

# **Beijing's Moratorium on Nuclear Tests: An Evaluation of Mainland China's Nuclear Weapons**

On the morning of July 29, mainland China conducted its 45th nuclear blast in 32 years. According to Australia's Nuclear Monitoring Group, the test explosion was 5,000 tons in magnitude.

In a statement issued immediately thereafter, Beijing said that it would impose a moratorium on such tests starting the following day (July 30) and would actively take part in negotiations held in Geneva for the signing of a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).

In its statement, Beijing also advanced the following arguments: (1) major nuclear powers should abandon the policy of nuclear deterrence and "drastically reduce" their weapons stockpiles; (2) the declared nuclear powers should all pledge not to be the first to use nuclear weapons under any circumstances; they also should not threaten to use such weapons against countries that do not have them; (3) no countries should deploy nuclear weapons outside their borders, and a nuclear-free area should be built; (4) no countries should develop space-based weapons systems or a guided-missile defense system that may sabotage world security and stability; and (5) a global comprehensive treaty banning the tests and possession of nuclear weapons should be concluded.

The recent test comes on the heels of another blast conducted on June 8 which measured between 20,000 and 80,000 tons, a magnitude much stronger than the latest blast. In addition, the nuclear device tested on June 8 carried two warheads and used a new ignition technology (mercurochrome). In other words, mainland China has succeeded in minimizing warhead size and controlling explosion magnitude. This technological breakthrough is militarily significant for mainland China. First, the new warheads can be installed on MIRVed missiles to attack enemy targets separately. These new warheads can also be used in cruise missiles for more precise attacks on enemy targets. MIRVed and cruise missiles equipped with this new warhead type will have the capability to weaken the United States' TMD (The-

ater Missile Defense) and BMD (Ballistic Missile Defense) systems now under development. Moreover, since the new ignition technology can prevent nuclear blasts from creating radiation, Beijing may use such weapons if it is in an inferior position during military confrontation with either the United States or Japan. As a result, the difference between strategic and tactical nuclear warheads has been obliterated, and future warfare may take on a new complexion.

After its June 8 nuclear weapons test, mainland China not only expressed its willingness to impose a moratorium and join in CTBT negotiations after conducting one more blast, but also proposed controlling the production of nuclear fission materials and the development of missile technology. Beijing itself has benefitted from its support for nuclear disarmament. First, the signing of a global test ban treaty would give Beijing's two longstanding enemies India and Japan little chance to develop or further develop their nuclear weapons, and leaves mainland China with a considerable amount of nuclear power. Second, test ban support will enhance mainland China's reputation in the international community. Third, Jiang Zemin's leadership position can be further consolidated if mainland China's international prestige is enhanced and safety is guaranteed. Fourth, such a move would help clear away other countries' suspicions of a mainland China nuclear threat and consequently place the latter in a better position to solicit foreign economic assistance, such as low-interest loans from Japan.

Nonetheless, there is reason to believe that in posturing to distinguish itself as a member of the Third World, Beijing may encounter trouble with the United States before it finally initials the CTBT. The signing of the 1995 nuclear nonproliferation treaty is a case in point. In fact, mainland China probably has not taken the CTBT very seriously, nor does it think the United States has. Indeed, to guard against possible nuclear threats from other countries, including mainland China, the United States is expected to continue blasting tests of below 1,000 tons. Beijing's five arguments reiterated in its July 29 statement were mainly directed at the United States. Should the latter fail to observe those requirements, Beijing would have the excuse to continue its own nuclear tests.

In the foreseeable future, mainland China is expected to gradually readjust its nuclear weapons systems. The Dongfeng-31s which have passed the test and can carry the new warhead type are expected to replace the long-range Dongfeng-4s (which have a range of 8,000 kilometers), and the Dongfeng-41s currently being designed will re-

place the intercontinental Dongfeng-5s (which have a range of 12,000 kilometers). Mainland China also has the intermediate-range Dongfeng-21s (2,500 kilometer range), and short-range missiles such as M-9s and M-11s. Attempts have also been made to test-launch the Dongfeng-31s from nuclear submarines. Finally, it has been suggested that cruise missiles be installed with nuclear warheads and have their firing range increased. However, since there is presently little opportunity to use new weapons, such research would probably not be an urgent task.

**(Arthur S. Ding)**