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Nuclear diplomacy: a niche diplomacy for middle powers

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Abstract

Using the concept of “niche diplomacy”, this article shows that some medium-size countries have chosen to use “nuclear diplomacy” as a niche. It first analyses how this foreign policy choice can be articulated and advance an international actor’s interests. It also elaborates on how middle powers nuclear diplomacy can impact the global nuclear order and address issues such as proliferation, deterrence or peaceful uses of nuclear energy. To illustrate this thesis, the article develops three case studies (Japan, South Africa and Kazakhstan) and concludes on how nuclear diplomacy can be used constructively to strengthen the nuclear-related regimes and what are the conditions that make this “niche diplomacy” effective.

Introduction

During the latest Review Conference of the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), held in New York from April 15th to May 22nd, Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida invited political leaders and youth of all nations to visit Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Although the proposal failed to gather support, it showed Tokyo's willingness to play an important role on the nuclear order and to capitalize on its history to advance its own nonproliferation and disarmament agenda.

The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki provides Japan with an undisputable –although tragic– legitimacy to address nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation on the international stage. Its advanced civilian nuclear program is another asset to enhance its credibility on this issue. Put together, they enable Japan to use nuclear issues as a “niche” and promote its interests worldwide through an active diplomacy set in place not only by the Japanese government but also by influential civil society actors.

Japan is not the only nation known for its activism on nuclear issues. Historically, big powers, notably the United States, were instrumental in shaping norms regulating the use of nuclear energy, nonproliferation, arms control and disarmament. Several other countries, and especially middle size countries, have, over time, tried to influence international politics while advancing their own interests. Ireland initiated what became the NPT as early as 1958. Brazil led the resistance against the compulsory generalization of the additional protocols of the International Atomic Energy Agency in the 2000s. Austria is today at the forefront of a group of nations promoting the entry into force of the Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (NPNW).

But only a couple of middle powers combine the legitimacy, the capacity, and the willingness to develop a real “nuclear diplomacy”, using it as a form of “niche” to promote their global interests. Japan, but also Kazakhstan or South Africa are among those states. Their policies on this field encompass all aspects of nuclear issues: security, of course, but also politics, economy, or energy. It is therefore particularly interesting to determine the tenets of their “nuclear diplomacy” and to understand why some middle powers develop “nuclear diplomacy” as a “niche diplomacy”, how they achieve success, and how their behavior can influence the global nuclear order. Case studies of these three countries will demonstrate that to be effective, nuclear diplomacy requires several types of legitimacy, which can be claimed by state and non-state actors. They will show that this niche is a way to advance security, political, economic interests and to participate to the construction of one's identity. Finally, they will illustrate the role that can be played by middle powers on the nuclear order, as bridge-builders and mediators between nuclear weapon states (NWS) and non-nuclear weapon states (NWS).

Definition and concepts

Nuclear diplomacy

The concept of nuclear diplomacy (or atomic diplomacy) was originally used to describe the diplomatic relationships of the United States and the USSR with regard to deterrence, for instance in George Quester's book published in 1970.¹ Gar Alperovitz coined "atomic diplomacy" in his 1965-book in which he interpreted the 1945 atomic bombings on Japan as a way for the United States to improve its bargaining situation vis-à-vis the Soviet Union.² In the same vein, Loyd Graybar used the phrase to evoke the 1946 American atomic tests.³ Eventually, nuclear diplomacy was extended by Abraham Bargman as several distinct "activities", namely nuclear commerce, nuclear deterrence and extended deterrence as well as the international control of atomic energy.⁴

Today, nuclear diplomacy can be described as an inclusive notion, ranging from strategic issues to energy, humanitarian to economic, and has been defined as "*the interaction among and between international actors (be they states, international organisations, individuals and transnational non-state organisations) on nuclear-related issues, actors and interests (be they material or non-material) to achieve objectives.*"⁵ This definition not only emphasizes the plurality of issues tackled by nuclear diplomacy, but also the important fact that it can be appropriated and led by non-state actors. Accordingly, its means of expression are diverse. It is exercised in a formal or a back-channel way, a bilateral or multilateral format, through hard or soft ways, may involve non-governmental experts (track two diplomacy) or mostly relying on public opinion (public diplomacy).

Niche diplomacy

Middle powers lack resources to pursue an active diplomacy on an extended number of issues. They therefore usually choose to pick some of them. This strategy has been labelled "niche diplomacy" and consists in selecting a "niche" which is either of special value for the state concerned or on which it may be able to make a distinct contribution. This is often the case when a state possesses technical expertise on a define subject, such as international civil aviation for Canada (which hosts the seat of the international organization dealing with this issue) or the law of the sea for Malta and Singapore.⁶

¹ George H. Quester, *Nuclear Diplomacy: The First Twenty-Five Years* (New York, NY: Dunellen Publishing Company, 1965)

² Gar Alperovitz, *Atomic diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam: the use of the atomic bomb and the American confrontation with Soviet power* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1965).

³ Lloyd J. Graybar, "The 1946 Atomic Bomb Tests: Atomic Diplomacy or Bureaucratic Infighting?" *The Journal of American History*, vol. 72, n°4 (March 1986), pp. 888-907.

⁴ Abraham Bargman, "Nuclear Diplomacy," *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science* 32:4 (1977), pp. 159-169

⁵ Jo-Ansie Van Wyk, "South Africa's nuclear diplomacy, 1990-2010: Securing a niche role through norm construction and state identity," PhD diss., University of Pretoria, 2013, p. 54

⁶ Andrew F. Cooper, *Niche Diplomacy: Middle Powers after the Cold War* (London: Macmillan, 1997).

Middle powers are difficult to define and their list is ever-changing. Simple criteria such as population, GDP or surface area fail to encompass the notion. Their behavior on the international stage is more helpful. Keohane describes them as states “whose leaders consider [that they] cannot act alone effectively but may be able to have a systemic impact in a small group or through an international institution”.⁷ Others insist on their endeavors to appear as “good international citizens.”⁸ Finally, the Middle Power Initiative, created in 1998 to promote the abolition of nuclear weapons, proclaims that “Middle power countries are politically and economically significant, internationally respected countries that have renounced the nuclear arms race”.⁹ Other than subjective elements such as their positive behavior and their self-description as middle powers, one could also argue that on nuclear issues, they can be defined by objective criteria, such as a concrete involvement in nonproliferation norms (positive or negative), an interest and a technical knowledge of nuclear energy issues, or a specific attitude to deterrence.

As perfectly understood by states like Japan, South Africa or Kazakhstan, nuclear diplomacy represents an interesting niche for middle powers. As can be seen in the three case studies developed in this article, these states have built their legitimacy on the subject and influence the nuclear order in several ways. Moreover, they succeed in articulating their nuclear diplomacy with their general foreign policy objectives, which illustrates why and how nuclear diplomacy can be a precious niche and to what extent it can impact the global nuclear order.

The bases of nuclear diplomacy

Broadly speaking, in the diplomatic area, it is usually agreed that states and non-state actors try to act to favor what they perceive as their various interests. In a realist framework, George and Keohane lists the national interests as physical survival, autonomy, and economic well-being.¹⁰ The constructivist analysis adds a fourth major interest, namely collective self-esteem, characterized as the “group’s need to feel good about itself, for respect or status.”¹¹

Security interests

Widely interpreted, nuclear diplomacy is used to satisfy all these interests. Survival, which can be extended to security considerations, is the most obvious incentive for a national community and more specifically for a state to engage in nuclear diplomacy. This criteria can lead a middle power to make various decisions. For Israel or Pakistan, developing a nuclear arsenal was seen as an essential way to address security challenges, in a regional

⁷ Robert O. Keohane, “Lilliputians’ Dilemmas: Small States in International Politics,” *International Organization*, vol. 23, n°2 (Spring 1969), pp. 291-310.

⁸ Andrew F. Cooper, Richard A. Higgott and Kim Richard Nossal, *Relocating Middle Powers: Australia and Canada in a Changing World Order* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1993), p. 19.

⁹ “Mission and Overview”, Middle Powers Initiative website.

¹⁰ Alexander George and Robert Keohane, “The concept of national interests: Uses and limitations,” in Alexander George, ed, *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1980), pp. 217-238.

¹¹ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 236.

environment characterized by strong hostilities. Prime Minister Voerster's South Africa made the same choice at the end of the 1970s. Copying the relationship between Cold War rivals but also the postures adopted by smaller nuclear powers such as China, France, and the United Kingdom, these states developed military strategies based on deterrence but also used their nuclear capabilities to put diplomatic pressure on opponents but also on allies¹². Preserving the survival of the nation led other states, lacking the financial, technical or political possibility to acquire nuclear weapons on their own, to rely on extended deterrence. West Germany opted for this policy during the Cold War, and, from this standpoint, influenced, willingly or unwillingly, the United States' and the Soviet Union's thinking on deterrence strategies, but also on arms control and nonproliferation¹³.

For NPT-abiding NNWS, security imperatives often express themselves in efforts to secure the nonproliferation regime. States are indeed compelled to protect their territory and their population from the use or the threat of use of nuclear weapons. In the eyes of most, this risk decreases if fewer states possess these weapons, if their nuclear postures are as limited as possible and include security guarantees for NNWS, if the deployment of their arsenals is circumscribed and if their qualitative and quantitative development is checked, and if non-state actors are prevented access to nuclear or radiological material that could potentially be used in a terrorist attack. As a consequence, middle powers played an important role in supporting the nonproliferation agenda, especially when situated near a nuclear aspirant, by proposing new norms, advocating their enforcement and their universalization or, financing their implementation.

For states leaders or civil society groups convinced that the existence of nuclear weapons is a threat to global security, pushing for arms control and disarmament initiatives is also in coherence with the pursuit of their security interests. This is why some states, such as Ireland or Austria have historically turned their diplomatic efforts towards the abolition of nuclear weapons.

But for middle powers, the debate on security cannot be limited to a positioning in favor or against deterrence. Nuclear explosions have wide and massive consequences in terms of health and environment, which is a security threat in itself. This argument is notably put forward by states and civil society organizations opposed to nuclear testing, as has been the case in New Zealand.

Eventually, and in a totally different field, energy security concerns may lead a country to adopt an active position in the international debate on the control of nuclear technologies and materials. For natural resources-deprived nations, such as Japan, the access to nuclear energy is seen as a fundamental security interest and is at the roots of an attentive position on the rights and obligations of states parties to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

¹² *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014.

¹³ Andreas Lutsch, "Merely 'Docile Self-Deception'? German Experiences with Nuclear Consultation in NATO," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 39, 2016.

Political interests

Nuclear diplomacy has been used to assure the autonomy of a country and thus promote its political interests. As for security, political interests can be seen by leaders as an incentive to develop a nuclear arsenal or on the contrary to abstain from it. In the 1960s-1970s decades, states tended to assimilate the nuclear military power with enhanced authority and stature on the international stage. Today, these same arguments tend to convince states to decide against nuclearization. NNWS, especially when their technological advancement and financial resources are sufficient to pretend to a nuclear military force, gain prestige and moral authority because of their renouncement while proliferators are regarded as pariah states.¹⁴

Non-nuclear-weapon middle powers also enhance their political standing and therefore preserve their foreign policy autonomy by forming coalition. This strategy increases their leverage and their influence and may push major powers to accept compromises. Nuclear-related coalitions include the New Agenda Coalition (NAC), launched in 1998 by Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, South Africa, Sweden and Slovenia, or the Nonproliferation and Disarmament Initiative (NPDI), formed within the NPT Review Conference context in 2010. Working together with other like-minded actors gives a state more weight and an opportunity to publicly disagree with powerful allies and put pressure on them. Thus, the NAC played a major role in forging a compromise during the 2000 NPT Review Conference. As Austria has shown at the forefront of the Humanitarian Initiative which led to the adoption of the TPNW, acting within a coalition offers visibility, which in this particular case also serves the country leaders domestically. It also reflects a willingness to mark a differentiated posture vis-à-vis main powers and to define an independent strategic positioning.

Taking a stand in favor of strengthening nuclear norms eventually derives from the conviction of many middle powers that their autonomy only depends on the robustness of the global international order. For them, collective security arrangements and international institutions implementing them are essential to preserve national sovereignty. They tend to believe in cooperation rather than the use of force, multilateralism rather than unilateralism, interdependence and shared responsibility to solve global problems such as conflict, but also energy production and distribution. Enhancing norms like the NPT or the IAEA safeguards is a way to give credibility to the United Nations (UN) system and to international law as a whole, which in turn is the most efficient tool to protect them from the law of the strongest.

Economic well-being

Economic considerations usually play an important role in convincing a middle power to engage into nuclear diplomacy. States and economic stakeholders counting on or wishing to develop nuclear energy in their country have naturally a strong incentive to try to influence the international norms ruling how they can access, develop and sell materials and technologies. In specific cases, they hope to secure assistance and foreign cooperation and resort therefore to diplomatic tools to defend their interests. With or without the means

¹⁴ Maria Rost Rublee, *Nonproliferation Norms: Why states choose nuclear restraint* (Athens, Ga: University of GA Press, 2009), p. 17.

to use nuclear energy for electricity, some states benefit economically from the atom thanks to their natural resources in uranium, industries able to generate nuclear fuel or even firms producing radioisotopes for non-electric applications. To serve their economic interests, they feel compelled to act diplomatically to alter national, regional or international trade rules impacting technology transfer, export controls, and industrial practices.

The enforcement of nonproliferation norms is often linked to the adoption of sanctions. As a consequence, many states have much to lose in applying those norms and complying with multilateral sanctions regimes. This economic loss may concern a rise of the energy bill, for instance for a state forced to renounce its oil imports from Iran or on the contrary a detrimental decline of exports towards the targeted country. As a consequence, states but also economic actors may attempt to make sanctions against proliferators more lenient or more rigorous depending on their situation.

Constructing identity

As shown by constructivists, norms and identities are instrumental in explaining states' behaviors. This school of thought has explained that preferences are not stable and that in the nuclear realm, the perception of nuclear weapons and sensitive technologies can evolve over time and be influenced by international institutions, values, and ideas. More precisely, a modification of behavior can derive from a change in the cost/benefit analysis of a situation, a change of preferences linked to genuine persuasion or a need to conform, the internalization of a norm or an attempt to identify to a group of state by adopting its behavior.¹⁵ Complying with the main rules of the nuclear order has for more than fifty years impacted states' decision-making regarding nuclear issues. The NPT modifies the cost/benefit calculus of infringing nonproliferation norms. A vivid debate among civil society opinion groups erases the prestige associated with nuclear weapons in most countries, but still pushes for the acquisition of nuclear technologies in others. The pressure to follow the example set by NPT-abiding states and to bandwagon with allies slowly transforms itself into an intimate conviction that these norms are legitimate, just and necessary for the international community.

If a state's or a group's preferences are thus formed in favor of nonproliferation, it estimates that an active nuclear diplomacy can procure itself recognition as a contributor to global peace and enhance its international standing. To achieve those objectives, several approaches are followed. Actors improve their moral authority by promoting arms control and disarmament on the international forum. They support peace by advocating diplomatic efforts in nonproliferation crises, and sponsor them as negotiators, mediators or facilitators. The focus on nonproliferation and the bolstering of its regime emerge from an actor's endeavor to appear as a force on the side of security worldwide. Likewise, attempts to shore up nuclear safety and security testify of a state's commitment to global health and global environment. In a general manner, siding with multilateral initiatives and norm enforcement is a good way to demonstrate a constructive role on the world stage. In return, this positive image reflects on the ego of a nation. Adopting a posture based on moral reasons is not only pursued for domestic politics but also because it is genuinely considered as a way of expressing a state identity and of boosting its collective self-esteem.

¹⁵ Maria Rost Rublee, *Nonproliferation Norms: Why states choose nuclear restraint* (Athens, Ga: University of GA Press, 2009), p. 17.

Nuclear diplomacy derives from a subtle balance of all these elements. Occasionally, they conflict: security issues contradict economic considerations, principles challenge pragmatism, domestic factors oppose international goals, and civil society spoils governmental efforts. The nuclear policy of a country therefore evolves to reflect a balance of those interests, as perceived by the different stakeholders at a given time.

Forging nuclear diplomacy

The importance of legitimacy

Contrary to major powers, middle powers lack certain tools to influence effectively the global order. Their diplomatic leverage is limited by their lack of individual military power, economic weight, and political prestige. They do not have a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council and cannot rely on the threat of vetoing a measure, cannot count on a range of close allies and client states, and simply do not dispose of the means to engage into an openly ambitious and extended foreign policy. That being said, some features can help them gain leverage and be more effective in the field of nuclear diplomacy.

One of them is legitimacy. Securing a niche on the international stage often requires a technical expertise and a specific know-how, factor of credibility. Fraught with complexities and technicalities, dealing with nuclear issues requires a solid experience in the field of physics, environmental science, energy management, but also international law, trade issues, and arms control history. But as more and more countries acquire nuclear technologies and related skills, the legitimacy of middle powers may derive from very specific elements giving them a unique profile on the international stage. History is one of the strongest argument to boost legitimacy and many actors active in nuclear diplomacy put forward their specific relationship with atomic energy, whether it be their status of victim of nuclear weapons or tests, or their decision to forgo these weapons after contemplating their acquisition or even building them. A good record on nonproliferation or disarmament also gives an actor the moral authority to impact the norms

The relationship between states and non-state actors

The efficiency of states playing the “nuclear card” is often related to the relationship between a given national government and its civil society. Non-state actors have their own agenda and follow their own interests. In many cases, their national affiliations are loose at best or are made irrelevant by the international nature of their organizations. However, a state’s actions are at times supplemented by the involvement of its civil society and both sectors can complement one another. For instance, the militancy of Japanese Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) but also of some local authorities such as the city of Kobe, which forbid the introduction of nuclear-weapon armed ship in its port in 1975, helped Tokyo in its attempt to appear at the forefront of disarmament initiatives, even when its actual policies in this field were much more ambiguous and limited. New Zealand joined forces with Greenpeace after the sinking of the Rainbow Warrior in 1985 and used the uproar caused in support of the militant organization to fight against nuclear testing.

Because of their independence – and in parts of the world where it is truly the case – NGOs and governments may have different objectives and actually set on conflicting courses. When it happens, the efficiency of nuclear diplomacy may be severely damaged as the

message carried out by actors will be impacted by internal debates and its clarity will be affected. A government's commitment to nonproliferation is seen as shallow if corporations registered within its borders are involved in nuclear trafficking or defy the international regime of sanctions against a proliferating state, even if it has no responsibility in those doings.

Even when state and non-state actors follow the same long term goals, they may differ on the methods and the preferable ways to reach them. With their ability to disregard diplomatic codes and conventions, NGOs give an impetus and make headways by mobilizing domestically but also internationally in favor of ambitious programs. In the same way, states may use NGOs' visibility and moral status to convey their opinions and advance their own interests. But the links between the two sectors is not always productive. In some occasions, the militancy and zeal of non-state actors can put a state in a difficult negotiating position and prevent it from achieving limited results, even if both parties share the same objectives.

Various levels of intervention

Concretely, nuclear diplomacy is a set of practices aiming at influencing, reinforcing or modifying the norms that are at the roots of the nuclear order, such as the strategic postures and doctrines associated with nuclear weapons (deterrence, extended deterrence, no-first-use,...), arms control conventions and disarmament measures, non-proliferation norms including bans on testing and the production of fissile material for weapons, export control regimes, UN and bilateral rules sanctioning proliferation, agreements regarding the peaceful use of nuclear energy (including but not restricted to IAEA safeguards, liability, nuclear safety and security, environmental protection, transport and physical protection of sensitive material). Depending on the norm and the goal followed, actors opt for a bilateral or a multilateral strategy. In the latter case, they play the role of norms entrepreneurs¹⁶ (or norms challengers in some cases)¹⁷ and rely on tools such as awareness raising, coalition building, civil society mobilization, back-channel compromising or simply count on emulation and conformity mechanism to bring about the generalization of a norm.

Because of their status as middle powers, which tends to give them a less biased, self-interested and bullying image than big powers, actors opting for this niche are often able to work as bridge builders between antagonistic groups¹⁸. Capitalizing on their legitimacy and their investment on nuclear issues, and taking advantage of correct or even good relations with a wide range of international actors, they play a specific role as mediators and bring conflicting actors to a compromise. It was the case in several NPT Review Conference and

¹⁶ Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," in Peter J. Katzenstein, Robert O. Keohane and Stephen D. Krasner, eds. *Exploration and Contestation in the Study of World Politics* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999), p. 257.

¹⁷ Carmen Wunderlich, "A 'Rogue' Gone Norm Entrepreneurial? Iran within the Nuclear Nonproliferation Regime," in Wolfgang Wagner, Wouter Werner and Michal Onderco, eds. *Deviance in International Relations: 'Rogue States' and International Security* (Londres: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 83.

¹⁸ Alan K. Henrikson, "Middle Powers as Managers: International Mediation Within, Across and Outside Institutions," in Andrew F. Cooper, ed. *Niche Diplomacy: Middle Powers after the Cold War* (London: Macmillan, 1997), p. 56.

particularly in 1995, when South Africa¹⁹ was able to convince the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) to vote in favor of the indefinite extension of the Treaty by securing concessions from the United States and the other NWS.

Appealing to moral and ideological arguments is another way for middle powers to deploy their nuclear diplomacy in an effective manner. By presenting themselves as models, they alter preferences and gather support from other state and non-state actors.

Case Studies n°1: South Africa

In 2009, South Africa declared that a ‘primary goal’ of its foreign policy was to be “*a responsible producer, possessor and trader of defence-related products and advanced technologies in the nuclear, biological, chemical and missile fields*”.²⁰ With a unique history with regard to nuclear weapons and a special positioning in the international community since the end of the Apartheid regime, South Africa’s choice to pursue nuclear diplomacy almost seems natural. Banking on different kinds of legitimacy (historical, moral, and technological), the country has tried to promote its global objectives of multilateralism, peaceful resolution of conflicts and economic and social development via a focus on nuclear issues (see Table 1). However, its involvement has been unequal over time, reflecting the changing priorities of the government but also the absence of an active civil society advancing Pretoria’s goals, which reflects the limited resonance of nuclear-related subjects among South Africans. Therefore, the efficiency of South Africa’s nuclear diplomacy has fluctuated in the last decades, and its impact on the global nuclear order has varied.

| Issues | | Nuclear deterrence and disarmament | Nonproliferation regime | Civilian use of nuclear energy |
|-------------------------------|-----------|--|--|--|
| Legitimacy | | Only country having manufactured and dismantled nuclear weapons | Enforcement of all norms and role played to ensure the indefinite extension of the NPT | Expertise and prominent industrial capacity, especially in uranium mining and isotope production |
| Stakes | State | Elimination of all nuclear weapons in the short term | Balance between nonproliferation and the inherent right of all states to use nuclear energy | Full right to have access and develop all technologies and enhanced international cooperation |
| | Non-state | Same | For companies, fewer rules regarding to export controls and sanctions | Same especially in the business community |
| Major diplomatic achievements | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Well-publicized and acclaimed dismantlement of its nuclear arsenal - Coalition building to promote disarmament within the NPT - Co-sponsor of the NPWT | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “Bridge-building” at the 1995 NPT RevCon - Leading role in the Pelindaba Treaty - Attempt to mediate between Iraq and the US in 2003 and critic of “counter-proliferation” - Support the implementation of the 1540 UNSC Resolution | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Signature of various cooperation agreements - Active role within the IAEA |

Table 1: summary of the bases of nuclear diplomacy in South Africa (1995-2018)

¹⁹ Barbara Crossette, “South Africa Emerges as a Force for Extending Nuclear Arms Pact,” *The New York Times*, April 23, 1995, p. 16.

²⁰ Page “United Nations Disarmament Commission,” Department of International Relations & Cooperation.

A legitimacy stemming from redemption

At the height of the Cold War, South Africa engaged in a clandestine nuclear program that led to the construction of six completed bombs by the end of the 1980s.²¹ With the help of dual-use technologies and thanks to international cooperation in the development of its civilian nuclear program²², the regime pursued this capacity despite international pressure and sanctions. The Soviet support of proxies in Angola and Mozambique, the Cuban interventions in those two countries but also the threat, amplified by the white minority, of foreign fighters and black “terrorists” struggling to end the Apartheid created a feeling of encirclement and vulnerability (the “laager complex”) which justified the production of a last-resort nuclear arsenal to ensure the security of the regime.²³

For a variety of reasons, among which deep changes in the nation’s strategic situation after the end of the Cold War, the toll of its political and economic isolation and a willingness to restore its reputation abroad before launching vast domestic reforms leading to democratization, F. W. De Klerk decided in 1989 to get rid of the nuclear arsenal.²⁴ By February 1991, all bombs had been dismantled, in August of the same year, South Africa signed the NPT and in 1994, inspectors from the IAEA confirmed that South Africa no longer held nuclear weapons or related materials.²⁵

In the wake of President De Klerk’s revelation about the program in Parliament in February 1990²⁶ and after the election of Nelson Mandela at the Presidency, South Africa was received back within the international community as the prodigal son and its new compliance with nuclear norms played a role in its warm welcome. Since then, Pretoria has never missed a chance to recall that it dismantled voluntarily its arsenal and to voice its claim to lead by example.

This exemplary trajectory would however not be enough to justify the constitution of a niche in nuclear matters. South Africa also builds its legitimacy on its scientific, technical and industrial expertise in atomic energy, a remnant of the military program but also an evidence of its strong interest in nuclear energy, its desire to exploit its uranium resources, and to expand its production and exports of other nuclear applications (in particular medical isotopes). If this expertise appears limited through a purely quantitative lens (only 1912 persons are currently employed by the nuclear company NECSA in 2017),²⁷ it is more significant in a qualitative analysis. South Africa is one of the few emerging countries contemplating the development of the entire fuel cycle, its company NTP

²¹ Peter Liberman, “The Rise and Fall of the South African Bomb,” *International Security* 26:2, (Fall 2001), pp. 45-86.

²² Zondi Masiza, “A Chronology of South Africa’s Nuclear Program,” *The Nonproliferation Review*, vol. 1, n° 1 (Fall 1993), op. 34-53.

²³ Helen Purkitt and Stephen Burgess, *South Africa’s Weapons of Mass Destruction* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), p. 54.

²⁴ Jacobus De Villiers, Roger Jardine and Mitchell Reiss, « Why South Africa Gave Up the Bomb,” *Foreign Affairs* 72:5 (November-December 1993), pp. 98-109.

²⁵ Peter Liberman, “The Rise and Fall of the South African Bomb.”

²⁶ Frederick W. De Klerk, “Speech on the Nonproliferation Treaty to a Joint Session of Parliament, March 24, 1993”, in *Joint Publications Research Service* (Proliferation issues), March 29, 1993.

²⁷ 2017 Integrated Annual Report, South African Nuclear Energy Corporation SOC Limited, 2017.

Radioisotopes SOC Ltd is one of the leaders in radiochemistry with 25 percent of the world production and it was the first corporation to develop technologies using low-enriched uranium for the production of isotopes. This competence goes beyond science and industry to reach diplomacy, in particular thanks to the influence of Ambassador Abdul Minty. This former governor of the IAEA, who ran an unsuccessful bid to lead the Agency in 2008, played an important role in shaping its government's position on proliferation issues, especially in critical event such as the 1995 NPT Review Conference.²⁸

Special interests to tackle nuclear issues

As most non-nuclear states parties to a nuclear-weapon-free zone, South Africa considers that the possession by some countries of nuclear arsenals constitutes a threat to the rest of the world and in particular to its own security. This assessment is based on the risk of an attack or a threat of an attack by a nuclear-weapon state but also on indirect dangers posed by these weapons: safety and security, risk of nuclear terrorism, environmental issues... Security is therefore one of the reasons why it champions disarmament and non-proliferation.

Pretoria also reaps political benefits from this niche diplomacy. After living as a pariah for decades, in part because of its nuclear status, it takes full advantage of its restored reputation and uses it when possible to advance its interests. Its propositions in the 1995 NPT RevCon, put forward in a letter to Vice President Al Gore and discussed with Secretary of State Warren Christopher made it a prime partner for the Clinton administration and gave it a chance to demonstrate its leverage to major powers, since it was admitted that South Africa's support for the indefinite extension of the Treaty, as well as its innovative proposals to buffer the review process, succeeded in producing a consensus where mere US pressure was insufficient.²⁹ From 1998, South Africa gathered political success through its participation in the New Agenda Coalition, which gave it an opportunity to confront major nuclear powers while taking the moral high ground.³⁰ Finally, as the African most advanced country in nuclear-related issues, investing in this niche is a chance for Pretoria to lead on the continent and increase its position as a regional power.

Because of its natural resources in uranium, its leading industries operating in the production of medical isotopes and its nascent energy program, South Africa has a strong economic interest in international cooperation, trade, and the circulation of nuclear technologies and materials. Today, its two Koeberg reactors operating produce about 6 percent of its electricity, a part which should rise to generate 9.6 GWe by 2030 according to the Department of Energy's projections.³¹

Finally, developing the image of a peaceful, development-oriented and norm-abiding nation is one of the strong motivations behind South Africa's involvement in nuclear

²⁸ John Siko, *Inside South Africa's Foreign Diplomacy, Diplomacy in Africa from Smuts to Mbeki* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2014), p. 223.

²⁹ Paul Kanger, *Wreath Layer or Policy Player: The Vice President's Role in Foreign Policy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2000), p. 247.

³⁰ Jo-Ansie Van Wyk, "South Africa's Nuclear Diplomacy since the Termination of Its Nuclear Weapons Programme," *Journal of Military Studies*, vol. 42, n° 1 (2014), pp. 80-101.

³¹ Department of Energy, "Strategic Plan 2015-2020," 2015.

diplomacy. Forging its image through its status as a roll-back nation and through the social pressure of norms on the international stage, it publicizes this image to boost its self-esteem and identify with like-minded countries.³²

An active diplomacy as a bridge-builder

As we have seen, South Africa's diplomacy is particularly active with regard to the NPT, and especially in the multilateral fora constituted by the Review Conferences. In these occurrences and as a middle power, Pretoria resorts to strategies such as confrontation with major powers in its call for global disarmament and lately in its active support for a Treaty banning nuclear weapons, but also parallelism and partnership as was shown in its 1995's decision to align itself with the American position.³³ Pretoria's ability to convince the NAM also derived from the personal prestige of Nelson Mandela, since skeptical states found it difficult to publicly reject his government's arguments and appeal.³⁴

Confrontation was also the posture adopted during the Iraqi proliferation crisis and the earlier part of the Iranian one. Concerning Iraq, Pretoria strongly rejected Washington's counter-proliferation strategy and stuck to its conviction that proliferation issues should be primarily dealt with by the IAEA. With the consent of the UN, a mission was sent to Baghdad, led by vice-foreign Minister Aziz Pahad, to advise Iraq on disarmament issue. After its visit, the team presented Iraqi efforts in that field to the Security Council, but failed to convince the United States to renounce to its prepared military intervention, an offensive strongly condemned by South African leaders.³⁵

As for Iran, Pretoria defended its policy that "*there should be neither a nuclear weaponised Iran, nor an outbreak of war over the nuclear programme.*"³⁶ In fact, Mbeki's South Africa supported Teheran's right to develop a civilian nuclear program and to have access to all technologies linked to the fuel cycle. At the IAEA's board of governors, it abstained from voting the resolutions referring the issue to the UN Security Council, and even if as a non-permanent member of the Council, it voted in favor of all resolutions related to sanctions against Iran, it did it reluctantly, made attempts to soften them and tried to obtain exemptions to pursue its importations of Iranian crude oil.³⁷ This position illustrates both the attachment of the South African government to the equal right of all States to develop nuclear energy and its economic interests, which may be at odds with nonproliferation objectives and is clearly at the root of the decision to contest the legitimacy of economic sanctions or the IAEA's proposal to build an international low-enriched uranium (LEU) fuel bank in Kazakhstan, given its own intention to restart enrichment and sell fuel on the international market. Apart from these three issues, South

³² Jo-Ansie Van Wyk, "South Africa's Nuclear Diplomacy, 1990-2010," PhD diss., University of Pretoria, 2013.

³³ Alan Henrikson, "Niche Diplomacy in the World Public Arena: the Global 'Corners' of Canada and Norway," in Jan Melissen, ed. *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 74.

³⁴ Julia Preston and R. Jeffrey Smith, "The Nuclear Treaty: Product of Global Full-court Press by U.S.," *The Washington Post*, May 14, 1995.

³⁵ Niko Price, "Experts Say Iraq Doing Best to Disarm," *The Associated Press*, February 27, 2003.

³⁶ Department of Foreign Affairs, "South Africa in The United Nations Security Council (2007-2008)," 2009.

³⁷ Jo-Ansie van Wyk, "South Africa's Nuclear Future," *SAAI Occasional Paper n°150*, June 2013, p. 19.

Africa's diplomacy with the IAEA is usually more cooperative and consensual, and it possesses a history of successful initiatives and joint projects.

Most of these initiatives serves to confirm the role of South Africa as a leader on the continent. In the field of nonproliferation, this role is demonstrated by Pretoria's bid to host the headquarters of the African Commission on Nuclear Energy (AFCONE), the organization charged with implementing the Pelindaba Treaty, and concerning the civilian use of nuclear energy by its active membership within the African Regional Cooperative Agreement for Research, Development and Training related to Nuclear Science and Technology (AFRA). Finally, Pretoria is regionally concerned by nuclear security: it notably helps other African nations to fulfill their obligations according to the 1540 UN Security Council resolution.

Assessment

South Africa's choice of nuclear diplomacy as a niche appeared as an excellent choice immediately after the end of the Apartheid, and the country managed to promote its interests (security, political, economic and self-esteem) while at the same time playing a constructive role on the nuclear global order. Lately, it adopted a more confrontational posture which started with its support to Iran and lately crystallized in the refusal of the Zuma government to give away its stocks of highly enriched uranium.³⁸ The choice to favor disarmament and civilian use over nonproliferation can be justified given the profile of South Africa, and one may even argue that the attempt to make the major nuclear powers recognize the right of all states to master the integrality of the fuel cycle is starting to yield results. The adoption of the JCPOA between the P5+1 and Iran, on the one side, and the revised US-South Korea nuclear deal, adopted in April 2015, may be the first steps in this direction.

However, the efficiency of Pretoria's diplomacy may suffer from its radicalism, which shows a shift from the 1990s' successful strategy of mediation and compromises between NWS and NNWS. Rejecting realism on disarmament and nonproliferation may be coherent with Pretoria's identification with the NAM but hurt its political standing and influence. This new focus, which was visible in the loud support for the Ban Treaty, may also be linked to a change of generation within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs where the old generation favoring the bridge-building position (including Abdul Minty) is eventually retiring.

On the other side, focusing on short-term economic benefits by disregarding nonproliferation imperatives may put in doubt its seriousness in this field. Reports of the participation of South African businesses to the A.Q. Khan network, a 2007 break-in in the nuclear site of Pelindaba and the refusal to part from its high enrich uranium tarnish its image of a "good international citizen"³⁹ and raise question on its ability to sustain effectively this niche diplomacy. Finally, the internal opposition to the use of nuclear energy, fueled by active NGOs, as well as a lack of cash to launch ambitious projects, may limit

³⁸ Douglas Birch and R. Jeffrey Smith, "U.S. unease about nuclear-weapons fuel takes aim at a South African vault," *The Washington Post*, March 14, 2015.

³⁹ Aziz Pahad, "Statement in a nuclear-free world – the need for a new agenda," Department of Foreign Affairs, June 9, 1998.

the development of the civilian nuclear program and start to deprive Pretoria from its technical expertise on the subject.

Case Studies n°2: Japan

One may debate the inclusion of Japan among middle powers, but it is difficult to contest that nuclear is one of the niche selected by its diplomacy. Three Japanese cities have become the symbols of the threat constituted by atomic energy: Hiroshima, Nagasaki and more recently Fukushima. It was therefore difficult for the democratic Japanese regime to avoid any reference to disarmament, nonproliferation, and the civilian use of nuclear energy, in its foreign policy. That being said, its diplomacy is much more complex and ambiguous and is characterized by a plurality of objectives, at times contradictory, and a plurality of actors, whose cooperation has varied over time (see Table 2).

| Issues | | Nuclear deterrence and disarmament | Non-proliferation regime | Civilian use of nuclear energy |
|-------------------------------|-----------|--|--|---|
| Legitimacy | | Only country victim of nuclear explosions but also reliance on extended deterrence and decision not to build a nuclear capacity | Exemplary record and financing of many initiatives | Leading nuclear industry mastering the integrality of the fuel cycle |
| Stakes | State | Long term elimination of nuclear weapons, short term dependence on extended deterrence | Strengthening the regime in all its aspects | Full right to access and develop all technologies (including reprocessing) and enhanced international cooperation |
| | Non-state | Short term elimination of nuclear weapons | Same | Same for the business community but growing distrust of nuclear energy among citizens |
| Major diplomatic achievements | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tokyo Forum - UN Programme of Fellowships on Disarmament, UN Conference on Disarmament Issues - Several propositions to move forward on disarmament, especially within the NPDI - Group of Eminent Persons for Substantive Advancement of Nuclear Disarmament | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support of the CTBTO, CANWFZ, CTR - Education in Asia and developing countries on nonproliferation issues | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Negotiation of civil nuclear agreement recognizing the right to reprocess |

Table 2: summary of the bases of nuclear diplomacy in Japan (1995-2018)

The conscience of the world

The bombings on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which killed at least 250 000 persons, conferred slowly to Japan a status of martyr which became part of the identity of the country as the long term consequences of the explosion emerged. The testimonies shared by the survivors, or *hibakusha*, gained the status of undeniable arguments about the

atrocities of nuclear warfare. Though at the root of many Japanese organizations promoting disarmament, this legitimacy is only one of the aspects of Tokyo's credibility on nuclear issues.

Many other elements can legitimize the Japanese policy. First, its leading nuclear industry gives it one of the best expertise in the world on technical issues. This is only reinforced by its command of the entire fuel cycle and its access to sensitive technologies and materials. Second, its exemplary nonproliferation record, coupled to its well-publicized decision to forgo nuclear weapons, make it one of the most trusted nation on the nuclear global order, a position which may be reflected by the selection of Yukiya Amano to lead the IAEA in 2008.

Lastly, Japan's strategic positioning in a troubled region, surrounded by nuclear powers and itself under the American nuclear umbrella gives it a better understanding than many other NNWS of the security imperatives linked to deterrence and the possession of nuclear weapons, even if it also complicates its foreign policy in this field and its interaction with its civil society.

A tension between interests, a tension between actors

The national interests perceived by the Japanese government, rather stable over time, differ quite largely from the way they are interpreted by many NGOs in the country, and by the business community. However, all groupings agree that Japan has a major stake in nuclear issues.

Japan's security interests are strongly influenced by nuclear factors, since it is both threatened (North Korea) and protected (the United States) by nuclear powers. As a consequence, its conviction that nuclear weapons are inherently dangerous and should be eliminated is tempered by the government's determination to rely on extended deterrence for its security. In the past, this tension was even stronger since the government, on several occasions, considered the opportunity of producing nuclear weapons. However, the fear of losing the American alliance and the almost unanimous popular opposition led the Sato government to proclaim the "Three Nonproliferation Principles" in 1967: no possession, manufacturing or deployment of nuclear weapons on Japanese territory.⁴⁰ This did not prevent the Japanese to secretly authorize the United States to reintroduce nuclear weapons into Okinawa in times of emergency, a decision only made public in 2010 and totally at odds with popular sentiments at the time.⁴¹ Nowadays, its security interests clearly push Japan in favor of the reduction of the role of nuclear weapons, the enforcement of strict nonproliferation rules, especially in northeast Asia, and an emphasis on nuclear security and the prevention of WMD terrorism. The dependency on a nuclear alliance, regularly evoked as paramount by the government, is somewhat controversial since some Japanese see it as a threat rather than an element of stability, but is considered absolutely paramount by a government eager to receive guarantees by Washington. Regardless, most actors agree that Japan holds a security interest in nuclear issues and should therefore conduct an active diplomacy with regard to deterrence, disarmament and nonproliferation, but also energy since the country sees its supply in nuclear materials as essential.

⁴⁰ Maria Rost Rublee, *Nonproliferation Norms: Why States choose Nuclear Restraint*, p. 58.

⁴¹ Anthony Kuhn, "Japan Confirms Secret Nuclear Pacts with U.S.", *NPR*, March 11, 2010.

Politically, nuclear diplomacy increases Japan's authority and enables the country to promote its principles of multilateralism and peaceful resolution of conflicts. The militancy of its civil society, as well as the leading work in the field of Japanese physicists, political scientists and peace activists gives Japan an independent and essential place on the international stage, place that government officials could difficultly claim themselves because of their links with the United States.

For the business community, supported by the government, economic interests are of paramount importance. With the ongoing restart of the reactors, up to 20 percent of the country's electricity is set to have a nuclear origin (30 percent before the Fukushima accident), although this goal is far from being reached at the moment when only 2% of Japan's electricity comes from nuclear energy.⁴² Thanks to the purchase of Westinghouse, Toshiba is one of the many Japanese companies exporting nuclear technologies and fuel services. Tokyo is therefore concerned in ensuring international cooperation, the development of nuclear programs abroad and the organization of an open but secure and safeguarded trade of sensitive components. Moreover, Japan has invested heavily in the past decades in the breeder reactors and reprocessing technologies to mitigate its deficiency in uranium. Though criticized because of their proliferation risks, those techniques and the plutonium necessary to fuel them are a key economic interest for Japan, whose business and political leaders are hence diplomatically active to defend their validity, especially since Japan sincerely believes in the security and exemplarity of its program, which led some to argue that through its sale around the world and efforts to educate on safety and security, Japanese companies contribute to the nonproliferation efforts. The recent deal allowing India to reprocess Japanese fuel is an evidence of this mindset.⁴³

As seen, Japan has interiorized most nuclear norms, and its commitment to a nuclear-free world is now part of its identity. Preserving and developing this identity is essential for NGOs and even for the government which retires part of its prestige and respect from its peaceful and international law-abiding reputation. When it failed to support the TPNW, unwilling to damage its reliance on extended deterrence, Tokyo was strongly criticized both abroad and domestically.⁴⁴ This backlash illustrates its need to conform to its proclaimed identity but also to clarify its positioning vis-à-vis NWS.

A “wallet” nuclear diplomacy

Formally, Tokyo's diplomacy is non-confrontational, results-oriented and favors financial and intellectual contributions. According to these principles, Japan put in place several initiatives to advance nuclear disarmament, such as the UN Programme of Fellowships on Disarmament, which enables diplomats to visit Hiroshima and Nagasaki each year, the sponsoring since 1989 of the UN Conference on Disarmament Issues in Japan or the work set in place with the NPDI, a coalition set to help implement the final document of the 2010 NPT Review Conference or the Group of Eminent Persons for Substantive

⁴² “Japan backs role of nuclear power in 2030 energy plan,” *Reuters*, 16 may 2018.

⁴³ Kyodo, “In a reversal, Japan to let India reprocess spent fuel from Japanese reactors,” *The Japan Times*, June 19, 2015.

⁴⁴ Ramesh Thakur, “Japan on the wrong side of nuclear weapons ban treaty,” *The Japan Times*, July 10, 2018.

Advancement of Nuclear Disarmament which produced a report in November 2017.⁴⁵ Outside the government, the Tokyo Forum, organized in 1999, had a major impact on the NPT Review process.

This willingness to emphasize concrete actions has led Japan to dedicate substantial funds to its nuclear foreign policy. With regard to nonproliferation, this “wallet” diplomacy enabled the organization of an Asian Export Control Seminar, as well as Asian senior talks. On the North Korea crisis, Japan put a lot of money in initiatives aiming at the denuclearization of the peninsula, and proposed to fund the elimination of nuclear components after the Kim-Trump meeting in June 2018.⁴⁶ It also paid for the negotiations leading to the adoption of the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), and the Central Asian nuclear-weapon-free zone (CANWFZ) and committed 100 million to the transport of missiles and the decontamination of old submarines in the framework of the Cooperative Threat Reduction Program (CTR).⁴⁷ Non-state actors also push their priorities through financial tools: the Hiroshima Peace and Culture Foundation thus spends about 1 billion yen each year in outreach and education.⁴⁸

Its insistence on its right, not only to enrich uranium, but also to reprocess spent fuel and exploit the benefits of plutonium is visible in its bilateral nuclear diplomacy with the US. More generally, it pushes for civilian use through technological cooperation, trade but also the promotion of the IAEA additional protocol.⁴⁹

Assessment

Sometimes denounced for its hypocrisy, Japan’s nuclear diplomacy tries to find a third way by promoting gradualism and supporting (and especially financially), major initiatives reinforcing the nuclear order. A force when it enables it to reach effectively different interlocutors, the plurality of Japanese voices on this issue can also be a weakness when it blurs the significance of the message carried and creates uncertainty on the sincerity of the actors. The traditional conflict between the Arms Control and Nonproliferation and the North American section at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs illustrates this dualism and this difficulty to define clear priorities in the field of nuclear diplomacy. Sometimes described as a thorn in the side of government, the NGO community exert a real influence on politicians (obvious with the publication of the Peace Depot grading of governmental efforts on disarmament from 2002 to 2005),⁵⁰ which may sometimes thwart its efforts to

⁴⁵ The Group of Eminent Persons for Substantive Advancement of Nuclear Disarmament, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, November 28, 2017.

⁴⁶ “Abe offers funds for denuclearization,” *The Japan News*, June 16, 2018.

⁴⁷ Maria Rost Rublee, “The Threshold States,” eds. Tanya Ogilvie-White and David Santoro, *Slaying the Nuclear Dragon* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2012), p. 99.

⁴⁸ Maria Rost Rublee, *Nonproliferation Norms: Why States choose Nuclear Restraint*, p. 79.

⁴⁹ For instance, see: “*The universalization of the Additional Protocol is the most realistic and effective way to strengthen the current non-proliferation regime*”.

Statement by H.E. Mr. Sumio Tarui, Ambassador, Permanent Representative of Japan to the Conference on Disarmament, Second Session of the Preparatory Committee, for the 2010 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), Cluster II, Geneva, May 5, 2008.

⁵⁰ Anthony DiFilippo, *Japan's Nuclear Disarmament Policy and the U.S. Security Umbrella* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 67.

builds bridge between groups (such as the NAC and the P5) but is still essential to reactive nuclear norms and improve Japanese self-esteem and reputation. Forging a constructive bond with the civil society and sharing roles in a smarter way, preserving its independence while retaining good relations with the United States are one of the keys that could improve the efficiency of Japan nuclear diplomacy in the coming years.

Case Study n°3: Kazakhstan

Landlocked between major powers Russia and China and with “only” 17 million inhabitants, Kazakhstan is rarely considered as a middle power. On the nuclear order however, it is used to punching above its weight ever since its independence in December 1991. This activism is chiefly endorsed by the country’s President, Nursultan Nazarbayev, who almost made it a personal trademark. But it is also relayed, to a lesser degree, by civil society and corporate actors. As part of a global diplomacy aiming at preserving strong relationship with Russia, China, and the United States, nuclear diplomacy is also a key component of Kazakhstani energy policy (see Table 3). Its achievements must be recognized even if its efficiency is limited, as is the case for Astana’s foreign policy in general, by its dependency on major actors to guarantee its economic development but also its political and physical survival.

| Issues | | Nuclear deterrence and disarmament | Non-proliferation regime | Civilian use of nuclear energy |
|-------------------------------|-----------|---|---|---|
| Legitimacy | | Victim of nuclear tests, renouncement of nuclear weapons stationed on its territory | Leading role in international cooperation to reduce nuclear threat and raising awareness against nuclear testing | World leader in uranium production, ambitions to develop its nuclear industry |
| Stakes | State | Elimination of nuclear testing and step by step elimination of nuclear weapons | Strengthening of the nonproliferation regime | Full right to have access and develop technologies, enhanced international cooperation, foreign investments |
| | Non-state | Same | Same | Same especially in the business community |
| Major diplomatic achievements | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Relocation of nuclear weapons - Adoption of a Day against nuclear testing and active participation to the CTBTO work | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Leading role in the Semipalatinsk Treaty - Hosting of the International LEU Bank - Constructive role in the Threat Reduction Programs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Development of international cooperation |

Table 3: summary of the bases of nuclear diplomacy in Kazakhstan (1995-2018)

Semipalatinsk as a symbol of legitimacy

Even since the first explosion in 1949, the Kazakhstani city of Semey has been witnessing about 500 nuclear tests, including 200 above the ground. Several hundred thousand people suffered from those tests, which made President Nazarbayev say that the “Kazakh people

have through hundreds of tragedies similar to that in Hiroshima”.⁵¹ This first-hand experience of the effect of nuclear weapons created a profound aversion among the population for all things nuclear and led to the mobilization of the civil society with the creation in 1989 of the Nevada-Semipalatinsk movement led by poet Olzhas Suleimenov.

Having hosted Soviet ICBMs and nuclear bombers, Kazakhstan also benefits from a strategic and technical credibility on nuclear weapons. Even if only Moscow detained sensitive information, the dismantlement of the missiles, management of the contaminated sites and storing of weapon-usable material give it a special experience of issues usually restricted to NWS. Besides, its decision to renounce to the Soviet heritage and to join the NPT as a NNWS was described as exemplary and, in the words of the President, “earned [the Kazakhstani people] the moral right to call on the world to follow our experience.”⁵²

On the civilian side, Astana’s legitimacy is chiefly built on its status as a leading exporter of uranium and its industrial capacities, dating from the USSR period, and specialized in fuel production. Despite the departure of many Russian experts after the independence, Kazakhstan was able to attract foreign investments to develop this sector and to train rapidly a skilled workforce.

Finally, Astana’s credibility is strongly linked to the personality of its leader. Indeed, Nursultan Nazarbayev has established a personal legitimacy on this issue thanks to his early activism against nuclear testing, which gave him a strong popularity in his homeland. He has been publicly consistent, ever since his first act as President of closing the testing site of Semipalatinsk in August 1991, in his commitment to strengthening the nuclear order.

Special interests to tackle nuclear issues

In the earlier moment of its life as an independent country, Kazakhstan had to decide whether its security would be better assured by keeping the Soviet nuclear weapons on its soil or by joining the NPT regime as a NNWS. Given the immediate need to secure international recognition to guarantee the survival of the new state, and thus to accommodate both the Soviet Union and the United States, Nursultan Nazarbayev opted for the latter option in exchange of security assurances of all members of the P5. Unwilling to become a “Central Asian North Korea”⁵³, he founded his country on the principles of multilateralism and international cooperation, and on the assumption that “genuine security rests not on nuclear arsenals, but on peaceful foreign policy, internal stability and sustainable economic and political development of the country.”⁵⁴ That being said, Kazakhstan’s security is strongly linked to Russia, via the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and it still leases to its northern neighbor the missile testing ranges of Sary

⁵¹ Michael Reiss, *Bridled Ambition, Why Countries constrain their Nuclear Capabilities* (Washington DC: The Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1995), p. 139.

⁵² John C.K. Daly, “Kazakhstan Aims to Become a Nuclear Energy Player,” *Silk Road Reporters*, June 22, 2015.

⁵³ Togzhan Kassenova, “The Rollback States,” in eds. Tanya Ogilvie-White and David Santoro, *Slaying the Nuclear Dragon* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2012), p. 99.

⁵⁴ Statement by Yerzhan Ashikbayev, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan, at the 2015 NPT Review Conference, General Debate, April 27, 2015.

Shagan and Kasputin Yars (as well as the Baikonur Cosmodrome), which illustrates a certain tolerance for the P5's nuclear status.

To preserve its autonomy, Astana's main foreign policy objectives are to stay on good terms with Russia, China and the West. The negotiations leading to the dismantlement of the ICBMs gave Kazakhstan a special importance in the eyes of the United States, which dedicated a lot of time and resources to organize the operations, but also of Russia in a time of transition. Its continued commitment to nonproliferation and nuclear security still makes it an important partner for major powers and gives it some influence.

Economically speaking, Astana nurtures four main ambitions: becoming the world largest uranium producer (achieved in 2011 with 41 percent of mined uranium), supplying nuclear fuel, producing electricity with a national nuclear program, and eventually selling reactors in cooperation with Russia.⁵⁵ These economic interests require major foreign investments and an integration in international trade. They also necessitate a respect of global norms, a reputation of respectability and of skill, justifying the efforts of exemplarity deployed by the country. Historically, economic factors were also at the root of the deals between Astana and Washington, and through their diplomatic efforts, the Kazakhstanis obtained 84 million dollars in dismantlement assistance, 200 million dollars in economic investments from 1993 to 1996, and a tripling of U.S. economic assistance.⁵⁶

In 2006, the House of Representative saluted the outstanding cooperation of the Kazakhstani government in implementing the threat reduction program and in 2008, two Congressmen proposed the name of President Nazarbayev for the Nobel Peace Prize, a nomination also considered by Japanese Representatives in 2012. This recognition and positive depiction is essential for a leader who is preoccupied by his image abroad and attempts to overshadow the criticism associated with his country's human rights violations, corruption, and poor democratic record.⁵⁷ If personal recognition is not the only motivation of President Nazarbayev's nuclear diplomacy, he clearly perceives the identification of his country as a norm-abiding and constructive actor on the international stage as a national interest.

A multi-directional diplomacy

An important part of the country's nuclear diplomacy is dedicated to the struggle against nuclear testing. As a state party to the CTBT, it hosts an International Training Center on seismic activities in Almaty and was the host of a major on-site exercise in 2008. At the UN, it successfully lobbied in favor of the creation of an International Day against Nuclear Tests and through the NGO The Atom Project, it set itself "*leading the fight against nuclear testing*".⁵⁸

Because of its status of NNWS but also of its close links with NWS, Kazakhstan sees itself as a potential mediator between both group of states, able to strike compromises by

⁵⁵ Togzhan Kassenova, "Kazakhstan's nuclear ambitions," *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, February 28, 2008.

⁵⁶ Michael Reiss, *Bridled Ambition, Why Countries constrain their Nuclear Capabilities*.

⁵⁷ Ariel Cohen, *Kazakhstan: The Road to Independence, Energy Policy and the Birth of a Nation* (Washington DC: The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, 2008), p. 32.

⁵⁸ Togzhan Kassenova, "The Rollback States".

promoting the importance both of nonproliferation and disarmament. On disarmament, it traditionally tried to keep a realistic perspective by focusing on issues such as the CTBT, the fissile material cut-off Treaty, and bilateral arms control negotiation. Unwilling to offend its powerful partners, the government avoided until recently to commit itself in favor of a convention banning nuclear weapons, even if it increased its critics against the lack of progress of the P5 in reducing their stockpiles and upholding their security assurances to country having renounced their arsenals, namely Ukraine and Kazakhstan. This shift led it to participate to the Humanitarian Initiative Movement and to support the negotiation to ban nuclear weapons. During the two sessions, Kazakhstan called for increased prohibitions with a special focus on transit and testing. Although these were not reflected in the final text,⁵⁹ the TPNW was signed on 2nd March 2018. While Astana is currently seeking ratification of the Treaty, the government mentioned that NWS should not be left out of the disarmament process, refusing to give up its bridge-building status.⁶⁰

On the proliferation side, Astana attempted to play the role of a mediator between the P5+1 and Iran by providing location for the initial talks in 2013 which led to the Geneva agreement in November 2014. As a founding member of the CANWFZ, it participated in the extension of IAEA additional protocols in the region. One of its major successes in this domain is the designation, in June 2015, of the Ulba Metallurgical Plant, in Oskemen, as the location of the IAEA international fuel bank of low-enriched uranium, an initiative designed to reassure states choosing not to develop enrichment capacities.⁶¹ For the Kazakhstani government, this nomination is an opportunity to prove that it possesses a stable and reliable nuclear industry, that its commitments towards nonproliferation are robust and therefore to attract more investments from abroad and to modernize the sector. With various cooperation agreements and especially a strong partnership with Russia, Astana is indeed reinforcing its position in uranium production, but also fuel manufacturing and is working to soon exploit nuclear electricity. This decision receives however limited public support, and the public is especially weary of the environmental impact of the new installations.⁶²

This government's answer to these protests is an increase in nuclear safety and security.⁶³ Praised for its openness in the implementation of the CTR, Kazakhstani leadership has been saluted during the Nuclear Security Summits and President Obama even evoked "*the outstanding leadership of President Nazarbayev and the people of Kazakhstan*" in this domain.⁶⁴

Finally, the promotion of the image of the country and of its leader is pursued through attempts to gather symbolic or institutional recognition. In the wake of the fuel bank,

⁵⁹ "Nuclear Ban Treaty Daily," *Reaching Critical Will*, vol. 2, n° 13, 6 July 2017.

⁶⁰ Statement by the delegation of the Republic of Kazakhstan at the General debate of the Second session of the Preparatory Committee for the 2020 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (Geneva, April 24, 2018).

⁶¹ Alexander Nitzsche, "IAEA Moves Ahead on Establishing Low Enriched Uranium Bank in Kazakhstan," IAEA, June 11, 2015.

⁶² Togzhan Kassenova, Kazakhstan's nuclear ambitions.

⁶³ "Kazakhstan opens nuclear security training centre," *World Nuclear News*, May 16, 2017.

⁶⁴ Barack Obama, "Remarks by President Obama, President Medvedev of Russia, and President Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan at Trilateral Announcement", Seoul, March 27, 2012.

Kazakhstan has formally made a bid to host the next Nuclear Security Summit and has recently organized in Astana the Pugwash Conference on Science and World Affairs in 2017, the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) World Congress in 2014 and an International Anti-Nuclear Conference in 2012. From 2016 to 2017, Astana also assumed the chair of the Hague Code of Conduct against the proliferation of ballistic missiles (HCOG). Lastly, its long-standing endeavors to gain a seat to the IAEA Board of Governors echoes its campaign for a non-permanent seat on the Security Council for 2017-2018, race that was won by Kazakhstan against Thailand

Assessment

As a niche, this diplomacy has been rather effective for Kazakhstan. Not only did it contribute to the acquisition of security guarantees and to its initial recognition, but it definitely increased its leverage and prestige on this international scene. Without it, President Nazarbayev probably would not have met as often with American Presidents. Eventually, it played a substantial role in its economic development at the onset and still does with about 25 800 persons working for Kazatomprom. Given the current focus on nuclear security and the development of nuclear energy worldwide, this policy is bound to remain effective for the coming years. Two factors may however have a damaging role. First, as the divisions between NWS and NNWS is becoming sharper, and Astana may find it even more complex to find common grounds between the two sides and to put forward acceptable initiatives which may not be only easily- agreed upon empty verbiage but have a concrete and constructive impact. Second, the aversion of the population for all things nuclear is genuine and may play a role if local and independent NGOs are allowed to campaign freely. This popular opposition may also constitute a hurdle in civil nuclear development and especially in the construction of the fuel bank.

Conclusion

As demonstrated by these three case studies, the development of a nuclear niche diplomacy answers a plurality of interests and brings a middle power enhanced security, political standing, economic power but also boosts its self-esteem. The cases studied show that in South Africa, Japan and Kazakhstan, these four incentives were at the roots of the diplomatic endeavors. In the three cases, there were positive returns, even if different actors may have benefited from the initiatives (state or non-state). In the three cases, the efficiency of their diplomacy relies on the legitimacy of the national actors on all nuclear themes, which include strategy and disarmament, nonproliferation, nuclear security and safety but also the peaceful use of nuclear energy.

This criteria is usually met by countries having a lasting impact on the international nuclear order. It does not mean that others cannot play an important role. In the 1960s, Ireland was at the forefront of efforts to enforce arms reduction and to promote nonproliferation, and its activism at the United Nations was instrumental in the formation of several norms, including the NPT. Today, Austria's crusade for a Treaty banning nuclear weapons caused a major challenge for the P5 and shook the foundations of the nuclear order. For these states, involvement in nuclear diplomacy stemmed from a historic commitment towards arms reduction, neutrality, and non-alignment. They may however lack the credibility to play a durable role in shaping the nuclear order in all its aspects, and may find more

difficult to concretely intervene on issues such as the IAEA safeguards, the negotiation of a fissile material cut-off treaty or the CTBT verification system.

Although the NWS sometimes tend to consider nuclear issues as an insider game, middle powers opting for this niche are sometimes effective proposing constructive ways to strengthen the regime and reduce the risk associated with nuclear energy. In a time when the divide between NWS and NNWS seems larger than ever, their voices must be heard and their efforts to build bridges and to represent the concerns of the international community must not be overlooked, since they have the ability, as proved in the past, to help legitimize norms and promote their universalization, submit ways out of deadlocks, and reach useful compromises.