particular. (UNODA n.d. c)

The PRC actively portrays itself as a country committed to promoting the NPT. In August 2022 the PRC published statement on nuclear disarmament at the 10th NPT Review Conference, expressed by ambassador Li Song³ (李松, b. 1967). He claimed that the NPT faces the most challenging situation since its indefinite extension in 1995. In the very beginning of his statement, he accuses the US for its Cold War mentality, undermining mutual trust between countries what in the end lead to the increasing risk of the nuclear conflicts (Permanent Mission of the PRC to the UN 2022). In the same text Li Song calls for adapting the NFU policy.

It keeps to the stance that the PRC will not attack unless is attacked, but the PRC will surely counterattack if attacked. The PRC will firmly defend its national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and resolutely thwart the interference of external forces and the separatist activities for “Taiwan Independence.” (Permanent Mission of the PRC to the UN 2022: n.p.)

³ Li Song is “member of the Communist Party of China, till 2023 Permanent Representative and Ambassador Plenipotentiary and Extraordinary of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations and other International Organizations in Vienna, Permanent Representative to the United Nations Industrial Development Organization and Permanent Representative to the International Atomic Energy Agency,” 2023-02-23, Available HTTP: <http://vienna.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/dsxx/dsjl/202312/t20231221_11208821.htm>, Accessed: 2024-06-26.

On January 3, 2022, the leaders of France, the PRC, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States issued a Joint Statement on Preventing Nuclear War and Avoiding Arms Races and together expressed commitment towards the NPT (White House 2022). In April-May 2026, the NPT was reviewed – the 11th NPT Review Conference took place in the UN Headquarters in the New York City.⁴ The *First Meeting of the Preparatory Committee for the 2026 NPT Review Conference* took place from 31 July to 11 August 2023 at the Vienna International Centre in Vienna, Austria (UNODA n.d. a). China was represented by Sun Xiaobo (孙晓波), Director-General of the Department of Arms Control of the Foreign Ministry of China. He maintained Chinese support for the global nuclear disarmament, underlined Chinese care for the peacekeeping. He opted for global disarmament and implementation of the New START Treaty⁵, expressed the Xi Jinping support for the P5⁶ issued a Joint Statement on Preventing Nuclear War and Avoiding Arms Races⁷ and called e.g. for leaving the idea of replicating “nuclear sharing” arrangements in the Asia Pacific, what appeared in Chinese statements e.g. in 2022. As one of the most important contributions of the PRC he counted was that the PRC it kept the nuclear arsenal on the minimum level to secure the national safety and strongly opposed to the “ill-intentioned accusation and distortion of China’s nuclear doctrines made by certain countries.” As the third point Sun Xiaobo expressed Chinese strong support for the Iran nuclear deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), objections against the AUKUS (Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) nuclear submarine as the threat for the global peace and example of undermining the IAEA safeguards regime (Permanent Mission of the PRC to the UN and other international Organizations in Vienna 2023).

Hu Xijin argues that the PRC needs a strong nuclear arsenal to achieve a “new security balance,” emphasizing its defensive stance. He criticizes the US nuclear policies, claiming they drive global insecurity and threaten the PRC’s safety

⁴ The second meeting was planned from 22 July till 2 August 2024 in Geneva.

⁵ The New START Treaty is the bilateral treaty on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms between the US and Russian Federation. More on the website of the U.S. Department of State: <<https://www.state.gov/new-start/>>. Russia suspended its participation in the treaty on 21st February 2023.

⁶ The five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council i.e. France, the People’s Republic of China, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and Russia (formerly the Soviet Union).

⁷ The full text of the statement is to be found here: “Joint Statement of the Leaders of the Five Nuclear-Weapon States on Preventing Nuclear War and Avoiding Arms Races,” Available HTTP: <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/01/03/p5-statement-on-preventing-nuclear-war-and-avoiding-arms-races/>>, Accessed: 2024-04-29.

with its quest for military dominance. He highlights that while the US advances nuclear projects like Australian submarines and encourages nuclear capabilities in Japan and South Korea, the PRC remains committed to international non-proliferation and upholds a peaceful image as a “responsible nation” (Hu 2020).

In both cases, recurring themes of the PRC’s diplomatic narrative are evident: strong support for nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament, advocacy of a universal No First Use policy – particularly among the P5 nuclear-weapon states – emphasis on the special responsibility of the United States and Russia as possessors of the world’s largest nuclear arsenals, and criticism of what the PRC describes as the United States’ continued adherence to a Cold War mentality and selective application of non-proliferation norms. As is typical of NPT review process statements, the PRC’s declarations present the PRC’s policies as fully consistent with the objectives of the treaty and portray international non-proliferation efforts in largely positive terms.

At the same time, these declaratory positions remain subject to debate. The growing body of scholarship and official assessments points to the rapid modernization and expansion of the PRC’s nuclear forces. Critics argue that this ongoing buildup raises questions about the compatibility between the PRC’s disarmament rhetoric and its strategic behavior. Chinese analysts, in contrast, generally present these developments as a response to changes in the international security environment, including advances in the US missile defense systems, strategic competition between Washington and Beijing, and concerns regarding the credibility of the PRC’s nuclear deterrent.

The evolution of the PRC’s nuclear policy since the 2010s has therefore been shaped by a combination of continuity and change. While Beijing has maintained its official commitment to No First Use and support for eventual nuclear disarmament, its nuclear modernization program has expanded significantly. Many observers interpret this development as an effort to strengthen deterrence, particularly in the context of growing tensions over Taiwan and the broader strategic rivalry with the United States. Because these issues extend beyond the PRC’s official diplomatic discourse and involve significant scholarly and political disagreement, they are examined separately in the chapter on the PRC’s nuclear policy and the challenges of the NPT regime.

Concerns regarding the PRC’s actions and their impact on the nuclear non-proliferation regime are discussed in more details in a separate chapter of this book.

2.3.3 Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT)

《全面禁止核试验条约》

The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) was adopted on September 10, 1996 and opened for signature on September 24, 1996. Despite broad international support, it has not yet entered into force. According to Article XIV, the treaty will become legally binding 180 days after all states listed in Annex 2 have ratified it. As nine Annex 2 states have not yet completed ratification – i.e. China, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), Egypt, India, Iran, Israel, Pakistan, Russia, and the United States; the CTBT remains inoperative.⁸ The CTBT bans all kinds of the nuclear explosions, including those for the peaceful reasons. This is crucial because it hampers countries' efforts to develop nuclear weapons for the first time and prevents those with existing weapons from enhancing their destructive capabilities. Additionally, it mitigates the extensive damage caused by radiation from nuclear blasts. The Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO) is tasked with promoting the treaty's universal adoption. Established by the treaty's signatory states in 1996, the CTBTO oversees the necessary preparations for the treaty's enforcement, including the implementation of a global verification system (CTBTO n.d., UNODA n.d. e).

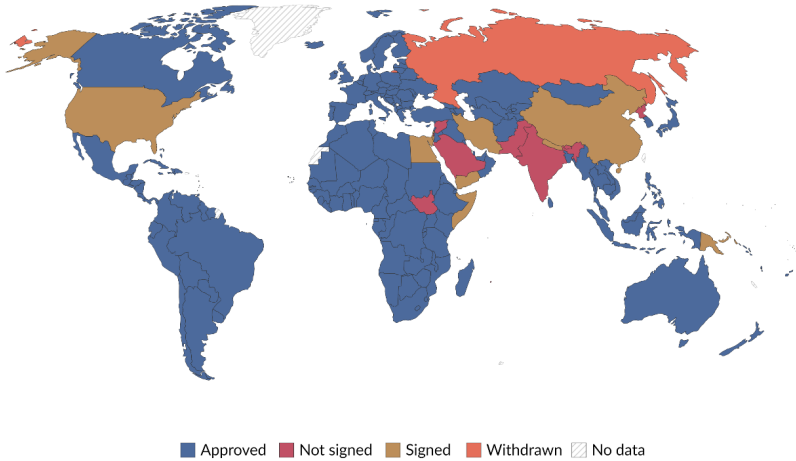
On September 24, 1996, Qian Qichen (钱其琛, PRC Foreign Minister 1988-1998, Vice Premier 1993-2003), then Vice Premier and Foreign Minister of China, signed the CTBT at the United Nations Headquarters in New York (UNODA n.d. e). Although the PRC has not yet ratified the treaty, its signature signaled support for the CTBT's objective of banning all nuclear explosions for both military and civilian purposes.⁹ At the same time, the absence of ratification means that the PRC has not accepted the full legal obligations associated with the treaty, leaving its commitment at the political rather than legally binding level.

⁸ More information and the full list of the Annex 2 countries are available on the United Nations Treaty Collection website, Available HTTP: <https://web.archive.org/web/20170621101227/https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=XXVI-4&chapter=26&lang=en>. Accessed: 2024-05-01.

⁹ CTBT was ratified by France and the UK April 6, 1998; not ratified by the PRC, the USA, Russia, India, and Israel; neither signed or ratified by the DPRK, India, Pakistan. See: *CTBTO* "CTBTO status of signature and ratification." <<https://www.ctbto.org/our-mission/states-signatories>>. Accessed: 2024-07-06.

Country position on the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, 2023

The treaty's objective is to stop nuclear weapons tests in the atmosphere, in outer space, under water, and underground. A country's position on a treaty can be "Not signed"¹, "Signed"², "Approved"³, or "Withdrawn"⁴.



Data source: United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (2024)

OurWorldInData.org/nuclear-weapons | CC BY

1. Country status "Not signed" on a treaty: This status means that the country has neither signed nor committed to a treaty.
2. Country status "Signed" on a treaty: This status means that the country accepts a treaty without a legal commitment.
3. Country status "Approved" on a treaty: This status means that the country has legally committed to a treaty. This status comprises one of the following actions defined by UNODA: - "Ratification" is an act of formal confirmation, where a country consents to be legally bound to a treaty. - "Accession" means that a country accepts to become a party to a treaty that has been signed by other states, not by the country itself. It has the same legal effect as ratification. - "Succession" means that a newly formed country adopts the treaty obligations of a predecessor state.
4. Country status "Withdrawn" on a treaty: This status means that the country has withdrawn from its legal commitment to a treaty.

Map 3. Herre/Rosado/Roser/Hasell (2024).

In 2017, the CTBTO published an enthusiastic article on the PRC's progress regarding the CTBT, based on a visit by Lassina Zerbo, the Executive Secretary of the CTBTO (2014-2021), to the PRC. The visit aimed to mark the certification of four International Monitoring System (IMS) stations in the PRC that monitor nuclear weapons tests. During this visit, Zerbo met with Wang Yi (王毅), Minister of Foreign Affairs of China from 2013, Lt. General Zhang Yulin (张育林)¹⁰, Vice Director of the Equipment Development Department of the Central Military Commission, and several other high-level PRC officials (UNODA n.d. e).

He stated that the PRC is making steady progress in its domestic preparations for the implementation of the treaty. In addition, the PRC supports the early commencement of negotiations on a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT)

¹⁰ Zhang Yulin is a Deputy Director of the PLA General Armaments Department since 2011.

within the Conference on Disarmament (CD)¹¹ based on a comprehensive and balanced Program of Work and in accordance with the Shannon Report (CD/1299). The PRC also actively participates in the work of the United Nations Group of Governmental Experts on Nuclear Disarmament Verification (Permanent Mission of the PRC to the UN 2022).

The PRC's position during the CTBT negotiations was not without controversy. During the drafting process, the PRC advocated the inclusion of provisions permitting so-called peaceful nuclear explosions. This proposal was ultimately rejected, and the final treaty established a comprehensive ban on all nuclear test explosions, regardless of their stated purpose. The issue could, however, be reconsidered during the treaty's review process after its entry into force.

When discussing the CTBT, Chinese official statements frequently emphasize the country's signature of the treaty while paying considerably less attention to the fact that it has not yet been ratified. This tendency is also visible in the description provided by the State Administration of Science, Technology and Industry for National Defence (SASTIND). In the section entitled “条约签署国” [Treaty Signatories], the PRC is listed among the 182 states that have signed the treaty, with no immediate reference to its outstanding ratification. By contrast, India is highlighted as a state that has not signed the CTBT, while the United States is identified as a country that has signed but failed to ratify it. Both cases are presented as major obstacles to the treaty's entry into force (SASTIND 2016: n.d.). Only later does the text briefly note that the PRC itself has yet to ratify the treaty.

The selective emphasis found in the PRC's official discourse may therefore be interpreted as an attempt to focus attention on the actions of other key states, particularly India and the United States, rather than on the PRC's own pending ratification. Such framing is consistent with broader the PRC's diplomatic narratives that stress the responsibilities of other major powers in advancing arms control and disarmament. At the same time, the PRC's continued non-ratification preserves a degree of strategic flexibility while allowing Beijing to maintain its public support for the objectives of the CTBT.

¹¹ CD stands for the Conference on Disarmament – a multilateral disarmament forum with annual meetings in Geneva, consisted of five NPT nuclear-weapon States and 60 States of crucial military importance. Read more on the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs: <<https://disarmament.unoda.org/conference-on-disarmament>>, Accessed: 2024-05-01.

2.3.4 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW)

《禁止核武器条约》

The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) was opened for signature at the United Nations in New York on September 20, 2017. It is the first legally binding international agreement to comprehensively prohibit nuclear weapons. The TPNW entered into force on January 22, 2021. At the moment, there are 95 signatories and 74 states parties (UNODA n.d. h).

In 2016, the PRC abstained from voting on the UN General Assembly resolution that established the formal mandate for states to commence negotiations on “a legally binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons, leading towards their total elimination” (ICAN: n.d.). Consequently, the PRC did not participate in the negotiation of the Treaty on the TPNW at the United Nations in New York in 2017 and did not vote on its adoption (UN General Assembly 2017). Since 2018, the PRC voted against an annual UN General Assembly resolution that promotes TPNW (ICAN n.d.). In 2023, the PRC contended that “the nuclear disarmament process advocated in this resolution is divorced from the international security reality and runs counter to the principles of maintaining global strategic stability, undiminished security for all, and gradual nuclear disarmament” (UN Web TV 2023).

This behavior reflects the PRC’s cautious approach on nuclear disarmament efforts and probably a preference of maintaining the *status quo*. Though officially the PRC claims to endorse the goals of the nuclear disarmament and the goals of the TPNW.

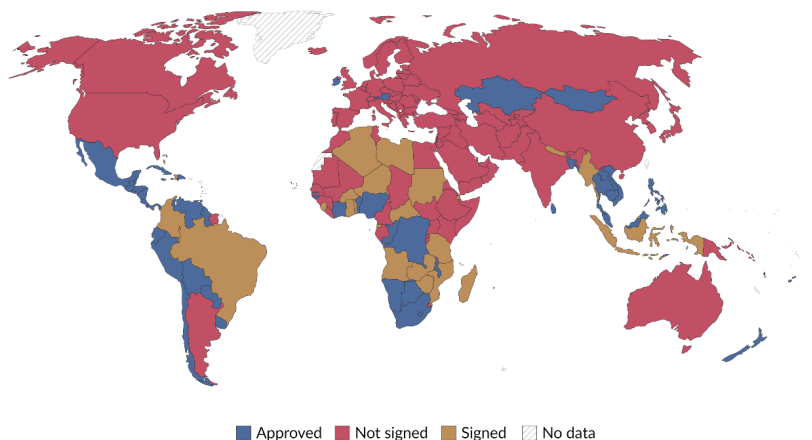
However, the PRC is not isolated with this position. In 2018 joint statement of P5¹² was published with the fifth paragraph listing objections against the TPNW. The argumentation lies that 1) the TPNW cannot be efficient and will not affect the reduction of the nuclear weapons stockpiles, 2) that the TPNW ignores the “security context” and “regional challenges.” In the end the statement calls for joining the NPT (Gov.uk n.d.). As the join statement it showcases the official position of the PRC on the TPNW.

¹² The five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council i.e. France, the People’s Republic of China, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and Russia (formerly the Soviet Union).

Country position on the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, 2023



The treaty's objective is to stop developing, testing, producing, acquiring, possessing, stockpiling, deploying, using, and threatening nuclear weapons, as well as assisting other countries in these actions. A country's position on a treaty can be "Not signed"¹, "Signed"², or "Approved"³.



Data source: United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (2024)

OurWorldInData.org/nuclear-weapons | CC BY

1. Country status "Not signed" on a treaty: This status means that the country has neither signed nor committed to a treaty.

2. Country status "Signed" on a treaty: This status means that the country accepts a treaty without a legal commitment.

3. Country status "Approved" on a treaty: This status means that the country has legally committed to a treaty. This status comprises one of the following actions defined by UNODA: - "Ratification" is an act of formal confirmation, where a country consents to be legally bound to a treaty, - "Accession" means that a country accepts to become a party to a treaty that has been signed by other states, not by the country itself. It has the same legal effect as ratification. - "Succession" means that a newly formed country adopts the treaty obligations of a predecessor state.

Map 4. Herre/Rosado/Roser/Hasell (2024).

2.3.5 UN Security Council Resolution 1540

《联合国安全理事会第1540号决议》

The UN Security Council Resolution 1540 is a critical response to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, influenced with exposure of the Abdul Qadeer Khan (1936-2021) – father of the Pakistan's nuclear bomb – proliferation network. A.Q. Khan illicit actions in over 20 countries increased threat of possession of the WMD by the terrorist groups, non-state proliferators. A.Q. Khan transferred nuclear technologies and uranium enrichment, e.g. to the DPRK. Resolution 1540, adopted on April 28, 2004 is to answer this threat. It imposes obligations on all member states to develop and enforce legal and regulatory measures against the spread of chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons and their means of delivery. Notably, it recognizes non-state proliferation as a threat to peace under Chapter VII of the UN Charter,

necessitating adjustments to states' internal legislation. This resolution marks a departure from previous non-proliferation arrangements – it established universal mandatory obligations. On November 30, 2022, UN Council approved Resolution 2663, which extended the mandate of its subsidiary body, the 1540 Committee, for an additional ten years until November 30, 2032. This decision ensures that the committee will continue its work on non-proliferation efforts related to weapons of mass destruction for the specified period (UNODA 2004).

Resolution 1540 was approved unanimously by the PRC (PRC MOFA 2010b).

The PRC MOFA stated that China attached great importance to Resolution 1540, actively supported and participated in the 1540 Committee's work, and submitted a detailed national report with supplementary explanations. This report outlined the PRC's non-proliferation policy and measures taken by the government to prevent and combat proliferation activities, covering legislation, law enforcement, and international cooperation (PRC MOFA 2011).

The PRC was active in preparing Resolution 1540, organizing events and revising the document. The PRC participated in external activities related to Resolution 1540. Together with the European Union and the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs in July 2006 in Beijing, it co-hosted an Asia-Pacific regional seminar on implementing the resolution. In October 2014, Ambassador Oh Joon, then Chairman of the 1540 Committee and Permanent Representative of South Korea to the UN, led the Committee's first "state visit" to the PRC. In September 2015, the PRC and the 1540 Committee held the "亚太地区防扩散国家联络点培训班" [Asia-Pacific Non-Proliferation National Contact Point Training Course] in Qingdao. In August 2017, the PRC and the 1540 Committee held the „Asia-Pacific Non-Proliferation National Contact Point Training Course" in Xi'an (PRC MOFA 2011).

2.3.6. Seabed Arms Control Treaty

《禁止在海床洋底及其底土安置核武器和其他大规模毁灭性武器条约》

The full name of the Seabed Arms Control Treaty is – *Treaty on the Prohibition of the Emplacement of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction on the Sea-Bed and the Ocean Floor and in the Subsoil Thereof*. The Treaty prohibits weapons of mass destruction to be emplaced on the ocean floor, seabed and "in the subsoil thereof beyond the outer limit of a sea-bed zone" beyond

a 12-mile coastal zone (UNODA n.d. d). The Treaty provides the first laws and regulations in this field.

Seabed Arms Control Treaty is an important step in preventing the seabed militarization and keeping the oceans the peaceful zones. Militarization and the placement of destructive weapons in these areas would pose significant environmental risks to these crucial parts of the Earth's ecosystem.

While the Treaty successfully restricts the emplacement of weapons of mass destruction on the seabed, it does not address conventional military installations. This limitation was viewed by some coastal states, including India, as a significant weakness, as it failed to eliminate the broader strategic and security concerns associated with the military use of continental shelf areas (Jain 1974: 300-313).

The Treaty was signed on February 11, 1971 and entered into force on May 18, 1972. The Republic of China ratified it on February 22, 1972 and then the PRC did on February 28, 1991 (UNODA n.d. d). The PRC announced two reservations on the Sea-Bed Arms Control Treaty. First, confirmed that nothing in the treaty should enable the infringement of sovereignty and other rights over the territorial sea, the contiguous area and the seabed and land beneath them. Second, the PRC declared that any signing or ratification of the treaty by the Taiwanese authorities is illegal and null and void (PRC MOFA n.d.).

Participation in the Seabed Arms Control Treaty is aimed to reduce regional tensions and prevent nuclear arm race in this sensitive area. Therefore, it might be an instrument addressing the PRC and the South China Sea disputes. The PRC's actions cause tensions and disputes in the maritime domain, undermining the UN maritime law. "China argues they have the right to prevent foreign military vessels and aircraft to enter its EEZ (exclusive economic zone); however, this is not what international law dictates" (Marek 2021: n.p.). The PRC's maritime claims are sometimes ambiguous, especially regarding the Spratly Islands and "nine-dashed line" (九段线) on official maps. Such actions can destabilize the region (Fravel 2011: 294-295). Artificial islands are also undermining national security of other South China Sea countries, e.g.

Xi Jinping, claimed its [artificial island] purpose was to benefit all—bolstering navigational safety for commercial shipping, for instance—and that the new islands had no military purpose. The claims are bunkum. The artificial islands host runways for long-distance bombers, reinforced bunkers, missile batteries and military radar. (Economist 2022: n.p.)

2.3.7 The Outer Space Treaty 《外层空间条约》

The Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, including the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies – commonly referred to as the Outer Space Treaty – is a foundational legal framework for international space law. Adopted on January 27, 1967, and entering into force on October 10, 1967, the treaty was initially signed by 62 countries and now has over 118 parties (UNOOSA: n.d.). The treaty mandates that outer space, including the Moon and other celestial bodies, be used exclusively for peaceful purposes, prohibiting the placement of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. It asserts that outer space is not subject to national appropriation and ensures freedom of exploration for all states, that countries are responsible for their national space activities and astronauts and must avoid harmful contamination. The treaty emphasizes the peaceful nature of space exploration and use, and prohibits the militarization of space (UNODA n.d. g).

In 1959, the UN General Assembly with the Resolution 1472 established the UN Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS). The Committee has two subsidiary bodies established in 1961: 1) the Scientific and Technical Subcommittee, and 2) the Legal Subcommittee (UNOOSA n.d. b).

The PRC accessed the Outer Space Treaty in 1983 (US deposit) and 1984 (UK and Russian deposits) (UNODA n.d. g). As a member of COPUOS it participates in the body's activities. The PRC official statements inform that the country played a significant role in establishing the UN-SPIDER (United Nations Platform for Space-based Information for Disaster Management and Emergency Response) office in Beijing – established in accordance with General Assembly Resolution 61/110 from 2006. Two offices in Bonn and Beijing were established to support Vienna headquarters. The Beijing office, supported by the PRC's government, was in 2010 in the final stages of operational readiness (Permanent Mission of the PRC to the UN and Other International Organizations in Vienna 2010).

Some scholars have argued that the Outer Space Treaty requires updating in light of the PRC's rapid economic growth, military modernization, and expanding space capabilities. In this context, Alex B. Englehart contends that the pursuit of offensive space weapons by the United States could undermine strategic stability and negatively affect international relations, particularly in the context of the PRC's growing political, economic, and military influence (Englehart 2008: 134-135).

2.4 Official Discourse and Xi Jinping

Since the early 2000s, non-proliferation has become an integral element of Beijing's bilateral and multilateral diplomatic engagement (Medeiros 2007: 89). While treaties reveal a state's formal legal commitments, official statements offer insight into how governments interpret, justify, and communicate their policies. This section chronologically analyses the People's Republic of China's official discourse on nuclear non-proliferation from 2002-2024 through statements issued by government officials and state institutions. The materials were collected from the official website of the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs

In general, official statements from the PRC assert that its nuclear arsenal is defensive and essential for safeguarding national security (SASTIND 2016). The PRC describes its nuclear development as modest, aimed at protecting sovereignty and promoting global peace and disarmament. Moreover, the PRC statements support international non-proliferation and disarmament, including the prohibition and destruction of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons (JMCNS 2024). It is also highlighted that the PRC, which adheres to a No First Use (NFU) policy, is unique among nuclear-armed states in its commitment and has never used or threatened to use nuclear weapons against other countries (SASTIND 2016).

The NFU policy or principle is one of the key features of the PRC's international security policies. The PRC has maintained a NFU policy since its first nuclear test in 1964, pledging never to use nuclear weapons first or against non-nuclear states and nuclear-weapon-free zones (James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies 2024; SASTIND 2016). On the international arena the PRC is increasingly advocating for the adoption of this principle.

This policy's credibility is supported by the PRC's scholars. Li Bin, a professor at Tsinghua University, supports the PRC's NFU commitment, advocating for a similar US policy. Li argues that the US by rejecting the NFU and by its „sole-purpose” policy undermines nuclear non-proliferation efforts. Prof. Li Bin suggests that confidence-building measures and a formal NFU treaty will enhance global security and reduce nuclear risks. He draws a parallel with the US's historical No First Use policy for chemical weapons, which contributed to comprehensive bans (Li Bin 2024).

2002

In 2002, the PRC introduced the “Regulations on the Supervision and Administration of Nuclear Imports and Exports and International Nuclear Cooperation” to enhance oversight of nuclear materials and technologies. These regulations apply to the import and export of nuclear materials, equipment, reactor non-nuclear materials, and special fissionable materials, including actions involving enriched uranium (浓缩铀). All international nuclear cooperation must be reported to the Commission for Science, Technology and Industry for National Defense (COSTIND, 国防科学技术工业委员会, now: SASTIND)¹³.

Paragraph 5 of the regulations states that “It is prohibited to provide assistance to nuclear facilities of non-nuclear-weapon states that have not accepted the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency,” which includes nuclear exports, personnel exchanges, and technical cooperation. This provision is to ensure that the PRC adheres to IAEA guidelines and accepts its safeguards and inspectors. For the nuclear export – allowed only in peaceful use of nuclear energy – the national and IAEA policies must be obeyed. If the provisions are violated the special penalties are listed (Wu/Zeng 2002).

In 2002, the International Wilton Park Conference, hosted by the British Foreign Office’s arms control NGO, gathered officials from the US State Department, the British Foreign Office, the European Commission, and NGOs like the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The PRC’s Ambassador to the UN, Sha Zukang, represented the PRC.

Sha reiterated the PRC’s commitment to the complete prohibition and destruction of nuclear weapons, stressing that nuclear proliferation contradicts the PRC’s national interests. He argued that the development of the PRC’s nuclear arsenal was a historical security concern that should now be resolved. Sha presented two options for addressing non-nuclear-weapon states’ security concerns: universal nuclear armament (which he deemed too risky and unachievable, 风险太大, 无法实现) or total disarmament, advocating the latter. He emphasized improving international security, ensuring non-proliferation, and achieving global nuclear disarmament.

¹³ In March 2008, the Commission for Science, Technology, and Industry for National Defense (COSTIND) (中华人民共和国国防科学技术工业委员会, 国防科工委) merged into the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) (工业和信息化部) and was renamed the State Administration for Science, Technology and Industry for National Defence (SASTIND) (国家国防科技工业局).

Sha suggested that concerns about nuclear programs should be addressed through dialogue and legal measures, not economic sanctions or military threats. He also highlighted the importance of active participation in disarmament treaties like the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT) (Gu Xinping 2002).

The PRC's engagement in nuclear security became particularly visible after 2002. Since August 2003, Beijing has hosted the Six-Party Talks involving North Korea, South Korea, Japan, Russia, and the United States, while encouraging North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons program (Xia Liping 2008: 1-9, Szoja 2025: 21-37).

2004

In 2004, in Vienna, Zhang Huazhu (张华祝, b. 1945), head of the PRC delegation and Director of the China Atomic Energy Authority (国家原子能机构), affirmed the PRC's support for the IAEA's efforts to prevent nuclear proliferation and promote peaceful nuclear energy use. Addressing post-9/11 nuclear terrorism concerns, Zhang reaffirmed the PRC's stance against all forms of terrorism and noted that the PRC support for the IAEA aids in countering nuclear terrorism. He also announced that on March 28, 2004, the PRC completed the legal procedures for the Additional Protocol to the Safeguards Agreement, which came into force the same day (CAEA 2004: n.p.).

The PRC safeguards agreements are in force from September 16, 1989 and additional protocol (as Voluntary Offer Safeguards Agreement – VOA¹⁴) as stated from March 28, 2002 (IAEA 2024: n.p.).

During the 48th IAEA General Conference Zhang noted the PRC's early ratification of the Additional Protocol to the Safeguards Agreement in 2002, marked the PRC to be the first NWS under the NPT to do so. He emphasized the PRC's active role in modifying the Convention on Physical Protection of Nuclear Materials and its engagement in all relevant treaties and institutions (Gu Xingping 2004).

By 2003, the PRC had trained over 2,000 individuals abroad and hosted more than 1,200 experts through the IAEA programs. Moreover, the PRC announced an initial extra-budgetary contribution of 1 million USD to the IAEA, totaling 13 million USD by year-end. He stressed the PRC's participation in over 200 IAEA meetings and its leadership in nuclear cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region.

¹⁴ VOA – voluntary offer safeguards agreement are concluded between IAEA and NPT nuclear-weapon States only.

Regarding the DPRK, Zhang reiterated the PRC's commitment to a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula and promoting peace through dialogue (Gu Xingping 2004).

In September 2004, Zhang Huazhu addressed the press at the State Council Information Office (国务院新闻办公室). He stated that nuclear non-proliferation serves both international and Chinese interests, reaffirming the PRC's position as the first nuclear-weapon state to ratify the Additional Protocol to the Safeguards Agreement.¹⁵ Zhang also cited the PRC government's White Paper on "China's Non-Proliferation Policy and Measures" (PRC MOFA 2010a) as proof of its commitment to nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. He viewed the PRC's entry into the Nuclear Suppliers Group as a sign of alignment with international non-proliferation efforts. Zhang noted that national regulations are under revision and will be updated soon. Regarding Sino-Iranian cooperation, he clarified that past collaborations (1980s-1990s) were for peaceful uses and were reported to the IAEA, with no further extension planned. He also highlighted ongoing PRC's nuclear cooperation with the USA, Russia, and France (Yan Qiu 2004).

2009

On September 24th, the PRC's President Hu Jintao delivered a speech at the UN Security Council Summit on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament. He reaffirmed the PRC's commitment to a defensive nuclear strategy and the No First Use policy, pledging not to use or threaten nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon states and nuclear-weapon-free zones. President Hu emphasized that the PRC avoids participating in nuclear arms races and maintains its arsenal at a minimum level necessary for national security. He highlighted the PRC's efforts in advancing international nuclear disarmament and supporting the global non-proliferation regime. Hu Jintao called for all NWS to meet their NPT obligations, particularly Article VI, to avoid an arms race and pursue nuclear disarmament. He advocated for the early entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty and stressed the importance of respecting every country's right to peaceful nuclear energy, urging developed nations to assist developing countries. He also emphasized the need for international cooperation to combat nuclear terrorism (Ju Peng 2009).

¹⁵ The other states ratified them in the following dates: France: 30 April 2004; Russia: 16 Oct. 2007; USA: 6 Jan. 2009; and UK: 31 Dec. 2020.

2010

2010 marks an important publication of the PRC addressing the non-proliferation. In 2010, the „China’s Non-Proliferation Policy and Measures” is published 2010, starting with the following statement:

China has always stood for the complete prohibition and thorough destruction of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), including nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, and is firmly against the proliferation of such weapons and their means of delivery. China does not support, encourage or assist any country in developing WMD and their means of delivery. China firmly supports international non-proliferation efforts, and stands for the attainment of the non-proliferation goal through political and diplomatic means. To this end, on the one hand, the international non-proliferation mechanism should be constantly improved and export controls of individual countries further strengthened; on the other hand, proliferation issues should be dealt with through dialogue and international cooperation. (PRC MOFA 2010a)

This comprehensive work reaffirms the PRC's commitment to the global non-proliferation regime, stressing that these norms should be universal and free from double standards. It emphasizes the UN's role and calls for a balance between non-proliferation and international cooperation, particularly in the peaceful use of high technologies and dual-use materials. The PRC advocates for equitable access to scientific advancements for all countries, especially developing ones, while preventing misuse for weapon development. Additionally, the PRC highlights its participation in WMD non-proliferation efforts and the strengthening of export controls, referencing regulations like the “Regulations on Control of Nuclear Export” and the “Regulations on Export Control of Nuclear Dual-Use Items and Related Technologies.”

The White Paper sums up the PRC's activities such as active involvement in non-proliferation efforts at regional and international levels, supporting the UN's role and participating in relevant treaties and organizations. It also lists the international organizations building the nuclear non-proliferation regime, especially these focused on safeguarding and control measure. It joined the IAEA in 1984, placed its civilian nuclear facilities under IAEA safeguards, acceded to the NPT in 1992, and signed the CTBT in 1996. The PRC became a Zangger Committee member in 1997, signed the Additional Protocol with the IAEA in 1998, and was the first NWS to complete the protocol's domestic legal procedures in early 2002. It has been actively involved in the IAEA, the CTBTO, and other international organizations, supporting efforts against nuclear terrorism and amending the Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Materials.

The PRC joined the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) in May 2004 (PRC MOFA 2010b).

The PRC also supports Nuclear Weapons Free Zones (NWFZ), having signed and ratified protocols to the Treaty of Tlatelolco, Treaty of Rarotonga, and Treaty of Pelindaba. It has committed to signing the protocol to the Treaty of Bangkok and supports establishing the Central Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (PRC MOFA 2010b), ratified in 2014.

The statement concludes by expressing the PRC's openness to dialogue, citing ongoing engagement with the EU, the US, and other countries and organizations, including various export control regimes (PRC MOFA 2010b). However, relations with the US on this issue may be contentious.

A second, shorter statement titled "China and Multilateral Export Control Mechanisms" highlights the PRC's responsible approach to export control mechanisms and its memberships in the Zangger Committee and the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). It mentions the PRC's application for membership in the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), though it remains an informal member (PRC MOFA 2010b). Historically, the PRC opposed the MTCR as discriminatory (Huang 2012: 6-7).

The PRC, once a major missile proliferator in the 1980s, adjusted its stance in the 1990s due to global concerns and sanctions. In 2000, the PRC committed to MTCR guidelines and has strengthened its export controls, though it remains outside the regime due to skepticism from some members, especially the US. Despite these challenges, the PRC continues to modernize its missile technology and export controls, though concerns about enforcement and proliferation activities of defense companies persist (Huang 2012: 15). The statement concludes with the PRC's readiness to continue improving export control mechanisms, presenting the PRC's rule taker position.

In 2011, the PRC MOFA released a statement on the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), proposed by US President Bush in 2003. The PRC supports PSI's goal of preventing the spread of WMD. However, the statement underscores that PSI actions must not contravene international laws or the UN Charter, what could jeopardize regional peace and security. The PRC expressed concerns that PSI might exceed these legal boundaries (PRC MOFA 2011).

2021

On October 10, 2021, the PRC released a written statement at the First Committee of the 76th Session of the UN General Assembly declaring the PRC was committed to peaceful development and a nuclear strategy of self-defense (James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies 2024). While this formulation aligns with long-standing PRC declaratory policy, it also reflects a continued emphasis on legitimacy-building within the multilateral non-proliferation framework. In particular, the reference to “self-defense” reinforces the PRC’s narrative of a restrained deterrent posture, even as external assessments increasingly highlight ongoing nuclear modernization.

2022

In January 2022, the Director-General of the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ Arms Control Department stated that the PRC was not expanding its nuclear arsenal, but instead undertaking modernization measures (James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies 2024). This distinction between “expansion” and “modernization” reflects a recurring feature of PRC nuclear discourse, in which qualitative improvements are presented as compatible with quantitative stability. However, this framing remains a point of divergence between official PRC statements and several external assessments of its nuclear trajectory.

In April 2022, Chinese President Xi Jinping introduced the Global Security Initiative (GSI) (Permanent Mission of the PRC to the UN 2022). In 2025 White Paper on the Arms Control in New Era, nuclear non-proliferation, disarmament and arms control were embedded in this broader framework. It can be understood as a broader strategy of including existing norms into the PRC’s proposals. This may also serve as the PRC’s attempt to position itself as a norm-shaping actor in global security architecture. In this sense, the GSI can be interpreted not only as a policy statement, but also as part of a wider effort to articulate alternative security narratives in global affairs.

In August 2022, the PRC’s ambassador Li Song said:

China’s nuclear weapons are never intended to dominate the world or bully other countries. The only purpose for China to develop nuclear weapons is to deter the use of nuclear weapons of enemies against China and conduct a resolute counterattack after when it is under a nuclear attack. From the very first day of possessing nuclear weapons, China has proactively advocated the complete prohibition and thorough destruction of nuclear weapons. (Permanent Mission of the PRC to the UN 2022: n.p.)

This statement reiterates core elements of the PRC's declared nuclear doctrine, particularly minimum deterrence and No First Use logic. At the same time, the emphasis on retaliation under conditions of nuclear attack underscores the continued centrality of assured second-strike capability. The simultaneous advocacy of nuclear abolition and maintenance of a credible deterrent reflects the broader tension between long-term normative objectives and immediate strategic requirements in PRC nuclear policy.

2024

In 2024 China Atomic Energy Authority (CAEA) also published several statements on nuclear non-proliferation.

In January, Zhang Kejian (张克俭 b. 1961), met with Al-Mudhi, Vice Chairman of the Saudi Nuclear and Radiological Regulatory Commission (NRRC). The event, attended by representatives from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Commerce, CAEA, National Nuclear Security Technology Center, China National Nuclear Corporation, and Saudi institutions, involved discussions on the international nuclear non-proliferation regime, nuclear technology laws, import/export management, and nuclear security (CAEA 2024a: n.p.).

In April, the CAEA published a statement on the IAEA Conference on Nuclear Power Plant Operation Safety, held in Beijing in April 2022. Liu Jing (刘敬), then Deputy Director of CAEA, highlighted the peaceful use of nuclear energy and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). He noted the PRC's contributions, such as building six nuclear power units in Pakistan, collaborating with Kazakhstan, and investing in uranium mines in Namibia, which support both the PRC's and international benefits.

Academically, Atomic Energy Scholarship (AES) of China (中国政府原子能奖学金¹⁶) initiated by the CAEA and Ministry of Education of PR trained nearly 200 nuclear-related master's and doctoral students from 26 Belt and Road countries. Liu Jing pointed out the importance of global nuclear non-proliferation and put his point in the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Goals framework (CAEA 2022: n.p.). This statement and scholarship strengthen the PRC image as the supporter and initiative-maker for the developing countries.

¹⁶ More on the scholarship, see the website: <<https://iczu.zju.edu.cn/admissions/2024/0223/c68877a2879427/page.htm>>. Accessed: 2024-07-01.

In May 2024, the CAEA published the interview with Liu Jing. The nuclear energy policy¹⁷ was mentioned – adhered to Xi Jinping’s concept of “rational, coordinated and progressive” (理性、协调、并进). By the end of 2023, the PRC had 55 operational nuclear power units, with safety performance ranking among the world’s top, as noted by the World Association of Nuclear Operators (WANO). In 2022 and 2023, 37 and 33 units respectively achieved full marks on the WANO index. Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (2012), the PRC has focused on safe and innovative nuclear development. President Xi Jinping has advocated for nuclear safety at two global summits. Achievements include collaborating with the US to establish the Asia-Pacific’s largest nuclear security demonstration center and converting reactors in Ghana and Nigeria to reduce proliferation risks. The PRC also underwent international peer reviews to enhance its nuclear security and support global nuclear safety (CAEA 2024b: n.p.).

The PRC is the third-largest nuclear power generator, behind France and the US. According to the IAEA, the PRC could become a global leader in nuclear power by the decade’s end, aligning with President Xi Jinping’s plan to achieve carbon neutrality by 2060 (Zhang 2022, Liou/Harvey 2023: n.p.).

2.5 PRC as a New “Rule Maker”

As shown in the previous section, the PRC consistently emphasizes its peaceful intentions, its commitment to supporting developing countries, and its role as a reliable international partner. This aligns with its broader efforts to position itself as a potential global leader, particularly through criticism of US policies and calls for adherence to international norms and proper conduct. In earlier analyses, the PRC was often viewed as not yet ready to assume a leadership role in the nuclear non-proliferation regime, in contrast to the United States (Paul 2002: 26). More recently, however, the PRC has increasingly signaled ambitions to become a key rule-shaper in global nuclear governance. This trend was already noted by American scholars, who in 2000 advised US policymakers to allow the PRC to “play a shaping role in international regimes,” recognizing its growing interest in actively influencing global institutions (Carter/Perry 2000: 121). These developments are examined in the present section of this book.

¹⁷ More on PRC nuclear energy, see: IAEA “IAEA. Power Reactor Information System,” Available HTTP: <<https://pris.iaea.org/PRIS/CountryStatistics/CountryDetails.aspx?current=CN>>, Accessed: 2024-07-06.

The PRC's critical stance toward the United States can be understood in the context of broader strategic rivalry between the two powers. Chinese official rhetoric frequently portrays the US nuclear policy and wider security behavior as destabilizing, particularly in relation to the nuclear non-proliferation regime. This framing can be interpreted as a political narrative that highlights external threats while justifying a stronger Chinese role in shaping international security norms (Service 2010). Through such discourse, the PRC simultaneously critiques existing the US-led structures while advancing its own vision of global governance and reinforcing its position as a potential rule-shaper within the international system.

More broadly, some analysts interpret the PRC's growing influence within the context of increasing alignment among authoritarian-leaning states. Andrew A. Michta, director of the Scowcroft Strategy Initiative at the Atlantic Council, describes the PRC as part of an emerging "axis of dictatorships" alongside Russia, Iran, and North Korea. He argues that these states are strengthening political and military cooperation, as illustrated by the PRC's diplomatic and political support for Russia following the invasion of Ukraine, and suggests that this alignment may contribute to a longer-term restructuring of the international system. In parallel, the rapid modernization of the People's Liberation Army, including the expansion of the PLA Navy, is often cited as evidence of the PRC's growing capacity to project power globally. From this perspective, the PRC and other major revisionist actors are increasingly positioned not only as participants in the international order, but also as actors seeking to reshape aspects of it, including the global security and nuclear governance architecture (Michta 2024).

In official PRC statements, criticism of the United States remains a recurring theme. Most recently, following remarks by Pranay Vaddi¹⁸ – former Senior Director for Arms Control, Disarmament and Non-Proliferation at the United States National Security Council (NSC) – on the potential need to expand the US nuclear arsenal, the PRC issued a strong response. Vaddi characterized potential US nuclear expansion as a reaction to the growing arsenals of Russia, the PRC, and North Korea, which he described as rapidly developing and resistant to arms control (Sim 2024). He further argued that the United States should adopt a "more competitive approach," given that these states "reject U.S. calls for arsenal limitation talks" (Landay 2024).

¹⁸ Pranay Vaddi was previously a fellow in the Nuclear Policy Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace as published on the official website: *Carnegie China*. <<https://carnegieendowment.org/people/pranay-vaddi?lang=en¢er=china>>. Accessed: 2024-06-11.

2.6 Xi Jinping's Perspective on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Proliferation

Xi Jinping's views on nuclear non-proliferation and proliferation reflect a continuity with his predecessors' policies, emphasizing the defensive nature of the PRC's nuclear arsenal and the importance of maintaining a credible deterrent. Xi Jinping's approach to nuclear weapons has significant implications for global, and particularly the US-PRC relations. Xi's emphasis on maintaining a credible deterrent and strengthening strategic readiness underscores the importance of sustained and careful diplomatic engagement between the two powers (Kulacki 2024).

Based on a Xi's speech to the Second Artillery in 2012, several key points emerge. Xi's speech underscores the traditional Chinese stance that nuclear weapons serve as a deterrent rather than an offensive tool. Contrary to some external speculations, he did not suggest a shift towards using nuclear weapons to intimidate or subjugate adversaries. Instead, he emphasized the need for better preparation and readiness of the missile forces to respond effectively to potential military interventions by strong adversaries. This involves improving strategic planning, adapting to new weaponry, and ensuring high alert levels during both peacetime and wartime (Kulacki 2024).

A significant portion of Xi's speech focused on reinforcing the Chinese Communist Party's control over the military and addressing corruption within the ranks. These measures are seen as crucial for maintaining the integrity and efficiency of the armed forces. Xi's remarks align with long-standing Chinese policies on nuclear weapons, which prioritize a No First Use policy and the storage of warheads separately from delivery systems to prevent accidental or unauthorized launches (Kulacki 2024: n.p.).

Since 2014-2024, Xi Jinping has attended two global nuclear security summits to promote nuclear safety. The accomplishments include working with the United States to create the largest nuclear security demonstration center in the Asia-Pacific region, enhancing global nuclear security capabilities (CAEA 2024c). During the Nuclear Security Summit in Hague, Netherlands on 24 March 2024 Xi gave a speech entitled "Follow a Sensible, Coordinated and Balances Approach to Nuclear Security." The speech stands that "enhancing nuclear security is a never-ending process" (Xi 2014: 278). Xi mentioned all the characteristics of Chinese nuclear policy like peaceful goals, international cooperation, enhancing international security, Chinese devotion to help

developing countries. Xi highlighted importance of peaceful usage of energy and following the guidance of the IAEA. Center of Excellence on Nuclear Security was an example of Sino-American joint projects mentioned by Xi Jinping. In the end Xi highlighted four key points 1) Chinese commitment to strengthen “its own nuclear security capacity – making a clear signal that the PRC will develop its own nuclear arsenal”; 2) commitment to “build international nuclear security system,” 3) “supporting international cooperation on nuclear security,” and 4) commitment for “upholding regional and global peace and stability, also in regards of nuclear terrorism and nuclear proliferation” (Xi 2014: 275-283).

Xi’s reference to a “new situation” is often interpreted as reflecting perceived changes in the US strategic behavior toward the PRC, which has in turn shaped the PRC’s assessments of military preparedness and external threat perceptions (Kulacki 2024).

While Xi Jinping has not articulated aggressive nuclear ambitions, subsequent developments, including the construction of new missile silo fields, have led some analysts to suggest a possible shift in the PRC’s nuclear posture – highlighting a movement towards a “launch-on-warning” posture. Such a posture would be intended to strengthen the PRC’s retaliatory capabilities and ensure credible deterrence under conditions of potential first-strike vulnerability.

“Non-Proliferation: Awareness, Knowledge, Influence” – Author’s Research

As part of this research, I conducted an online survey to examine the implications of nuclear weapons and nuclear non-proliferation at the individual and national identity levels. The study adopted a micro-level perspective, focusing primarily on students. The goal was to explore personal attitudes towards nuclear arsenals and their perceived influence. Although these views cannot be entirely separated from the broader international and political context, the survey sought to capture individual perceptions and experiences that are often overlooked in macro-level analyses.

The survey included 33 respondents. While the sample size is relatively small and does not permit broad generalizations, the findings provide valuable insights and may serve as a basis for further research. It should also be noted that a number of Chinese respondents had lived or studied abroad, a factor that may have influenced their perspectives and differentiated them from the wider population.

Given the sensitivity and complexity of issues related to nuclear weapons and non-proliferation, the results should be interpreted with caution. Responses may have been affected by social desirability bias, whereby participants provide answers that they perceive as socially acceptable or desirable rather than fully reflecting their actual knowledge, priorities, or concerns.

3.1 Survey Methodology and Objectives

The primary objective of this research is to assess the importance and influence of nuclear weapons among respondents from both Chinese and different cultural and national backgrounds. This study aims to gauge the awareness, knowledge,

and attitudes towards nuclear non-proliferation and the impact of nuclear weapons on national identity and international relations, with a distinction between Chinese – understood as the persons identifying themselves with the PRC – and non-Chinese respondents.

To achieve this objective, I conducted three surveys in different languages (Chinese and English) and formats to reach a diverse audience and circumvent potential censorship issues. The first survey entitled "Non-Proliferation: awareness, knowledge, influence" was published in English and was accessible to a global audience, not limited to Chinese participants, with 33 participants responding.

The second survey was translated into Chinese and distributed through the online survey platform Wenjuanxing (问卷星) <www.wjx.cn>. However, the survey was blocked shortly after publication, resulting in no responses being collected. According to the platform's moderation system, the topic was classified as sensitive and unsuitable for publication. In an effort to overcome these restrictions, a third, shortened version containing only the most essential questions was prepared. This version was likewise blocked before data collection could take place.

These difficulties highlight the methodological challenges of conducting research on nuclear issues within the PRC's online environment. The inability to distribute the Chinese-language surveys limited direct access to respondents located within the PRC and consequently affected the scope and representativeness of the study.

The last survey contained those questions:

1. 您如何理解核裁军? / How do you understand nuclear disarmament?
2. 您认为中国在国际舞台上的形象如何? / How is China's image in the international arena?
 - a. 强大的核武国家 / A strong country with nuclear weapons
 - b. 爱好和平、推动核裁军的国家 / A peace-loving country promoting nuclear disarmament
 - c. 不知道 / I don't know
3. 核裁军如何影响您的国家认同? / How does nuclear disarmament influence your national identity?
4. 您是否经常听到与核武相关的新闻和信息? / How often do you hear about nukes in the media? (0-从未听到/10-经常听到) / (0-Never hear about it / 10-Hear about it frequently)

5. 您认为核裁军是否有效? / How effective is nuclear disarmament? / (0-没有用/10-十分有效) / (0-Not effective at all / 10-Very effective)
6. 您认为无核武世界是否会实现? / Do you think a world without nuclear weapons will be achieved? (0-不会实现/10-肯定会实现) / (0-Will not be achieved / 10-Will definitely be achieved)
7. 您是否同意“联合国应该推动无核武世界”这一说法? / How much do you agree with the statement: The UN should promote a world without nuclear weapons?
8. 您是否同意我们应该追求“无核世界”? / Do you agree we should pursue a world without nuclear weapons?
9. 您认为实现无核武器世界有哪些障碍? / What obstacles do you see in achieving a world without nuclear weapons?
10. 您能说出哪些拥有核武器的国家? / Can you name countries with nuclear weapons?
11. 为什么各国都想拥有核武器? / Why do countries want to have nuclear weapons?

3.2 Survey Outcomes and Analyses

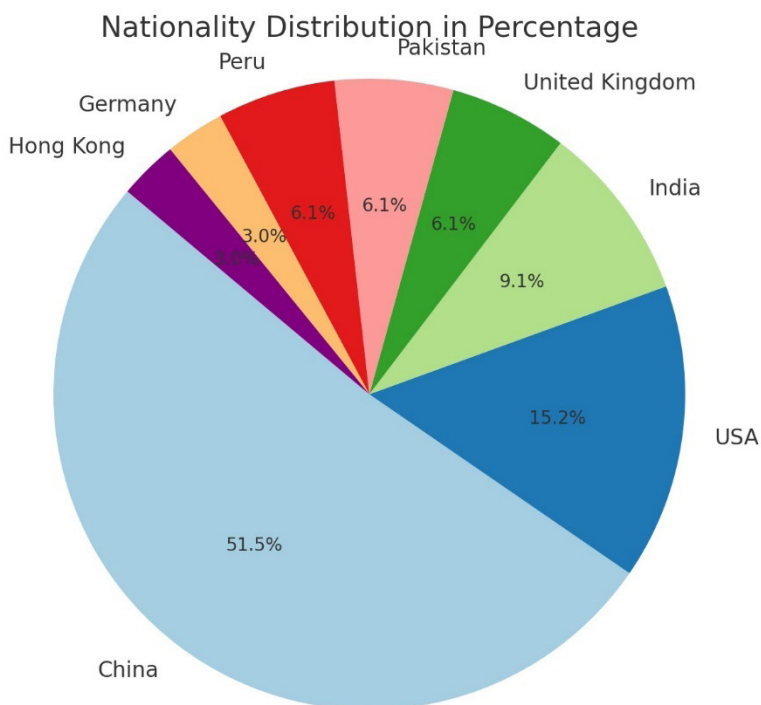
As the English-language survey was the only version successfully distributed and completed, this chapter focuses on its findings. The survey consisted of 39 questions divided into six sections: Demographics, Nuclear Weapons Knowledge, Chinese Nuclear Weapons, Personal Attitudes towards Nuclear Weapons, Nuclear Non-Proliferation, and an optional Feedback section. The questionnaire was designed to allow respondents to skip questions or sections for which they lacked sufficient knowledge or that were not applicable to their national context. For example, respondents from non-nuclear-weapon states could avoid questions concerning national nuclear capabilities and attitudes towards their country's possession of nuclear weapons.

The charts presented in this chapter were generated either by Google Forms or created by the author using Python.

Demographics

The survey sample consisted of 33 respondents, of whom 54.5% identified as female and 45.5% as male. Most participants (60.6%) were between 18 and 25 years old, followed by 33.3% aged 26-35, with the remainder aged 36-45.

Chinese nationals constituted the largest group (51.5%), followed by respondents from the United States (15.0%). Additional participants originated from the United Kingdom, Germany, Hong Kong, India, Pakistan, and Peru. In terms of educational attainment, 45.4% were enrolled in graduate-level studies, 33.3% in postgraduate programs, 18.2% in undergraduate studies, and the remainder had a high school education. Students represented approximately half of the sample, while 90.9% of respondents came from states possessing nuclear weapons.



Total number of participants: 33

Pie chart 1. Made by Author in Python (2024).

Nuclear Weapons Knowledge

Overall, respondents demonstrated a relatively high level of awareness of nuclear weapons and their global distribution. All participants were able to identify at least some nuclear-armed states, while 36.4% reported having formally studied the subject. Among Chinese respondents, the PRC, Russia, and the United States were the countries most frequently identified as possessing nuclear weapons. Interestingly, one Chinese respondent classified Japan, Israel, and Iran as “uncertain” nuclear powers, which may reflect ambiguity surrounding the nuclear status of some states or perceptions of latent nuclear capabilities. When Israel and Iran are rather publicly connected to nuclear weapons, listing Japan by the Chinese respondent may reflect the deeper mistrust towards this country, characteristic to the PRC.

Among Chinese respondents, 11 out of 17 expressed concern about nuclear proliferation. Although the sample size is too limited to support broad conclusions, this finding suggests that nuclear issues are salient among many Chinese participants. It may also indicate the visibility of nuclear security and non-proliferation topics within the PRC’s media and public discourse.

Impact on National Identity

Participants generally viewed nuclear weapons as important to both personal and national identity. Around 75% of Chinese respondents answered nuclear weapons were important for their Chinese national identity, when for the rest of respondents it was around 40%. Comments reflected the belief that nuclear weapons are crucial for national security and international standing, with one respondent stating, “Without nuclear weapons, we wouldn’t have our current position.”

Survey included a series of questions to express agreement on the Likert scale on the aspects of safety, pride, approach to nuclear weapons. Chinese respondents mostly (53%) felt safer because of the nuclear arsenal. At the same time, 30% of being neutral suggests uncertainty or ambivalence about the safety benefits of nuclear weapons but also probably lack of opinion and reflection on this matter. For the rest of respondents 38,5% rated it neutrally with 30,8% respondents supported this statement. Moreover, Chinese responses show a pride associated with their country’s nuclear arsenal (8 positive answers), with a tendency towards the middle of the Likert scale (6 opinions). The American responses, although

limited, indicate less pride in their nuclear arsenal, with responses clustering around the lower end of the scale (2 times 1 and 2 times 3).

Overall, approximately half of the international respondents supported their country's possession of nuclear weapons. Among Chinese respondents, attitudes were mixed: nine expressed support for the PRC maintaining a nuclear arsenal, four were neutral, and four opposed such possession. Although the sample size is limited, these results suggest a slight tendency towards support within the Chinese subgroup. For many respondents, nuclear weapons appeared to be associated with broader considerations of national security, strategic deterrence, and international status.

Chinese Nuclear Weapons

Awareness of the PRC's nuclear arsenal was very high among respondents, with 97% indicating that they were aware of its existence. Furthermore, 78.7% reported encountering news or information about Chinese nuclear weapons. Among Chinese participants, only two respondents indicated that they had not previously heard about the issue, suggesting a high degree of public awareness within this sample. As one respondent noted, "It's common sense to Chinese people."

An Indian participant similarly highlighted the regional significance of the issue: "As we are constantly in a war-like situation sharing borders with China, we hear about the nuclear arsenals of China on a regular basis in the news."

Respondents generally viewed the PRC's nuclear arsenal as important. While 43.3% considered it very important, 33.3% adopted a neutral position, and only one respondent expressed a clearly negative view. These findings suggest that the PRC's nuclear capabilities are widely regarded as a significant aspect of international security, although perceptions vary regarding their desirability and broader implications.

The qualitative comments provided by respondents reveal a range of perspectives on the role and significance of the PRC's nuclear arsenal. The selected responses below are reproduced in their original wording and spelling.

- *As a resource-rich country, China should have the ability to protect itself when other big countries have nuclear weapons;*
- *We have to protect our country and people; bc usa has unclear weapon too and 10 times more , China are forced to have this weapon, as China was aggressed by some western country, so need protect themselves;*

- *It could be helpful for the government to maintain its international influence, but it could also make the possible conflicts more severe;*
- *Both Russia and North Korean have nuclear weapons, and they are neighbors of China;*
- *For China have nuclear weapon can make us right now position, if without it we won't have any chance to get unification and independence.*

All respondents were asked about the perceived impact of nuclear weapons on the PRC's national identity. Most participants believed that nuclear weapons play an important role in how the PRC is perceived, both domestically and internationally. Among Chinese respondents, the ratings were: 13 out of 17 rated as important or very important with 4 neutral statements, highlighting the significant role of nuclear weapons in national identity. Chinese respondents in general expressed it was better for the PRC to possess nuclear weapons (11 out of 17).

Nine respondents provided assessments of the PRC's nuclear non-proliferation efforts. Five respondents (55.6%) expressed a neutral opinion, three evaluated these efforts positively or very positively, and one respondent expressed a very negative view. Given the limited number of responses, these findings should be interpreted with caution.

Personal Attitude towards Nuclear Weapons and Non-Proliferation

Participants' attitudes toward nuclear weapons varied: 42.4% were neutral, 33.3% negative, and 12.5% very negative. Among Chinese respondents, most were neutral (10), with 3 negative and 2 positive. While many supported nuclear disarmament goals (13 out of 17 Chinese respondents), only a few believed global disarmament is achievable (36.4%), with most expressing doubt. Moreover, for majority of Chinese (11 out of 17) it is better for the PRC to possess the nuclear arsenal with 5 neutral voices and one negative. Some Chinese respondents (5 opinions) saw the role of the USA as a major obstacle to disarmament.

Small group (8 respondents including 3 Chinese) shared their view on the PRC's non-proliferation actions. All Chinese respondents were neutral in their views on the PRC's non-proliferation actions, indicating a lack of strong opinions or a balanced view on the subject, when in international group answers varied with person from Hong Kong rating is maximally negative.

Feedback and Consent

1. Of course, I hope there are no weapons of mass destruction in the world and that there is global peace. However, being backward means being vulnerable to attacks. The invasions China suffered in the past were extremely painful. Given that China's adversaries already possess nuclear weapons, I support my country in having sufficient weapons to defend itself against aggression.

2. 像核武这类大规模杀伤性武器，它的价值已经远超他作为武器所具有的价值，拥有它比使用它能带来更大的利益，在现今的国际形势下，无核化不仅难以进行，甚至未来会有大量的国家尝试非法拥核，核武对国家的意义，就像是火器对一个瘦弱的人的意义，火器的出现使得战斗不再以个体力量来评估强弱，它给予了一个体弱者和体强者一个平等的机会，弱者反抗强者的机会，而核武器对于国家也是如此，拥核小国也可以对大国产生足够的战略威慑，这是现今世界权利平衡的重要因素，也是一个国家是否有话语权的重要因素，但同样核武本身的存在就是反人类的，这是人类彼此斗争中开启的潘多拉魔盒，但也成功的将热战为主的战争形式，通过互相威慑转移到了冷战的层面，某种程度上来说比起直接，血腥而又残忍的彼此屠杀的战争形式，核武促进了战争形式的改变也可看作是一种社会的进步。我不支持完全无核，那会使绝大多数国家回到二战的时候，太多的冲突将会以战争的形式爆发，毕竟常规武器不足以使人类感受到灭亡的恐惧，不会有足够的威慑，无核化带来的更大可能是社会退步以及国际格局的改变，现有的权利平衡被打破，在建立新的平衡之前又会有多少血雨腥风？但我觉得限核化可以促进世界和平，当国家彼此忌惮直接的武力冲突后，和平手段解决才会进入视野。

[Author's translation: Weapons of mass destruction like nuclear weapons have a value that far exceeds their value as mere weapons. Possessing them brings greater benefits than using them. Given the current international situation, denuclearization is not only difficult to achieve, but in the future, many countries may even attempt to acquire nuclear weapons illegally. The significance of nuclear weapons to a country is similar to the significance of firearms to a physically weak person. The advent of firearms made combat no longer judged by individual strength, giving weak individuals an equal chance to resist stronger ones. Nuclear weapons offer the same opportunity to countries; even small nuclear-armed nations can pose a significant strategic deterrent to larger countries. This is an important factor in the current global balance of power and a key element in a country's influence on the international stage. However, the existence of nuclear weapons is inherently anti-humanitarian. They are a Pandora's box opened in human conflicts, but they have successfully shifted the nature of war from direct, hot wars

to a state of mutual deterrence and cold war. In a certain sense, compared to the direct, bloody, and brutal form of mutual slaughter, the change in the form of war brought about by nuclear weapons can be seen as a form of social progress. I do not support complete denuclearization, as it would bring most countries back to the state they were in during World War II, with many conflicts likely to erupt into wars. Conventional weapons are not enough to make humanity fear extinction and thus do not provide sufficient deterrence. Denuclearization is more likely to lead to social regression and changes in the international landscape, breaking the current balance of power. How much turmoil will there be before a new balance is established? However, I believe that limiting nuclear weapons can promote world peace. When countries fear direct military conflict, peaceful means of resolution will become more prominent.]

3. Advocate for disarming nuclear weapons for all nations. If any nation possesses, I hope my country does as well.

3.3 Conclusion

This research provides insights into the significance of nuclear weapons from a global perspective, highlighting differences in opinions and attitudes across cultures. The respondents' answers and concerns might reflect the current geopolitical environment, including ongoing disputes and the strategic landscape in East Asia. Respondents had their opinions and thoughts on the topic of nuclear weapons and disarmament, including the PRC case.

Nuclear weapons were seen as vital to national identity, particularly by Chinese respondents, who associated them with national security and global standing. Most respondents recognized the significance of the PRC's nuclear arsenal. While there was general acknowledgment of its importance, neutral sentiments were also present. Chinese respondents had a strong knowledge on American possession of nuclear weapons visible in naming the countries and pointing the US as the obstacle for nuclear disarmament and the global proliferator in the past. They showed themselves as worried with the nuclear proliferation and their concerns reflect the current geopolitical environment, including ongoing disputes and the strategic landscape in East Asia, especially accruing to Japan and North Korea. The PRC's strategic rivalry with the US and its efforts to assert its influence regionally and globally likely play a role in shaping public opinion.

Historical context also appeared in the answers. The PRC's historical experiences, such as conflicts with Western powers and regional tensions (e.g. with India and the presence of nuclear-armed neighbors like the USSR/ Russia and North Korea), could contribute to a sense of vulnerability and the

perceived need for a nuclear capability but most importantly the need of stability and safety expressed in the open answers. Attitudes towards non-proliferation and nuclear weapons varied, with a mix of neutrality, negativity, and some support for nuclear weapons. Many supported nuclear disarmament goals but doubted their feasibility. Chinese respondents were mostly neutral about their country's non-proliferation efforts.

Concerns over the PRC's Nuclear Non-Proliferation Practices

According to some scholars, the PRC sees the nuclear non-proliferation as a way to gain and confirm its position of the global power in the international forums. Its renewed international status is to be one of the objectives for the 21st century (Paul 2003: 23).

However, critics argue that despite its declaratory commitment to principles of sovereign equality and the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, there is limited evidence that the PRC consistently seeks to reform global hierarchies beyond its immediate strategic environment. Chan notes that the PRC often “makes more noises than takes concrete actions to right the inequality that exists in the world” (Chan 1999: 78, in Paul 2003: 23).

In line with this critique, some scholars argue that the PRC applies non-proliferation norms selectively when it aligns with its broader strategic and economic interests. In particular, nuclear and missile cooperation with partner states has been interpreted as serving both geopolitical objectives and the development of domestic nuclear and defense industries, including in regions where the PRC seeks to expand its influence through strategic partnerships.

This chapter examines international concerns regarding the PRC's role in nuclear non-proliferation within the broader framework of global order theory. It aims to provide an objective overview of criticisms and challenges associated with the PRC's nuclear policies and practices, contrasting them with the positions presented in official Chinese statements. Key issues include nuclear doctrine, limited transparency, corruption, dual-use technologies, the expansion of nuclear capabilities, and the PRC's relationships with states frequently associated with proliferation concerns, namely North Korea, Pakistan, and Iran. From the perspective of global order theory, actions perceived as undermining

the non-proliferation regime may contribute to the PRC being viewed as a rule-shaper or even a rule-challenger, in contrast to the image projected in its official discourse.

Several scholars argue that the PRC views aspects of the existing global order and non-proliferation regime as inadequate or insufficiently representative of contemporary international realities (Clegg 2011: 447). Although the PRC actively participates in international institutions and non-proliferation mechanisms, some analysts contend that it has shown limited willingness to engage in nuclear arms reduction initiatives (Clegg 2011: 455). Similarly, the US Department of Defense has argued that Chinese foreign policy seeks to reshape elements of the international order in ways that better reflect the PRC's national interests (Office of the Secretary of Defense 2020: v).

Official PRC statements on nuclear non-proliferation consistently emphasize support for international peace, stability, and multilateral cooperation. Nevertheless, observers have raised concerns regarding the implementation of these principles in practice, particularly in relation to export controls and compliance with international non-proliferation norms (Huang 2012: 2). Critics also point to the PRC's limited nuclear transparency, its continued non-ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), and its opposition to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) as evidence of a gap between rhetorical support for disarmament and concrete policy commitments (Clegg 2011: 455).

Questions have also been raised regarding the PRC's position on a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT). According to a 2023 fact sheet published by the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, uncertainty remains concerning the status of the PRC's fissile material production. Although many observers believe such production ceased in the late twentieth century, recent developments have renewed debate on the issue. The same source notes that negotiations on an FMCT within the Conference on Disarmament have been blocked for many years, with Pakistan frequently cited as the principal opponent. Some analysts further argue that Pakistan's position has benefited from the PRC's diplomatic support, thereby contributing indirectly to the continued deadlock in FMCT negotiations (Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation 2023: n.p.).

4.1 Doctrine and Transparency

The first uncertainty is the reservation towards the PRC nuclear doctrine peaceful nuclear intentions. As it is not officially declared by the PRC representatives, the accurate scale of country's arsenal leads to various speculations. When the PRC emphasize its consistent and stable nuclear policy, experts inform that both the PRC military capabilities and strategy are transforming. This trend is also visible in *The Science of Military Strategy* editions (Cordesman/Kendall/Colley 2022: 6). Alarming is also lack of transparency on the PRC plutonium production.

Section 2.2 examined the PRC's official statements and nuclear doctrine, including the 2013 edition of *The Science of Military Strategy* (SMS). According to the SMS, the PRC's nuclear counterattack strategy focuses on striking targets that an adversary "most fears being hit," whether military facilities or urban centers. This approach has generated ethical and strategic debate, particularly regarding the potential targeting of civilian populations. Some analysts, including Kulacki, argue that such formulations may imply a preference for targeting urban areas because of their greater deterrent value (Kulacki 2015: n.p.).

Questions have also been raised regarding the actual size and intended role of the PRC's nuclear arsenal. Some experts suggest that the PRC's stockpile may be larger than estimates derived from publicly available sources. Others argue that the PRC may be developing capabilities intended not only for strategic deterrence but also for use in regional conflict scenarios. Cordesman, Kendall, and Colley contend that the continued expansion and modernization of the PRC's nuclear forces may reflect broader ambitions associated with its emergence as a major global power with changed intentions (Cordesman/Kendall/Colley 2024: 6-36).

From the perspective of the United States, the PRC's military doctrine is characterized by the concept of „active defense.“ At the same time, the US assessments highlight the PRC's objective of building a „world-class“ military by 2049, potentially comparable to or surpassing that of the United States (Office of the Secretary of Defense 2020: vi). Some analysts argue that, if the PRC were to achieve a position of strategic parity based on mutual assured destruction, it could increasingly rely on military and nuclear capabilities to support its foreign policy objectives (Kobayashi 2023).

Questions have also been raised regarding the credibility and scope of the PRC's No First Use policy. Some reports suggest that the PRC's officials have privately indicated that the use of nuclear weapons could be considered in

response to certain large-scale conventional attacks. Similar concerns appeared in the US Department of Defense's 2023 assessment, which noted the possibility that the PRC may consider nuclear retaliation under circumstances beyond a nuclear strike (US Department of Defense 2023: 105; in Kristensen/Korda/Johns/Knight 2024: 57).

The debate became particularly visible in 2005, when Major General Zhu Chenghu (朱成虎, b. 1952) of the National Defense University stated that the PRC "was prepared to initiate non-conventional warfare over Taiwan" and suggested that government should exclude the US from the NFU policy (Watts 2005) and use nuclear weapons in regard of Taiwan (Kahn 2005: n.p.). The PRC's authorities have repeatedly maintained that the PRC's NFU policy remains unchanged (Reuters 2024: n.p.), and a number of Chinese scholars, including Pan Zhenqiang, Yao Yunzhu, and Sun Xiangli, have defended the credibility of this commitment.

Pan Zhenqiang argues that the PRC's nuclear strategy is rooted in the country's socialist development path and defensive strategic culture, which he characterizes as fundamentally peaceful and non-aggressive (Pan 2016: 56). Other scholars offer less ideological justifications. For example, Tong Zhao argues that the NFU policy serves the PRC's national interests while simultaneously contributing to strategic stability and the broader nuclear non-proliferation regime. In his view, the policy should be promoted internationally as a responsible approach to nuclear deterrence (Tong Zhao 2022: 206).

Zhang Peimin likewise regards the adoption of NFU as a strategically beneficial policy. He argues that it helps the PRC project peaceful intentions internationally while reducing regional security concerns. At the same time, the effectiveness of NFU depends largely on whether other states regard the commitment as credible. Consequently, debates over the PRC's nuclear modernization, transparency, and strategic intentions continue to influence international assessments of its NFU policy. Zhang Peimin describes the NFU as beneficial for the PRC but not provable (Zhang 2004: n.p.).

4.2 Corruption

The PRC's recent anti-corruption purge (June 2024) within its military and government, highlighted by the expulsions of former foreign minister Qin Gang (秦刚, b. 1966, served 2022-2023) and former defense minister Li Shangfu (李尚福, b. 1958, served 2023), underscores significant issues within

the ranks of the PRC officials. This crackdown, which extends to high-ranking officials in sensitive areas such as the People's Liberation Army Rocket Force, responsible for the PRC's conventional and nuclear missile arsenal, reveals deep-seated corruption problems (Chen/Pang 2024, Chen 2024). The removal of these officials highlights the ongoing challenges in maintaining integrity and discipline within the PRC's leadership and military, impacting the effectiveness of its broader non-proliferation policy. This policy emphasizes strict control and oversight of military assets, yet the pervasive corruption indicates potential vulnerabilities in the PRC's strategic objectives of stability and security.

4.3 Dual-use

Another area of concern relates to the dual-use nature of nuclear materials and associated fuel-cycle technologies. The PRC began developing its uranium enrichment industry in the late 1950s, primarily to produce highly enriched uranium (HEU) for nuclear weapons purposes (Hui Zhang 2020: 4). More recently, attention has focused on the expansion of plutonium-related capabilities. While the PRC's authorities present these developments as part of civilian nuclear energy production, some analysts have raised concerns about the potential diversion of fissile materials for military use.

Regional actors have also expressed concern regarding transparency and safeguards. For example, Japan has urged the PRC to ensure that civilian nuclear technologies are not used for military purposes and has called for greater transparency in reporting to the IAEA. These concerns are further linked to the PRC's reported plans to expand reprocessing capabilities and develop fuel for fast breeder reactors, which are capable of producing weapons-usable plutonium. At the 2022 NPT Review Conference, the PRC opposed proposals to halt fissile material production, a position viewed by some observers as potentially limiting future constraints on nuclear expansion (Kobayashi 2023: n.p.).

Additional concerns have been raised by non-governmental and research organizations. According to analysis published by the Sasakawa Peace Foundation's *China Observer*, satellite imagery from 2019 and 2022 indicates significant construction activity at reprocessing-related facilities in the Gansu region, which some analysts interpret as potentially consistent with dual-use or military applications. However, official details regarding these facilities have not been publicly disclosed by The PRC's government or the China National Nuclear Corporation (CNNC) (Kobayashi 2023: n.p.).

Finally, it has been noted that since 2017 the PRC has stopped submitting annual declarations of plutonium holdings to the IAEA. This development has been linked by some analysts to the construction of nuclear fuel reprocessing facilities intended to extract plutonium from spent reactor fuel (Sokolski 2021 in: Kobayashi 2022: n.p.).

4.4 Escalating PRC's Nuclear Stockpile

According to Hui Zhang “Beijing believes that one key step toward a nuclear-free world is to reduce the role of nuclear weapons” (Zhang 2010: 140). At the same time, developments in the PRC's nuclear forces have generated debate about the consistency between this objective and ongoing force expansion and modernization. While the PRC maintains that these developments are driven by defensive security requirements, they have also contributed to broader international discussions on nuclear balance and deterrence stability.

Under the framework of the NPT, Nuclear Weapon States are not subject to comprehensive verification of all nuclear-related activities. Although the Treaty does not explicitly prohibit modernization, it obliges all parties to pursue negotiations in good faith on nuclear disarmament. In this context, the PRC officials typically argue that modernization measures remain consistent with the principle of “good faith” engagement and are necessary to maintain a credible minimum deterrent in response to evolving security environments.

Nevertheless, external assessments indicate a rapid expansion of the PRC's nuclear capabilities. According to Kristensen, Korda, Johns, and Knight, the PRC is currently expanding its arsenal at the fastest rate among the recognised Nuclear Weapon States (Kristensen et al. 2024: 51). The SIPRI Yearbook 2024 notes that the PRC could potentially deploy intercontinental ballistic missiles at levels comparable to either Russia or the United States in that period (Kristensen/Korda 2024: 271). The US Department of Defense successively prognoses of a drastic the PRC's buildup, till 1000 before 2030 (Office of the Secretary of Defense 2020: vi, Office of the Secretary of Defense 2023: 104; Kristensen/Korda 2024: 315). For 2026 the PRC's arsenal is estimated to reach 620 as for January 2026 (SIPRI 2026).

These developments have contributed to adjustments in regional security planning. In June 2024, Japan and the United States convened an Extended Deterrence Dialogue (END), during which both sides expressed concern over North Korea's continued nuclear development, its cooperation with Russia, and

the rapid and relatively opaque expansion of the PRC's nuclear arsenal (MOFA Japan 2024). The meeting also highlighted dissatisfaction with the suspension of US-PRC consultations on nuclear issues. In response, Japan and the United States reaffirmed their extended deterrence commitments and agreed to further strengthen bilateral coordination, including enhanced assurances of the US nuclear protection for Japan in the event of a potential contingency (MOFA Japan 2024: n.p.).

4.5 Ties with Nuclear-Destabilizing Nations

For many years, the People's Republic of China was criticized for supplying nuclear materials, technologies, and dual-use items to developing countries without applying comprehensive safeguards requirements. Reported examples include the transfer of nuclear reactors and related technologies to Algeria, Pakistan, and Iran, as well as the provision of sensitive technologies to states such as Iran, Libya, North Korea, and Saudi Arabia (Yuan 2000; Stewart 2015).

These activities raised concerns regarding the objectives of the NPT. Article I prohibits nuclear-weapon states from transferring nuclear weapons or assisting non-nuclear-weapon states in their acquisition. Article III establishes safeguards designed to prevent the diversion of nuclear energy from peaceful purposes to nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices. Transfers of nuclear materials and technologies without adequate safeguards therefore generated concerns about their potential contribution to proliferation risks.

Scholars have argued that the PRC's approach to non-proliferation approximately till 1990s was often influenced by broader strategic, economic, and geopolitical considerations. In particular, Beijing was accused of applying non-proliferation norms selectively in order to expand its export market, strengthen strategic partnerships, and balance the US influence in regions such as the Middle East (Paul 2003, 23).

However, the PRC's behavior evolved over time. As the PRC's integration into the international non-proliferation regime deepened, its leadership adopted a more cautious approach toward sensitive nuclear transfers. As Huang notes, "Chinese decision-makers are pragmatic; they know when to pull the plug on problematic arms deals and when to deflect international criticisms" (Huang 2012: 16).

A useful overview of the PRC's reported proliferation activities is provided by Yuan Jingdong (2000). His compilation of disclosed transfers illustrates

the range of the PRC's military and nuclear cooperation with several states. The reported transfers included missile technologies, nuclear reactors, nuclear-related components, and chemical-related materials. Iran, Pakistan, and Syria appear among the most significant recipients, with Iran receiving the widest range of technologies. These cases have continued to shape debates regarding the PRC's historical role in the global non-proliferation regime and its implications for regional and international security.

Recipient States	Missiles, Missile Components & Technologies	Nuclear Materials & Technologies
Algeria		- Nuclear reactor (WT 11 Apr 91)
Iran	- Silkworm (LAT 14 Feb 89); - M-1B (WP 29 Mar 90); - M-11/Tondar-68 (JDW 1 Feb 92); - Oghab (Jacob & McCarthy); - 150 C-802 (ACT Feb 96; WT 29 Jan 97); [China has promised to halt future transfers] - Guidance systems & propellant ingredients (DN 19-25 June 95 & LAT 3 Apr 92); - Telemetry equipment used in flight-tests for Shahab-3 and Shahab-4 MRBMs (WT 10 Sept 97, 7 Dec 98)	- Nuclear reactors (WT 16 Oct 91 & ACT May 95); [suspended Sept 95] - Calutron, or electromagnetic isotope separation system (WT 25 Sept 95)
Iraq	- C-601 & Scud update (Jacob & McCarthy)	Uranium enrichment high-speed centrifuges (WT 14 Dec 89)
Pakistan	- M-9/M-11 (WP 6 Apr 91/NYT 6 May 93); - M-11 components (IHT 23 June 95); - 34 M-11s but missiles remain inside crates at Sagodha Air Base (WSJ 15 Dec 98)	- Nuclear reactor (FEER 23 June 92); - Ring magnets (NYT 8 Feb 96); - Furnace and diagnostic equipment (WT 9 Oct 96; WP 10 Oct 96)
Saudi Arabia	- CSS-2 IRBM (WP 29 Mar 88)	
Syria	- M-9 (Jacob & McCarthy)	- Nuclear reactor (Shuey & Kan)

Table 4. Yuan, Jingdong (2000)

Sources: ACT (*Arms Control Today*); DN (*Defense News*); FEER (*Far Eastern Economic Review*); IHT (*International Herald Tribune*); JDW (*Jane's Defence Weekly*); LAT (*Los Angeles Times*); WP (*Washington Post*); WSJ (*Wall Street Journal*) WT (*Washington Times*); NYT (*New York Times*); Jacob & McCarthy (Gordon Jacob and Tim McCarthy, "China's Missile Sales - Few Changes for the Future," *Jane's Intelligence Review* (December 1992), pp. 559-63; Shuey & Kan (Robert Shuey and Shirley Kan, *Chinese Missile and Nuclear Proliferation: Issues for Congress* CRS Issue Brief (April 1994).

The allegations and available evidence concerning the PRC's involvement in the nuclear programs of Iran, Pakistan, and North Korea warrant closer examination. These three cases have had significant implications for regional and global nuclear security. The PRC's relationships with these states can be analyzed

through the lens of realist theory in international relations. According to realism, states pursue policies primarily aimed at maximizing their security, influence, and strategic interests within an anarchic international system.

From this perspective, the PRC's reported assistance to Pakistan's nuclear program may be understood as part of its broader effort to balance India's growing regional power. Strengthening Pakistan has enabled Beijing to maintain a favorable strategic balance in South Asia and constrain India's ability to project power.

Similarly, the PRC's cooperation with Iran can be interpreted as serving broader geopolitical and economic objectives. Strong relations with Tehran has allowed Beijing to secure access to energy resources, expand its influence in the Middle East, and challenge the US dominance in the region.

In the case of North Korea, the PRC's policy appears to be guided primarily by concerns over regional stability. Beijing has traditionally preferred the North Korean to be stable, not to collapse. The drastic shift could trigger large-scale refugee flows and potentially result in a unified Korean Peninsula aligned with the United States – both disadvantageous to the PRC. Consequently, the PRC's approach toward Pyongyang has often reflected a balance between supporting non-proliferation objectives and maintaining strategic stability.

4.5.1 Islamic Republic of Pakistan

Pakistan possesses a nuclear arsenal but is not recognized under the NPT as the NWS. It conducted first nuclear test of nuclear weapons in 1998, long after the Treaty's cut-off date of January 1, 1967. Pakistan's nuclear program began in the 1950s with civilian objectives. Its strategic orientation shifted during the 1960s and evolved into a military program in the 1970s. Islamabad's decision not to join the NPT in 1968 was strongly influenced by three main factors: 1) India's refusal to accede to the Treaty, 2) the traumatic experience of Pakistan's territorial dismemberment in 1971, and 3) growing concerns about India's emerging nuclear capabilities. Pakistani political elites increasingly viewed nuclear weapons as essential to ensuring national survival and strategic autonomy (Chakma 2011: 39-42).

The PRC was Pakistan's most important partner following India's 1974 nuclear test. From a realist perspective, such cooperation can be interpreted as part of the PRC's broader strategy to balance India's growing regional influence. By supporting Pakistan, Beijing strengthened a key regional partner while

simultaneously constraining India's strategic position in South Asia. The PRC needs a strong and independent Pakistan to balance India (Paul 2003, 23-24), treating the country similarly as the US treats Israel (Ross 1999: 193, in Paul 2003: 23).

While both Beijing and Islamabad have consistently denied direct cooperation on nuclear weapons development, numerous studies suggest that the PRC's assistance played a crucial role in Pakistan's acquisition of nuclear capabilities (Chakma 2011: 44; Paul 2003: 24). The M-11 missile provided to Pakistan from the PRC is still a core for Pakistani nuclear capabilities (Chakma 2011: 44). According to the testimony of Abdul Qadeer Khan – the father of Pakistani bomb – in 1976 there was to be a nuclear agreement of Benazir Bhutto (1953-2007), the Prime Minister of Pakistan (1988-1990, 1993-1996) and Mao Zedong. In the same year, however, on September 9, 1976 Mao died. If these talks took place – what lacks official confirmation – Mao Zedong must have been seriously ill (Smith/Warrick 2009).

Reports suggest that the PRC provided Pakistan with critical technology and expertise necessary for developing nuclear weapons. Notably, in the 1980s, the PRC allegedly supplied Pakistan with a complete nuclear weapon design, fissile material, and assistance in constructing enrichment facilities. Moreover, the PRC was accused of transferring missile technology to Pakistan, which could be used to deliver nuclear warheads (Burr 2004).

Since the late 1960s, the United States repeatedly expressed concern regarding Sino-Pakistani nuclear cooperation. This unease heightened in 1977 when it became apparent that the PRC was actively supporting Pakistani nuclear-weapons related projects. Diplomatic efforts in 1982 to gain clarity from the PRC officials regarding their involvement yielded ambiguous responses, deepened suspicions. By 1983, the US State Department analysts concluded that the PRC not only facilitated Pakistan's production of fissile materials but possibly also assisted in weapon design. Concern peaked in 1989 under the George H. W. Bush administration (1989-1993) with alarming reports, now declassified, suggesting ongoing the PRC's assistance to Pakistan's nuclear program. The PRC diplomats vehemently denied these allegations the same year (Burr 2004).

In 1992, mounting pressure from the US led the PRC to impose stringent safeguards on a nuclear reactor sale to Pakistan. Nevertheless, anxieties persisted later that year over the PRC's continued engagement with Pakistan's nuclear ambitions. By 1997, the Clinton administration (1993-2001) cautiously certified improvements in Beijing's nuclear proliferation policies, reflecting a nuanced

assessment of the PRC's evolving stance on global nuclear safeguards and non-proliferation efforts (Burr 2004).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the PRC was involved in nuclear proliferation scandals – especially in 1995 supplying ring magnets crucial for uranium enrichment – to Pakistan. The PRC also shared nuclear bomb designs used in its own 1966 test, which later ended up in Libya via the A.Q. Khan network. These designs, containing Chinese text and explicit instructions for making an implosion device, were discovered by IAEA inspectors in 2004. This discovery followed Muammar Qadhafi's renouncement of Libya's nuclear weapons program and the subsequent inspection of related facilities (Cordesman/Kendall/Colley 2024: 21).

Pakistan was believed to have a similar nuclear capability as India, able to quickly assemble a small number of nuclear weapons. However, unlike India, Pakistan's program has primarily focused on uranium enrichment at an unsafeguarded plant in Kahuta. Additionally, Pakistan was pursuing the plutonium route, building unsafeguarded production and separation plants at Khushab and Chashma, possibly with Chinese assistance. The PRC was the major supplier of the safeguarded Chashma reactor. In the early 1990s, the United States made further efforts to persuade the PRC to impose stricter limits on its nuclear cooperation with Pakistan (Foot/Walter 2010). In January 2001, the Pentagon reported that the reactor could be used to produce plutonium for nuclear weapons (CSIS 2002). The Khushab reactor, capable of producing enough plutonium for 2-3 nuclear weapons annually, was constructed with the direct PRC's assistance – especially critical in August 1998 (Paul 2003: 24).

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, concerns persisted regarding the PRC's continued involvement in Pakistan's nuclear program. During the second half of 2001, the CIA reported that the PRC was still supplying nuclear-related materials and technology to Pakistan (Paul 2003: 21). Similar concerns were expressed in July 2003, when the US State Department's Bureau of Verification and Compliance presented a record of alleged the PRC proliferation activities and criticized Beijing for actions perceived as inconsistent with the objectives of the non-proliferation regime. Nuclear cooperation with Pakistan was identified as a main example (DeSutter 2003).

The issue remained politically relevant in subsequent years. In 2016, Pakistan applied for membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) and received support from the PRC (Arms Control Association; *The Indian Express* 2016). However, the application was unsuccessful, largely due to concerns

among several NSG members on Pakistan's proliferation record and its status of the NWS outside the NPT framework.

From Pakistan's perspective, cooperation with the PRC offers significant economic and strategic benefits. It contributes to Islamabad's long-term energy strategy, which envisages a substantial role for nuclear power in meeting national electricity demand by 2030. At the same time, nuclear cooperation with the PRC is often viewed as strengthening Pakistan's strategic position vis-à-vis India, particularly following the Indo-US Civil Nuclear Agreement. Ahmad and Khan further argue that the PRC's support extends beyond energy development to broader efforts aimed at expanding Pakistan's nuclear infrastructure and reinforcing the strategic partnership between the two states (Ahmad/Khan 2015: 260).

For instance, on May 5, 2004, Beijing signed a contract to construct a second nuclear power reactor in Pakistan, just prior to the PRC joining the NSG. This timing allowed the Pakistani facility to circumvent the NSG's requirement for full-scope safeguards (CRS 2009: 5). Additionally, in spring 2010, the PRC agreed to build two more civilian nuclear reactors for Pakistan (Foot/Walter 2010: 167) what is against the NSG guidelines (Arms Control Association 2024). The British government expressed strong concern, emphasizing the lack of a firm position from the Obama administration (2009-2017). The American plans were to improve relations with the PRC after tensions connected with Taiwan as well as the necessity for good relations with Pakistan – due to the US engagement in the war against al-Qaeda in Afghanistan (Clifton 2010). Using the “threat balance theory” countries continue nuclear cooperation in order to balance potentially dangerous US-India nuclear deal and not allowing Pakistan absolute isolation in the international environment (Hussain 2017: 21-22).

The PRC and Pakistan have continued their nuclear cooperation into the 2020s with several significant projects. It raises international concerns from nuclear weapons experts (Guz 2014) but the direct accusation have not emerged. Notably, the construction of the Chashma Nuclear Power Plant Unit 5 (C-5) started in July 2023. It is described as the latest “milestone” in the PRC-Pakistan ongoing partnership. This project features the PRC's Hualong One technology and is part of a broader initiative to supply Pakistan with multiple nuclear reactors over the years (Zheng Xin 2023, Arms Control Association 2023). This cooperation aims to enhance Pakistan's energy security, support economic development, and reduce carbon emissions by providing substantial amounts of clean electricity (Zheng Xin 2023: n.p.).

Nowadays, both the PRC and Pakistan global status raise concerns – the PRC is perceived as a rising power and Pakistan as the unstable country:

The change in the PRC's position on international organizations coincided with “the dramatic rise of China's international standing in the hegemonic world order and its *sui generis* status as a ‘poor global power’ [which] can be explained by the change in China's national role conception from a revolutionary system-transforming actor to a neo-realist system-maintaining status quo actor” (Kim 1994: 401–434, in: Paul 2003: 22).

Their cooperation is therefore seen as something potentially revolutionary for the current global order. In October 2022, President Joe Biden controversially labeled Pakistan as “one of the most dangerous nations in the world.” The reason was Pakistani nuclear arsenal without an international control. Biden's remarks underscored American concerns, viewing strong Chinese-Pakistani relations as a negative factor in itself (Rashid/Ullah 2023: 60).

Sino-Pakistan relations presented positively in the PRC's media, e.g. in 2024, Liu Jing exemplified positive cooperation between these states. The PRC's was to construct six nuclear power units in Pakistan (CAEA 2024b).

Noticing that the US Department of Defense *Annual Report to Congress 2023* highlighted that for the PRC Pakistan is more important ally than Russian Federation, described as the sole “all-weather strategic partner.” Moreover, it was mentioned that it is in Pakistan that the PRC might consider to install its military facilities in the military exchange, as the co-production was monitored (Office of the Secretary of Defense, US Department of Defense 2023: 12, 154, 171).

4.5.2 Islamic Republic of Iran

Chinese relations Iran (then Persia) can be connected and dated already to Chinese explorer Zhang Qian (2nd century BC) – named the first “reporter” of the territories of the present-day Iran in 126 BC. In the current era the diplomatic relations between the PRC and Iran were established in 1971. The most important aspects of Sino-Iranian cooperation are general and oil-gas trade (Liu/Wu 2010: 41–43).

Iran is a “nuclear threshold state” possessing technologies to build nuclear weapons and a stockpile of highly enriched uranium. The 2026 military confrontation between Israel, the United States and Iran has further highlighted the strategic importance of Iran's nuclear program. Although a ceasefire was reached in June 2026, tensions remain elevated and negotiations over Iran's

nuclear future continue. Consequently, the PRC's political, diplomatic, and technological relationship with Iran has attracted renewed international scrutiny.

As of 2026, Iran does not possess a nuclear arsenal but maintains a nuclear program that it officially describes as exclusively peaceful and protected under the NPT. Nevertheless, Iran has engaged in clandestine nuclear activities since the late 1980s. The development of its program relied heavily on foreign assistance, particularly from the PRC and Pakistan. That included technology and materials necessary for uranium enrichment. Much of this cooperation remained undisclosed to the IAEA and against the NPT obligations. Iran has also been accused of pursuing capabilities that could facilitate the future production of nuclear weapons. In 2015, following prolonged negotiations and international sanctions, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was concluded to restrict Iran's nuclear program and increase transparency in exchange for sanctions relief. The PRC played an important role in this process.¹ After the United States withdrew from the agreement in 2018, Iran gradually reduced its compliance and, by 2020, had ceased observing many of the JCPOA's restrictions. In result many analysts describe Iran as a nuclear threshold status state (Iran Watch 2023: n.p.). The military confrontation between Iran, Israel, and the United States in 2026 has further reinforced international concerns regarding the future direction of Iran's nuclear program and the role of external partners in its development.

The PRC has played a significant role in supporting Iran's nuclear program over the years. This support includes the transfer of nuclear technology and machinery – crucial for Iran's nuclear energy program. Some Chinese scholars, however, argue that the significance of this assistance has been exaggerated and primarily reflects the perspective of the “US-led West” (Liu/Wu 2010: 46-47).

There are evidences that the PRC gave Iran both “materials and equipment for uranium enrichment [...] other nuclear-related technology, anti-ship cruise missiles, ballistic missile technology, and chemical weapons precursor materials” and as such enabled Iranian independent military industry and military modernization (Carter/Perry 2000: 121, Scott/Nader 2012: 7). Between 1985 and 1996, Iran reportedly received critical nuclear technology and machinery from the PRC, including assistance in uranium exploration and mining (Scott/Nader 2012: 7). At the same time, Beijing assured the international community that it would discontinue missile-related transfers to Iran (Carter/Perry 2000: 121).

¹ For more, see: Rabena, Aaron Jed B. (2016), “China's role in the Iran nuclear deal: Perspectives from mainstream Chinese media,” *Asian Politics & Policy* 8.2, pp. 382-386.

Beyond technological cooperation, the PRC has consistently provided Iran with diplomatic support in international forums, including the United Nations (Liu/Wu 2010: 49). It has repeatedly called for the removal of the US sanctions against Iran and has supported efforts to revive the JCPOA (Shi 2022: n.p.). Beijing's position reflects its broader interest in maintaining stable relations with Tehran while promoting regional stability and opposing unilateral sanctions.

Economic cooperation has further strengthened bilateral relations. The PRC has become one of the principal purchasers of Iranian oil despite international sanctions and has invested in infrastructure projects, including bridges, dams, railways, and other strategic sectors (Scott/Nader 2012: 1-4). Nevertheless, some Chinese authors reject claims that Iran is a formal ally of the PRC or that Beijing bears primary responsibility for weakening the effectiveness of international sanctions, arguing instead that "China should not be made a scapegoat" for the shortcomings of the US policy (Liu/Wu 2010: 40, 55).

From a geopolitical perspective, the PRC views Iran as an important strategic partner in balancing the US influence in the Middle East. Although economically interdependent with the United States, Beijing remains concerned about Washington's military presence and its potential ability to disrupt the PRC's access to critical energy supplies, particularly in the event of a crisis over Taiwan. However, with the current oil differentiation of the PRC such a leverage is significantly weakened. Strengthening economic, diplomatic, and, to a limited extent, military cooperation with Iran therefore serves broader strategic objectives. At the same time, some liberal Iranian commentators have criticized the relationship, arguing that the PRC benefits economically and thus supports Iran's existing political system. From Tehran's perspective, however, the PRC has increasingly emerged as a key international partner, in some respects replacing Russia as a preferred strategic partner (Scott/Nader 2012: 2-6).

The PRC's direct nuclear assistance to Iran ended in 1997, weakening Sino-Iranian relations, as the PRC tried to improve its relations with the US. That time Iran already developed its nuclear program and had a way to modernize it (Scott/Nader 2012: 8, 23). By that time, however, Iran had already acquired many of the technological foundations necessary to continue developing its nuclear program independently. Since then, the PRC has maintained that it no longer provides nuclear assistance to Iran while continuing to cultivate close political and economic relations (Yan Qiu 2004).

These ties have expanded in recent years. In 2023, with support from both the PRC and Russia, Iran joined BRICS and also became a full member

of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Under President Masoud Pezeshkian (b. 1954), bilateral cooperation is expected to deepen further, reflecting the PRC's growing importance in Iran's foreign policy (Konradt 2024). Despite the 2026 regional conflict, both states have continued to emphasize their strategic partnership, suggesting that Sino-Iranian cooperation is likely to remain an important factor in Middle Eastern geopolitics.

The US strikes on Iran in 2026 have significantly complicated the prospects for nuclear proliferation in the Middle East. While some scholars argue that Iran's nuclear programme primarily served as a strategy of nuclear hedging and diplomatic leverage rather than a genuine pursuit of nuclear weapons, others maintain that Tehran has consistently sought to preserve the option of acquiring a nuclear arsenal. Nevertheless, the military strikes have weakened incentives for restraint and may ultimately increase Iran's determination to pursue a nuclear weapons capability by undermining confidence in diplomatic and non-proliferation mechanisms.

4.5.3. Democratic People's Republic of Korea

North Korea remains the most prominent example of nuclear proliferation, being the only state to have conducted nuclear tests in the twenty-first century, with its most recent taking place in 2017. In the same year, it also successfully tested an intercontinental ballistic missile (USIP 2019: 2; White House 2018). Concerns have also been raised regarding illicit cross-border trade. For example, in 2009 the PRC's police seized vanadium – a strategic metal used in missile production – that was being smuggled across the DPRK border (Hornby/Lim 2009). At the same time, the available evidence regarding the PRC's direct involvement remains inconclusive. In 2003, the CIA reported that Sino–North Korean border controls had disrupted transfers of chemicals potentially useful for the DPRK's nuclear program, while subsequent CIA assessments in 2006 found no evidence of the PRC involvement in transporting nuclear-related materials or directly assisting the DPRK's program. Nevertheless, repeated UN recommendations to monitor the PRC's activities illustrate the persistence of international concerns (Gill 2011: 7-8).

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea began developing its nuclear program in the late 1950s, with significant progress achieved by the late 1970s. Initially, the Soviet Union supported the peaceful development of nuclear energy but refused to assist Pyongyang in acquiring nuclear weapons. Kim Il-sung

(1912-1994) also sought nuclear weapons assistance from both the PRC and France, but these requests were rejected. Mao Zedong reportedly argued that the DPRK did not require the status of a nuclear-weapon state (Lee 2009: 117; Singh 1998: 41-52).

Although direct PRC's assistance to the DPRK's weapons program has never been conclusively demonstrated, it is widely believed that Pyongyang benefited from the wider proliferation network centered on Pakistan. Abdul Qadeer Khan (1936-2021) reportedly transferred to the DPRK a Chinese-origin nuclear weapon design similar to those later supplied to Iran and Libya (Nikitin/Dunham 2009: 10). Consequently, international concerns regarding the PRC's role have focused less on direct technology transfers than on indirect proliferation through strategic partners.

North Korea joined the NPT in 1985 under the Soviet pressure, with began only in 1992, while IAEA safeguards entered into force in 1992. The first North Korean nuclear crisis emerged shortly thereafter, in 1993, followed by a second crisis in 2002-2003. In February 1993, the IAEA requested special inspections of two suspected nuclear waste sites. In response, Pyongyang announced in March 1993 its intention to withdraw from the NPT. Under Article X of the Treaty, withdrawal requires a three-month notice period. The DPRK argued that this requirement had already been fulfilled because it suspended its withdrawal shortly before it would have taken legal effect, leaving the legal status of its NPT membership disputed (Arms Control Association: *North Korea* 2018: n.p.).

After the US considered military options and tensions peaked, former President Jimmy Carter visited Pyongyang in June 1994. This diplomatic opening led to the October 1994 Agreed Framework, where North Korea agreed to freeze and eventually dismantle its graphite-moderated reactors in exchange for two proliferation-resistant light-water reactors and heavy fuel oil. By late 2002, it resumed plutonium production, expelled inspectors, and restarted its facilities, possibly producing enough plutonium for several nuclear weapons (Singh 1998: 41-52).

The Agreed Framework collapsed in late 2002 after the US intelligence concluded that the DPRK had initiated a clandestine uranium enrichment program. In response, the United States suspended heavy fuel oil deliveries. North Korea expelled IAEA inspectors, removed monitoring equipment from its nuclear facilities, reactivated the Yongbyon reactor, and in January 2003 formally withdrew from the NPT. These developments contradicted the PRC's strategic objective of maintaining a stable and non-nuclear Korean Peninsula. According

to Moore and Shambaugh, Beijing's temporary suspension of oil deliveries in February 2003 and the deployment of People's Liberation Army (PLA) troops to the border later that year reflected its dissatisfaction with Pyongyang's withdrawal from the NPT. Similarly, the PRC-controlled media reacted negatively when the DPRK publicly acknowledged its nuclear weapons program in 2005 (Gill 2011: 8-9).

Encouraged by the United States, the PRC assumed the role of mediator by hosting and chairing the Six-Party Talks, launched in 2003 and involving the PRC, the DPRK, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Russia, and the United States. These negotiations produced the September 2005 Joint Statement, in which Pyongyang committed to abandoning its nuclear weapons program in exchange for political, economic, and security incentives. Nevertheless, implementation repeatedly stalled over verification disputes. Despite the Joint Statement, the DPRK conducted its first nuclear test in October 2006, after informing the PRC in advance, prompting the adoption of UN sanctions (Singh 1998: 41-52). Diplomatic efforts continued, and in February 2007 the Six-Party Talks produced another agreement under which the DPRK pledged to halt plutonium production and disable its nuclear facilities in exchange for energy assistance. On June 26, 2008, Pyongyang submitted a declaration of its nuclear programs to the PRC, which chaired the Denuclearization Working Group (Nikitin/Dunham 2009: 16). However, following a failed satellite launch in April 2009, the DPRK withdrew from the negotiations, expelled IAEA inspectors, and resumed activities at its nuclear facilities, effectively bringing the Six-Party Talks to an end (Nikitin/Dunham 2009: 10-11).

The DPRK nuclear crisis marked an important turning point in the PRC's non-proliferation policy. Since the 1990s, the PRC has officially supported nuclear non-proliferation while generally avoiding strong sanctions or political pressure against the DPRK and Iran. Beijing's primary objective has been to preserve stability on the Korean Peninsula and maintain the status quo while encouraging the gradual denuclearization of the DPRK (Szoja 2025).

The North Korean nuclear program, however, prompted a noticeable shift in the PRC's approach. Initially, Beijing opposed UN sanctions. In 2006, Ambassador Wang Guangya reportedly threatened to veto proposed sanctions, while Premier Wen Jiabao warned of their potential unintended consequences (Swaine 2009: 4, 17). Growing concerns that the DPRK's nuclear program could eventually threaten the PRC's own security (Liu, in: Swaine 2009: 10) appear to have contributed to a gradual reassessment of this position.

The PRC's stance on the DPRK sanctions has evolved over time. Initially, in 2006, the PRC opposed the UN sanctions, with Wang Guangya threatening to veto and Premier Wen Jiabao expressing concerns about unintended consequences (Swaine 2009: 4, 17). The potential for a nuclear attack on the PRC (Liu in: Swaine 2009: 10) seemed to prompt a stricter approach. A significant change occurred after the DPRK's 2009 nuclear test, when the PRC supported UN sanctions despite its longstanding reluctance to use coercive measures against Pyongyang. This decision represented a major departure from Beijing's previous policy and reportedly contributed to growing dissatisfaction and declining trust in the PRC-DPRK relations. Nevertheless, later that same year, the PRC relaxed its implementation of the sanctions, illustrating its continued attempt to balance pressure with regional stability (Foot/Walter 2010: 164). By 2017, the PRC supported sanctions and reduced exports to North Korea to enhance their impact (USIP 2019: 17). This shift aligns with demands from non-PRC-controlled media after North Korea's second missile launch (Tao 2006 in: Swaine 2009: 17). The PRC's economic leverage and role in regional security were crucial in negotiations (USIP 2019: 3).

Relations deteriorated further after subsequent North Korean nuclear tests, particularly those conducted near the PRC border, which raised concerns about possible radioactive contamination affecting Chinese border regions (Page 2017: n.p.). By 2017, Beijing had adopted a firmer position by supporting additional UN sanctions and reducing exports to the DPRK to strengthen their effectiveness (USIP 2019: 17). This policy shift corresponded with growing criticism in non-PRC-controlled media following the DPRK's missile tests (Tao 2006, in: Swaine 2009: 17). Despite these changes, the PRC has continued to rely primarily on its economic leverage and diplomatic influence rather than maximum pressure, preserving its central role in negotiations on the Korean Peninsula (USIP 2019: 3).

The PRC possessed considerable leverage over the DPRK as its principal economic and political partner. For Beijing, this close relationship has often been presented as an expression of "socialist solidarity," a theme reflected, for example, in the speeches of Hu Jintao (Feng 2010, in: Gill 2011: 1-2). At the same time, however, the PRC's policy towards the DPRK has been characterized by what some scholars describe as "intellectual ambivalence" (Gill 2011: 9). While Beijing has consistently sought to preserve the stability of the North Korean regime and maintain its strategic influence, it has also opposed the DPRK's nuclear development, which undermines regional stability and complicates the PRC's broader non-proliferation objectives.

The PRC's support for the DPRK's nuclear program has generally been indirect rather than direct, taking political, economic, and strategic forms. Beijing's influence has been crucial in shaping international responses to the DPRK and remains indispensable for any effective diplomatic solution. Historically, the PRC has provided North Korea with extensive political and economic support, indirectly sustaining Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions, while concerns have also been raised regarding the transfer of proliferation-sensitive technologies (Stewart 2015: n.p.). As the DPRK's principal trading partner, the PRC has played a vital role in sustaining the North Korean economy, thereby reducing the impact of international sanctions and indirectly supporting the regime's strategic capabilities (USIP 2019: 2-5). At the same time, Bates Gill argues that it remains unclear whether any illicit transfers, if they continue to occur, reflect the PRC's official policy or are instead the activities of individual companies that "are known to use sophisticated measures to falsify and obscure their true identities" (Gill 2011: 8).

More broadly, the PRC-DPRK relations are often summarized by the formula "no war, no chaos, no nuclear weapons" (USIP 2019: 12), reflecting Beijing's competing strategic priorities. Scholars remain divided over whether the PRC genuinely seeks the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula or instead accepts a nuclear-armed DPRK as the lesser of two strategic risks. On the one hand, North Korea's nuclear capabilities complicate the US military presence in Northeast Asia and may serve as a strategic counterweight to Washington. On the other hand, they risk encouraging nuclear proliferation in Japan and the Republic of Korea while undermining regional stability. Consequently, the PRC has generally treated denuclearization as a long-term objective, while placing greater emphasis on preserving stability and preventing regime collapse. Under Xi Jinping, Beijing has prioritized maintaining "a predictable relationship that allows Beijing to maintain influence with the regime in Pyongyang" (USIP 2019: 5, 12-14). As Hou, Chang, and Chang argue, denuclearization of the DPRK and the PRC's broader objective of regional stability are closely interconnected (Swaine 2009: 10).

Despite international sanctions and diplomatic pressure, the PRC has consistently prioritized regional stability over strict enforcement. While officially supporting the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, Beijing has sought to avoid destabilizing the DPRK, fearing that excessive pressure could trigger regime collapse and broader regional instability. From the PRC's perspective, North Korea's behavior is "inherently destabilizing," yet it also provides Beijing

with strategic leverage in managing the US military presence and its alliances with the Republic of Korea and Japan (USIP 2019: 5). Some analysts therefore argue that the PRC has deliberately avoided fully resolving the DPRK nuclear issue in order to balance the US influence and preserve the PRC-US strategic dialogue (USIP 2019; Blumenthal/Kagan 2009; Applebaum 2009, in: Swaine 2009: 27). Although the DPRK's nuclear ambitions have resulted in greater international isolation and dependence on the PRC, the US experts continue to view denuclearization as the only viable long-term solution (USIP 2019: 6).

Moreover, the PRC has supported the DPRK indirectly through technological and scientific exchanges that may have contributed to North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities. However, direct evidence of official PRC transfers of nuclear weapons technology remains limited, with existing assessments relying largely on broader patterns of military and technological cooperation (Fink/Ditter/Vogler/Lee/Connell/Chesnut/McDonnell 2024: 116-128).

The PRC aims to portray itself as a key peacekeeper and "rule maker," aligning with Xi Jinping's call for increased international responsibility at the 19th National Congress of the CCP in October 2017 (Xi 2017 in: USIP 2019: 14). The PRC has emphasized its positive role in North Korean nuclear negotiations, such as securing North Korea's acceptance of the Agreed Framework in 1994 to freeze its plutonium weapons program. The PRC has also influenced North Korea's missile tests, contributing to regional tension management (Yuan 2000: n.p.). This engagement has fostered a sense of diplomatic accomplishment and enhanced the PRC's role in the non-proliferation regime (Gill 2011: 3).

4.6 Summary

Summing up, the PRC's nuclear doctrine remains ambiguous, fostering international suspicion about its true nuclear capabilities and intentions. More transparency, especially in plutonium production would improve the PRC's position in the nuclear non-proliferation regime. Anti-corruption purges within the PRC's military and government highlight significant integrity issues, raising concerns about the effectiveness of its non-proliferation policies and control over military assets.

The PRC's development of uranium enrichment and plutonium production, officially for civilian purposes, is suspected of having military applications. This dual-use technology, coupled with inadequate reporting to the International

Atomic Energy Agency, raises international alarm. Additionally, the rapid expansion of the PRC's nuclear arsenal contradicts its stated goal of reducing the role of nuclear weapons. This expansion is perceived as an effort to achieve strategic parity with the United States and Russia.

Furthermore, the PRC's historical supply of nuclear technology to countries like Pakistan, Iran, and North Korea undermined international non-proliferation norms and contributed to regional instability. These actions reflect strategic moves to counterbalance regional rivals and expand influence.

Through the global order theory, the PRC's actions highlight its role as a rule shaker, challenging existing norms while positioning itself as a potential rule maker. Its selective adherence to international norms and strategic alliances indicate efforts to reshape the international order to better suit its interests. The PRC's opaque nuclear policies and strategic partnerships underscore its ambitions and the need for a nuanced international response.

In essence, while the PRC consistently presents itself as a supporter of international peace and nuclear non-proliferation, its policies also reflect broader strategic and security considerations. As discussed throughout this chapter, these have generated differing interpretations of the PRC's role in the international order. Whereas some scholars have characterized the PRC as a rule shaper or even a rule challenger in certain areas of the non-proliferation regime, Beijing increasingly presents itself as a responsible stakeholder and an emerging rule maker. Understanding these differing perspectives is essential for assessing the PRC's evolving position within the global nuclear non-proliferation regime.

Conclusions

This book examined the People's Republic of China's (PRC) evolving role in the global nuclear non-proliferation regime through the theoretical framework of rule makers, rule takers, and rule shakers. The analysis combined the study of international treaties, official PRC statements, selected case studies concerning Pakistan, Iran, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), and the results of an original survey on perceptions of nuclear weapons and nuclear non-proliferation. Together, these sources provide a broader understanding of the PRC's changing position within the contemporary international order.

The analysis demonstrates that the PRC's role has evolved significantly since the establishment of the nuclear non-proliferation regime. Initially remaining outside many international institutions and often challenging aspects of the post-war order, the PRC gradually became an active participant in the principal arms-control and non-proliferation agreements. Over time, its growing economic, political, and military capabilities enabled Beijing not only to participate in international institutions but increasingly to influence debates surrounding their future development. In this sense, the PRC has moved from the position of a rule taker towards that of a state seeking to shape international norms. The transition to becoming a rule maker presents significant challenges, requiring the PRC to adhere to and help shape international norms. This shift requires greater responsibility, transparency, and cooperation, but it is still not sufficient for officials, particularly from the US and Japan, as well as some experts (e.g. Burr, Kobayashi, Sokolski, Zhang Hui).

The examination of official statements revealed a consistent and coherent diplomatic narrative. The PRC presents itself as a responsible nuclear-weapon state committed to peaceful development, strategic stability, multilateralism, and the long-term objective of a world free of nuclear weapons. Official documents repeatedly emphasize the principles of no-first-use, minimum deterrence, support

for developing countries, and respect for the authority of the United Nations and the NPT. This book argues that the PRC is now on the cusp of becoming a rule maker, as it seeks to shape international norms in a manner that reflects its values and strategic interests (Carter/Perry 2000, USIP 2019), mainly visible through the PRC active declaratory and formal presence in the non-proliferation conferences, declarations, and – importantly – questioning and challenging the current US position (e.g. Li Song 2022, Sim 2024, Landay 2024, Michta 2024). The future of global non-proliferation efforts may well depend on the PRC's willingness and ability to assume a leadership role that balances national security with global peace.

The PRC's engagement with the global non-proliferation regime is a study in contrasts, underscoring the paradox of a rising power advocating for peace while simultaneously expanding its strategic capabilities (Kristensen/Korda/Johns/Knight 2024). The analysis identified a number of challenges that complicate the PRC's potential aspirations to become a broadly recognized rule maker. These include the rapid expansion and modernization of its nuclear arsenal, limited transparency regarding its nuclear capabilities and doctrine, unresolved questions concerning fissile material production, and differing international assessments of its implementation of non-proliferation commitments. Although none of these issues necessarily contradict the PRC's treaty obligations, together they contribute to uncertainty regarding Beijing's long-term strategic intentions and leadership credibility within the non-proliferation regime.

The survey conducted as part of this research complements the macro-level analysis by illustrating selected public perceptions of nuclear weapons and non-proliferation. Although the sample was limited and therefore cannot be considered representative of wider society, the findings indicate relatively high awareness of the PRC's nuclear capabilities among Chinese respondents and generally greater acceptance of the importance of nuclear deterrence for national security. However, their responses also reflect the official PRC's statements, emphasizing the importance of nuclear weapons for national security and the belief that the United States is an obstacle to achieving the UN's goal of a "world without nuclear weapons".

Taken together, these findings suggest that the PRC cannot be understood solely as either a rule taker or a rule shaker. Rather, it increasingly exhibits characteristics of an emerging rule maker that seeks to influence international institutions while simultaneously interpreting and applying existing norms in ways consistent with its own strategic interests. This process remains incomplete.

Leadership within the global nuclear non-proliferation regime requires not only growing political influence but also broad international confidence, transparency, and predictability. Whether the PRC will ultimately achieve such recognition will depend on how successfully it reconciles its declared commitment to nuclear restraint with the practical implementation of its nuclear policies.

Finally, the conclusions of this study extend beyond the nuclear field. The PRC's approach to the non-proliferation regime reflects broader patterns visible across its foreign policy, including its participation in international organizations, responses to global conflicts, infrastructure initiatives, and efforts to shape contemporary international governance. Consequently, the concept of the PRC as an emerging rule maker may also provide a useful analytical framework for future research on the country's role in the evolving global order.¹

¹ An interesting example could be the PRC's statements on ending the Russian invasion of Ukraine, e.g. the "China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukrainian Crisis" 2023. Full text: PRC MOFA (2023), „关于政治解决乌克兰危机的中国立场,” 2023-02-24, Available HTTP: <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zyxw/202302/t20230224_11030707.shtml>, Accessed: 2024-07-29.

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Since its first nuclear test in 1964, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has evolved from an outsider challenging the post-war nuclear order into one of its key participants – a state actively shaping the rules of global non-proliferation. Yet an important question remains: has Beijing truly become a responsible steward of that order, or does it only speak the language of restraint? Drawing on Henry Gao's framework of rule makers, rule takers, and rule shakers, Martyna Szoja examines six decades of China's nuclear policy through international treaties, official PRC documents, and the discourse of Xi Jinping's administration. The analysis is complemented by case studies of China's relations with Pakistan, Iran, and North Korea, as well as original survey research on public perceptions of nuclear weapons. This book moves beyond the polarized "China vs. the West" narrative to reveal a far more contested reality. The result is a nuanced portrait of a rising power caught between its declared commitment to a nuclear-weapon-free world and the practical demands of national security – a paradox with implications reaching far beyond the nuclear domain, into the very architecture of the emerging global order.

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