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Beijing's Nonproliferation Record

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China recently issued its long-awaited Regulations on Export Control of Missiles and Missile-Related Items and Technologies, and an accompanying control list similar to the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) annex. While the regulations fulfil China's pledge in November 2000 to tighten controls on missile-related transfers, the critical issue remains how effectively it will enforce them. Still, Beijing has admittedly travelled a long way towards missile nonproliferation.

China's missile transfers to developing countries long have been an issue of contention in China-United States relations. Over the years, the U.S. has applied a mixture of incentives and sanctions to influence Beijing's missile-transfer policy. Though China made a number of pledges over the years to adhere to the MTCR's general guidelines and restrain its missile-related exports, implementation was a perennial problem, with alleged transfers continuing to countries such as Pakistan, Iran and North Korea. In response, the U.S. imposed sanctions on Chinese companies and individuals for what is believed to be Beijing's inability or unwillingness to carry through its commitments.

The apparent gap between Chinese promises and behaviour can be attributed to a number of factors. While Beijing agreed in 1994 to abide by the MTCR's original guidelines and parameters, it did not accept its annex, or the revised guidelines of 1993. Chinese reluctance to fully embrace the MTCR revolves around a number of issues. One is what Beijing views as the regime's double standard in only restricting missile exports but failing to address high-performance fighter aircraft equally capable of delivering weapons of mass destruction (WMD). It argues that ballistic missiles are not weapons of mass destruction, but rather are delivery vehicles.

While acknowledging that the MTCR has played some positive role in delaying ballistic-missile proliferation, Chinese officials claim there are inherent limitations to the regime. Beijing has been particularly critical of what one of its officials describes as the "lack of objective criteria and the double standard applied by certain MTCR members in implementing requirements of the regime." For instance, Beijing says the MTCR does not prohibit missile proliferation between member states. Indeed, U.S.-led theatre missile-defence research and development are viewed by Beijing in such light.

China has suggested that a more effective control mechanism should be comprehensive, fair and reasonable, and be linked to other disarmament measures and to efforts to settle regional conflicts in order to address the root cause of missile proliferation. It wants such mechanisms to restrict both missiles and other offensive weapons, including high-performance fighter aircraft. While Beijing may have a point here, given the increasing use of fighter aircraft in launching precision-guided munitions, the question is whether the MTCR is the right venue to address this issue.

Missile-related transfers have served important Chinese geostrategic and commercial interests in the Middle East, the Persian Gulf and South Asia. With China's conventional-arms exports suffering a precipitous decline since the early 1990s, and given MTCR member states' more restrictive policies, the importance of missile transfers and assistance has risen for Beijing.

Beijing at times has deliberately dragged its feet on implementation or narrowly interpreted its commitment when it sees its core interests being compromised by U.S. policy. Indeed, China has sought to use the controversy to win concessions from Washington on missile defence and U.S. arms sales to Taiwan.

Why, then, this major change of policy on Beijing's part now? First, China must realize that a continued dispute with Washington over missile-related issues does not serve its long-term interests. Secondly, September 11 may have raised China's awareness of the threats associated with WMD and missile proliferation. Finally, Beijing yearns to be seen as a responsible power, not a pedlar of dangerous weapons.

Building on the latest development and continuing to push China to embrace international nonproliferation norms and principles require continued efforts by the U.S. While China's promulgation of the missile export-control regulations is a significant development in its nonproliferation policy, the world will watch for effective enforcement of these measures as a sign that Beijing truly is determined to be part of the solution to--not still the problem of--WMD and their delivery systems.