



Libya's Nuclear Disarmament:

Lessons and Implications for Nuclear Proliferation

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Libya's Nuclear Disarmament: Lessons and Implications for Nuclear Proliferation

by Norman Cigar

Recent events in Libya have already had a significant effect on the region and beyond, and perhaps one of the most compelling results has been the potential impact on regional powers for the future course of nuclear proliferation. Libya's nuclear disarmament experience has provided lessons learned for other states, including for those states that have themselves acquired nuclear weapons recently, those that may be in the process of developing that capability or those that may be considering the possibility of doing so. What is important is not whether such states have understood the lessons correctly, but rather how they have studied and absorbed such lessons. A corollary is the importance of appreciating the impact that such lessons may have on their perspective of the role and relevance of nuclear weapons in relation to perceived threats and interests.

The thesis of this monograph is that the lessons learned from the Libyan case of disarmament, especially in light of the events of 2011, will confirm the decision of those countries that have already acquired nuclear weapons and add momentum to the efforts of those countries on their way to developing or considering the acquisition of nuclear weapons as a means of enhancing national and regime security. This dynamic, not surprisingly, will thereby complicate future efforts at nonproliferation and denuclearization.

For most countries, the interest was on the applicability of Libya's experience either for themselves or for their neighbors. Reactions have clustered along two principal lessons learned: first, a failure to acquire nuclear weapons will increase the likelihood of intervention by the international community (especially in support of dissidents), and second, the likelihood that neighbors will forego a nuclear capability has now diminished, with the related potential consequences for the regional balance of power.

Libya's Nuclear Disarmament Experience

The Honeymoon Period

Libya's mercurial strongman, Muammar Qaddafi, had garnered the world's attention and had gained a certain degree of respectability thanks to his decision, announced in December 2003, to voluntarily relinquish his country's established nuclear weapons program. It was a landmark event, even though the extent of the program's development at the time of its abandonment has been a subject of debate.¹

The motivations driving Libya to its crucial decision on the nuclear program involved a complex evolution of a cost-benefit analysis incorporating foreign, security, and domestic factors, culminating in a growing sense within the leadership that nuclear weapons were not useful in promoting the country's military and political objectives. And, in particular, the nuclear program was seen as a major contributor to Libya's on-going international isolation.² The country's former Foreign Minister, Abd al-Rahman Shalgam, for his part, claims that he had advised Qaddafi in 2000 that the nuclear program would cause Libya problems. However, according to Shalgam, the catalyst for Qaddafi's ultimate decision to relinquish his country's nuclear program was a reported message in 2001 from President George W. Bush in response to Libyan feelers for improved relations – communicated through Algeria's President Abdelaziz Bouteflika – that “either you get rid of your weapons of mass destruction or he will personally destroy them and destroy everything with no discussion.”³

Initially, many touted the Libyan experience as a model for halting nuclear programs in other countries, in particular North Korea and Iran. For example, in a 2004 interview, Paula DeSutter, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Verification and Compliance noted hopefully that “we want to have lessons learned from this because we want Libya to be a model for other countries.”⁴ Likewise, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell suggested that Syria follow Libya's example with its own weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program.⁵ At a Congressional hearing on North Korea's nuclear program, Congressman Tom Lantos (D-CA) was optimistic that “with creative diplomacy by all parties and the strategic decision by Pyongyang to follow the Libyan model, which I am convinced is the only viable formula, I am confident that the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is an achievable goal.”⁶ United Kingdom's Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw, also hoped for the application of the diplomatic route used in Libya to the case with Iran.⁷ Qaddafi, in fact, claimed that the United States and the Europeans had asked him on more than one occasion to talk to Iran and North Korea in order to convince them not to pursue nuclear weapons.⁸

The Libyans themselves encouraged this expectation of using the example they had set, as in an article that appeared in the Libyan press in 2007, which noted proudly that North Korea, in the wake of discussions on its nuclear program, seemed to be about to follow “the Libyan example ... which has become a positive model which is often held up in international diplomatic circles which seek to put an end to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and [as a model] for countries' responsible behavior.” The article urged Iran to follow Libya's experience as a model.⁹ As late as 2008, Qaddafi was still advising Iran to give up its nuclear program, as he did in a speech when visiting Tunisia.¹⁰

In part, the Libyans' promotion of their example was intended to justify Qaddafi's decision in the face of what must have been seen as exasperating criticism in some Arab circles. For example, in 2003, just days after Libya's announcement that it would relinquish its nuclear program, a discussion on Al Jazeera TV seemed to elicit a consensus from the invited participants that nuclear weapons were necessary for the Arab world in order to balance Israel's power. In that discussion, a Libyan dissident figure, speaking skeptically of Qaddafi's recent deal on the nuclear issue, asserted that “I believe that the Libyan model is abnormal” and that the decision was taken by Qaddafi only to save his own head without having negotiated in order to enhance the security of Libya or the region, thereby sacrificing not only the economic investment made in the nuclear program but

security for both Libya and the Arab world.¹¹

That same month, an Egyptian political analyst took Qaddafi to task, equating Libya's concessions on the nuclear issue and a failure to achieve a "nuclear peace" to "gains ... for the Zionist side." In his view, Qaddafi by his actions had been part of a wider "denuding of Arab security" and, what was more, Libya had taken these steps unilaterally without gaining any concessions in return on the Israeli issue. The same writer also feared that the Libyan deal set a bad precedent, as now the United States would feel emboldened to press other Arab states on regional issues.¹²

Perhaps the sharpest criticism came from Saudi Arabia. The Saudi Arabian National Guard's official journal, for example, carried a lengthy analytical article which concluded that "despite the expected positive effects of this decision for Libya, the international and regional effects will not be of the same type, as the negative effects will be dominant, especially those with respect to the unity of Arab action and the future of the Arab-Zionist conflict."¹³ Blaming Libya's "eagerness to please [the United States] at whatever cost," the author focused on the negative consequences of Libya's deal. For the author, Libya's decision would validate for the United States the principle of preventive war, leading not to stability but to the establishment of U.S. hegemony. It also marginalized and subverted international agencies, and Libya's revelations of Pakistani support embarrassed the latter. Moreover, pressure would ensue on other Middle East states to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Most importantly, there would now be a further erosion of the balance of power in the Middle East in Israel's favor, as a potential deterrent in the Arab camp would be removed, which would "confirm and solidify Israel's regional position" and facilitate the United States' wider plan of enabling Israel to play the role of a regional great power.¹⁴ Such criticism was persistent, and even in 2011 a Jordanian journalist still spoke of Qaddafi's "betrayal of his Umma [i.e., the Islamic community], his country, his people, and even himself when he delivered to America, through Great Britain, all the information about Libya's nuclear program."¹⁵

What may have been even more annoying to Qaddafi was that the Libyan opposition also derided him for having handed over the costly nuclear program. One Libyan dissident asked rhetorically "who was it that sold Libya's secrets after having deluded the Libyans that he was a nationalist and that he wanted a nuclear program with which to defend Libya from the ambitions of imperialism and to create a balance in the region? It became clear after Qaddafi was exposed that he is a liar, a coward, and an agent planted since 1969."¹⁶ For his part, a former Libyan military officer taunted him by asking whether he numbered among his victories "your latest one over American President Bush, who made you kneel before him and prostrate yourself, humiliating you, so that you would deliver to him all the equipment from Libya's nuclear program."¹⁷

Likewise, an anti-Qaddafi émigré Libyan journalist considered that "handing over the nuclear weapons [sic] was a great loss for Libya," and reminded readers that in return "Libya has received no reward from the [rest of] the world." Using irony, he concluded by saying: "On behalf of all the sectors of the Libyan people I call on the Leader of the Revolution Muammar Qaddafi to open a thorough investigation of any official who participated in the negotiations with America on the issue of surrendering the nuclear weapons and to punish everyone which the investigation reveals guilty of great treason to the nation and the revolution."¹⁸ Qaddafi's disarmament was also used as club against him within mainstream religious circles. For example, once the revolt had broken out in Libya against Qaddafi, the prominent Saudi cleric Muhsin al-Awaji lashed out saying "the hypocritical West has received its payment from this tyrant, since he ... handed over to the West the

Libyan nuclear sites and abjectly surrendered to [the West] tens of billions [of dollars], which he had taken from the mouths of the helpless Libyan people.”¹⁹ Jihadist circles also criticized Qaddafi for disarming Libya, with Al-Qaida’s Ayman al-Zawahiri in 2007 calling Qaddafi “the enemy of Islam” and criticizing him for having given up his weapons to “his masters, the Crusaders in Washington.”²⁰

In response to such censure, one Libyan writer typically argued the official line, namely that thanks to its disarmament, Libya had achieved its reintegration into the international community as a useful and positive player and had even been chosen as a temporary member of the United Nations’ Security Council. And, in addition, the same writer stressed that in any case, nuclear weapons had not benefited Pakistan and had been expensive, that nuclear weapons had not been used since World War II, and that the 9/11 attacks had proved that a defense relying on weapons of mass destruction was mistaken.²¹

The Onset of Disillusionment

Libya assumed that the deal on its nuclear program would result in immediate positive changes in its relationship with the United States.²² At the time, reflecting Libya’s assumptions, Qaddafi’s son Sayf al-Islam told the Saudi-owned *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* newspaper in a telephone interview that as part of the agreement by Libya to renounce its nuclear weapons program, the United States “has committed itself to defend us.”²³ Moreover, Sayf al-Islam also expected that “agreements on military and security cooperation” would follow.²⁴

However, perceptions began to sour for Qaddafi not long after his disarmament deal, reducing for others – even if only implicitly at first – the attractiveness of following Libya’s example. One could detect a growing sense within the Libyan leadership that the political and economic rewards had not been commensurate with the perceived major sacrifice of abandoning the country’s nuclear program. Qaddafi, soon after his country’s disarmament, had already begun to complain that the ensuing compensation had been less than he had expected or deserved. Being able to display rewards would have been especially important for Qaddafi in order to shore up his legitimacy at home and elsewhere in the Middle East and Africa to compensate for a perception that he was now ostensibly weaker in terms of military power and political clout.

One of the areas where Qaddafi’s disappointment was focused was his perception that international help with the development of nuclear power for peaceful uses had not been as forthcoming as expected. Claiming that the United States had been “terrified” (*maruba*) that Libya would develop nuclear weapons and had rejoiced at Libya’s decision not to do so, Qaddafi by 2005 was complaining that “America should have rewarded Libya, that is I am speaking about technical issues, that is that America, as well as Britain, Japan, China, Russia, and the European Union, should help Libya with the use of the atom for peaceful purposes, so that there would be technology for its peaceful use in Libya, once Libya had relinquished its military program, for the use of that energy.”²⁵ Qaddafi’s disillusionment seemed to fester and was expressed increasingly frequently in an open manner.

In addition, Qaddafi viewed the thwarting of the symbolic rewards he had anticipated in return for disarming as a public affront to his dignity and a dismissal of the sacrifice he felt he had made, as

well as a loss of stature at home and abroad. Thus, he complained bitterly about not having been invited to the Nuclear Security Summit, held in Washington, D.C., in April 2010, noting that Libya “should have been thanked and rewarded, but Libya has not been rewarded until now” for voluntarily relinquishing its nuclear program. In particular, Qaddafi maintained that Libya should have been among the first to be invited to attend the Washington summit, calling the failure to do so “a major political error.”²⁶

Perhaps not coincidentally, in November 2009, Qaddafi had suspended temporarily shipments from Libya’s stocks of enriched uranium – one of the provisions he had accepted as part of the 2003 disarmament agreement – and sought to use what was left of his nuclear program to try to exert leverage. While it was suggested that the immediate trigger had been Qaddafi’s pique at not having been allowed to pitch a tent when he had attended the United Nations’ General Assembly two months earlier, more substantive issues were also involved. As Qaddafi’s son Sayf al-Islam explained at the time, this act was an expression of simmering Libyan discontent with the slow speed of the normalization process in such areas as relaxing U.S. trade embargoes, selling military equipment, and providing “respect” in return for having disarmed.²⁷ By then, Qaddafi was placing increased emphasis on the need to pressure Israel to denuclearize, emphasizing that if the latter did not do so, then all the Arab countries would have the right to acquire nuclear weapons.²⁸ And, by 2010, Qaddafi was warning that “not rewarding this move [*i.e.*, denuclearization] by Libya ... will make it difficult to convince Iran and North Korea to abandon their nuclear aspirations” and had concluded that “the Libyan model is no longer attractive for the latter.”²⁹

NATO and Libya’s Arab Spring

Whatever Libya’s existing sense of disenchantment with its earlier decision to abandon its nuclear program, the initial support and subsequent direct intervention by foreign forces on behalf of the country’s domestic opposition marked a qualitative shift in perceptions within the Libyan leadership and a fuller realization of the relationship between nuclear weapons and regime security. That is, after the United States (19-31 March 2011) and then NATO (beginning 31 March 2011) intervened under a United Nations mandate in the Libyan civil war by enforcing a no-fly zone and mounting air strikes in support of the anti-Qaddafi forces, the Libyan leadership expressed in no uncertain terms its belated regret that the nuclear option had not been retained. For example, in an interview with a Russian reporter, someone identified as being “the closest possible” to Muammar Qaddafi, when asked if the latter regretted anything answered, “only that he terminated work on nuclear weapons. Nowadays everyone is afraid to even touch North Korea. If there were an atom bomb, no one would be attacking us.”³⁰ Sayf al-Islam, perhaps the most visible of Qaddafi’s sons in the media, openly articulated the same sense of regret in an interview on Russian television and saw Libya’s experience as a warning for others. Connecting NATO’s attack with Libya’s earlier decision to forego nuclear weapons, he concluded that “it’s a good lesson for anybody ... for us and for others ... it means this is a message to everybody, that you have to be strong, you [can] never trust them [*i.e.*, NATO] and you have to be always on alert. Because those people they don’t have friends. Over one night they change their mind and they start bombing ... and the same thing could happen to any other country.”³¹

Yet, even after the NATO air campaign was well underway, Qaddafi in a letter to the European Parliament and to the U.S. Congress, among others, still thought his earlier decision to abandon his

quest for nuclear weapons would carry weight in his favor. Significantly, his forlorn attempt to appeal for an end to NATO operations cited the fact that Libya had “cancelled its nuclear program voluntarily.”³²

Learning from Libya’s Experience

Governments both in the region and around the world monitored closely the international community’s policy on the civil war in Libya, presumably as a vicarious test-bed for their own strategy. On occasion, influential figures or official sources noted their perceptions, but one would not expect national leaders to go on record on such a sensitive issue, especially if their country was one of those suspected as a potential candidate to join the nuclear club. And, in most cases, they did not. However, according to Sayf al-Islam Qaddafi, some countries expressed directly to the Libyans in private their view that Libya had made a mistake in disarming: “We hear, I mean we got messages from many countries, and we heard many news from Iran, North Korea, saying ‘This is your mistake, Libyans. You give up your weapons of mass destruction, you stopped developing long-range missiles, you became very friendly with the West and this is the result.’”³³

However, while political figures were largely quiet on the Libyan issue, there was frequent commentary in the media in many countries. Analysis and recommendations appearing in local outlets at the very least can be said to express the thinking of the informed public on this issue. Moreover, in those countries where the media is monitored or controlled by the government – such as in the Gulf countries – one can assume that such commentaries coincide with official views and may be seen as intended to legitimate past policies or to prepare the way for measures to be taken in support of nuclear development.

The Middle East

In the Middle East, in particular, the media repeated widely articles drawn from the western, Russian, and even Israeli media – as well as transcripts of Sayf al-Islam’s interview with Russian TV – all of which suggested that Libya had erred in disarming and thereby had made itself vulnerable to foreign intervention. Such second-hand reporting could put forward to the public uncomfortable conclusions while relying on plausible denial.

Moreover, despite the sensitivity of any nuclear issue, the local media also addressed the issue of Libya’s nuclear disarmament directly at times. Not surprisingly, in the Gulf countries, given their sensitivity to a looming Iranian nuclear threat, the Libyan lesson was often translated into implications for the impact on Iran’s nuclear program. A growing consensus had developed that neither the United States nor Israel would be likely to derail Iran’s quest for nuclear weapons, and increasing questions about the United States’ ability to support regional friends in difficulty had already engendered anxiety in the Gulf. Events in Libya only sharpened such concerns.

One aspect of this situation has been a heightened perception that the events in Libya would confirm Iran’s decision to pursue nuclear weapons and, if anything, to spur the country to an even greater effort. For example, an editorial in the United Arab Emirates press projected its own observations from the Libyan case on Iran’s assumed perceptions and the impact that the Libyan case would have on Iran and its nuclear program. As the editorial assessed, “the removal of Qaddafi

and his regime with the NATO's collaboration is a clear signal to Iran that it is essential not to compromise on its nuclear program under any circumstance, but instead to proceed until it is successful as planned in achieving for itself a military nuclear force as a means of deterrence against foreign threats and intervention."³⁴ According to this analysis, Qaddafi's decision to forego a nuclear option had encouraged the Europeans to use military force. Iran supposedly feared the same fate as Qaddafi as part of an international effort at regime change. In such an atmosphere, "convincing Iran ... of the necessity of abandoning its nuclear ambitions will not be an easy matter, since the Iranian leadership understands that this [nuclear] program is the only instrument of deterrence which it has in order to prevent foreign intervention to change the Iranian regime as occurred in Libya." If anything, the lessons from Libya "will ... provide a spur to the Iranian leadership to retain its nuclear program." Perhaps superfluously, the editorial concluded: "This, of course, is not in the interest of the Gulf countries."³⁵

Not surprisingly, Bahrain, as the Gulf Cooperation Council country which feels the most threatened by Iran (and by the latter's support for Bahrain's own restive Shia majority), also seemed particularly receptive to the lessons from Libya. Thus, press commentary in Bahrain noted that "had Saddam and likewise Qaddafi not relinquished their nuclear weapons [i.e., programs] ... the West would not have dared to attack them."³⁶ While it is highly unlikely that the smaller Gulf countries would be in a position to develop nuclear weapons, such views suggest support for a collegial effort, which would no doubt have to be led by Saudi Arabia.

Significantly, in the wake of the enactment of sanctions against Libya and of the no-fly zone, one writer in a Saudi-owned newspaper posited that the lesson was clear: "If Colonel Muammar Qaddafi holds on, he may revive his nuclear program and acquire weapons of mass destruction." What is more, the lesson would stand even in the event he was removed, for "whoever might succeed Qaddafi is expected to follow the same path because the West is treacherous."³⁷

In a rare instance of candid advocacy, in fact, a writer in the Saudi press noted that the Libyan case raised an urgent question, namely "may the Arab states possess a nuclear weapon?" The article also asked whether NATO would have dared attack Libya if the latter had had nuclear weapons, and "would the Europeans consider admonishing Qaddafi if he insinuated he would launch a nuclear missile against France?" Likewise, the author wondered whether Syria would be under such pressure if it had a nuclear capability. Affirming that the Arab states have the same right to self-defense as any other state, the writer then observed that "the necessity is increasing for a joint Arab nuclear strategy to acquire nuclear weapons, whatever the legality of the path taken to achieve that, in order to provide for deterrence and self-defense and to confront the Israeli and the Iranian [nuclear] programs." He called for cooperation with such countries as Pakistan to bring to fruition what he termed "this great dream." In the meantime, he suggested reliance on diplomatic support by the great powers to make possible "confronting America and Israel" in the interim. Then, "once the Arabs possess nuclear weapons they will have a different degree of influence in the international balance."³⁸

In Egypt, a writer in the Nasserite national press stressed that among the effects of the Libyan events was that North Korea would now be even less likely to relinquish its nuclear arsenal despite any guarantees the United States might give. And, bringing the argument closer to home, he added that "this is also a lesson for the Arabs to rely only on their own power, and not on American guarantees."³⁹ Another Egyptian political analyst, likewise, noted that "[i]n 2003, Libya handed

over its nuclear program to the United States and accepted a sugar-coated American claim that it would guarantee Libya's security and improve relations if [Libya] relinquished its nuclear program. However, it did not take long for the United States to swallow it up by force, which confirms the law of history that peace can be maintained only when a state builds up its own strength, as long as the prevailing practice of brute force continues in our world."⁴⁰

Even a writer in the Iraqi Communist Party's official organ, *Al-Kadir*, drew the lesson from the Libyan case that nuclear weapons were necessary, for this capability would have provided Qaddafi "something that resembles a balance of terror, and they would not have dared to attack him out of fear of his response, as that would have been an extremely reckless gamble." Instead, "this picture was transformed when [Qaddafi] made a truce and surrendered his weapons and when he relied on [the West's] arrogant advisers. Thus he lost his next-to-innermost fortress."⁴¹ Had Qaddafi acquired a nuclear arsenal, according to this same author, "he could have used it for blackmail or for a balance of terror; instead, he was left with no means with which to defend his national sovereignty."⁴²

For still others, Qaddafi's abandonment of his nuclear program had prevented Libya from being able to deter Israeli policies in neighboring states. According to an editorial in *Al-Manar*, a Palestinian newspaper, Qaddafi had "handed over on a gold platter all that he had achieved and had spent money on in an attempt to develop a Libyan nuclear bomb ... in exchange for not being subjected to a possible foreign invasion." However, doing so "enabled Israel without firing a single shot to bring about the secession of Southern Sudan from the North," as well as making possible the destruction in Libya as a result of the NATO air strikes.⁴³

However, it was perhaps Iran, with its on-going nuclear development program, that found Libya's case of most immediate applicability by providing reinforcement and justification for its apparent goal of acquiring nuclear weapons. In a public sermon, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, pointing to Western intervention in Libya, believed the latter had made a mistake in relinquishing his nuclear program and concluded that Iran was right in rejecting any curb on its own nuclear development. Using biting irony, Khamenei criticized the fact that Qaddafi had "collected all his nuclear equipment on the heels of empty threats, loaded it onto a ship and handed it over to the Westerners, saying to them: 'Take it!'" He scoffed at Qaddafi for having accepted the "encouragement" which the West had offered, equating it to "giving a child candy or chocolate," while in return the Libyans had "lost everything they had! The [Libyan] people see that and that makes their hearts bleed and wounds their pride."⁴⁴ He reassured his audience that Iran, on the contrary, would not follow that path and, indeed, that Iran had increased its efforts in the nuclear field.

Paradoxically, perhaps spurred by the events in Libya as well as by the impact of the candid remarks by Khamenei, Iran appeared to become even more ambivalent in public than it had been in the past on the nuclear issue. In contrast to Qaddafi's own clumsy public diplomacy, official Iranian statements were often ambiguous as to intent, ranging from outright denials of the utility of nuclear weapons and of Iran's intent to develop such a capability to resolute refusals to permit effective international inspections.⁴⁵ Although most Iranian senior officials had at one time or another denied that Iran was seeking nuclear weapons, western news reports now suggested infighting within Iranian political circles centered over whether or not to go public with the country's nuclear program.⁴⁶ However, one could posit that the intent of such studied ambivalence was to divert

attention and to counter potential international support for any preemptive strike before Iran acquires a nuclear deterrent rather than signifying movement toward a decision to disarm.

Israel

As an existing nuclear power, albeit an undeclared one, Israel was primarily concerned that Libya would spur Iran to an even greater effort at developing a nuclear capability, although it also without a doubt provided an implicit confirmation of the need for Israel to retain and enhance its nuclear arsenal. In contrast to most other countries, Israel's reaction to the Libyan events was often forthcoming from official circles as well as from the media. Thus, Israel's ambassador to the United States, in an editorial expressed his unease that "while the allied intercession [sic] in Libya may send a message of determination to Iran, it might also stoke the Iranian regime's desire to become a nuclear power and so avoid Gadhafi's fate." In a cascading process, then in turn "other Middle Eastern states will also pursue nuclear capabilities, transforming the entire region into a tinderbox."⁴⁷ Arguing that a hardline policy had induced Qaddafi to abandon his nuclear program and would be effective in also convincing Iran to do so – and placing such an assessment in the U.S. media – apparently was intended to influence U.S. policy along those lines. Likewise, Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs carried on its website a news item suggesting that Qaddafi's fate would spur further proliferation in the region.⁴⁸

The Israeli media often agreed with such assessments, with one journalist noting that Arab rulers would learn the lesson that "they need weapons to deter Western action," positing that Qaddafi "surely regrets" his decision to end his nuclear program, and concluding that "if he had weapons of mass destruction, or at least the perception that he had them, the West would have backed off." While that commentator also saw the potential consequences as negative for Israel, his recommendation to mitigate the results was for Israel to advance a comprehensive peace settlement.⁴⁹

South Asia

In Pakistan, Abdul Qadeer Khan, the controversial nuclear scientist often known as the father of Pakistan's bomb and the key figure alleged to have been the conduit for proliferation of nuclear know-how to a number of countries, was predictably outspoken on the Libyan case. For A.Q. Khan, events in Libya clearly validated Pakistan's own earlier acquisition of nuclear weapons. As he argued, "[d]on't overlook the fact that no nuclear-capable country has been subjected to aggression or occupied, or had its borders redrawn. Had Iraq and Libya been nuclear powers, they wouldn't have been destroyed in the way we have seen recently." In particular, he also rued the fact that Pakistan had not developed nuclear weapons earlier, believing that that would have prevented the separation of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in 1971, which had been facilitated greatly by Indian intervention.⁵⁰

As one might expect, A.Q. Khan's rationalization for the wisdom of his country's acquisition of nuclear weapons had considerable resonance in his own country, and his article from *Newsweek* was reproduced widely in the Pakistani and Middle East media and was often accompanied by lavish praise. In fact, the Pakistani media commented frequently on the linkage between a lack of nuclear weapons and Libya's vulnerability to foreign pressure and intervention. Even as NATO air strikes were being prepared, one Pakistani commentator pointed out Qaddafi's earlier mistake in failing to learn what he saw as the lesson from Iraq – the lack of security that ensues once a nuclear

program had been relinquished. As he put it, “Qadhafi quickly volunteered to abandon his effort to build weapons of mass destruction (overlooking the fact that Saddam had been targeted a decade after he gave up his nuclear weapons programme).”⁵¹

Another Pakistani observer reached the same conclusion, one that was often repeated in some form in the Pakistani media: “Qaddafi chose to repent and become friends with America. So he quietly handed over his nuclear assets... Once his potential threat was removed, America attacked Libya and you can see the horrendous carnage going on in the name of humanity!” Drawing the parallel closer to home, the same commentator warned in an alarmist tone that this threat could also be directed against Pakistan if it were demilitarized: “This same pattern is being followed in Pakistan. Through the judicious use of carrot and stick, America will first ensure that our nuclear assets are effectively neutralized. Once that is ensured, friendly America will attack to destroy Pakistan.”⁵²

Often, Pakistani observers also linked their perception of Libya’s vulnerability after it had renounced its nuclear weapons program to the likelihood that that lesson would now spur other countries to even greater efforts to develop that capability in order to avoid repeating Libya’s fate. For example, one academic noted that “[t]he Iranians have an additional reason to speed up their atomic development, knowing the fact that the Gaddafi regime, in quest of amicable ties with the West, disbanded its nuclear programme, and subsequently was made to face the Western military action.”⁵³

In neighboring India, some likewise questioned the wisdom of Qaddafi’s disarmament. One commentator noted that “Col. Qadhafi must be wondering today if he did the right thing by giving up his dreams of nuclear deterrence at the behest of the West ... The [former Secretary of Defense Robert] Gates desk motto ‘lacking in sense and even self-destructive’ comes to mind.”⁵⁴ Focusing on the example of Libya for other countries, an Indian academic, for his part, concluded that “Kim Jong-Il of North Korea knows that it is only his nukes which keep him from going the way of Saddam Hussein or Muammar Kadhafi. The brutal military attack by NATO on two countries that gave up their WMD programmes – Iraq and Libya – has ensured that North Korea, Iran and Syria would never agree to go the conciliatory way Baghdad and Tripoli did.”⁵⁵

North Korea

North Korea likewise used the case of Libya to justify its reliance on nuclear weapons and its wariness of the United States. In an unusual move, normally reticent North Korea also spoke out on this issue. Addressing the events in Libya, an unidentified North Korean Foreign Ministry spokesman reportedly declared that “The Libyan crisis is teaching the international community a grave lesson.” Labeling Libya’s nuclear disarmament a form of aggression, North Korea accused the United States of using “sweet words” to lull Libya into believing there was a “guarantee of security” and then, once it was disarmed, “swallowing it up by force.”⁵⁶

Denuclearized States: The Former Soviet Republics

States which had themselves relinquished existing or developing nuclear capabilities could perhaps identify most closely with Libya’s experience, especially in cases where there were concerns about external threats or about domestic instability which could elicit foreign intervention. NATO’s use of force against Libya in 2011 in some cases reinforced security anxieties about a lack of nuclear

weapons that had already crystallized even before the campaign against Qaddafi materialized. Libya's fate now seemed to validate those concerns.

For example, there has been interest in events surrounding Libya in some of the former Soviet republics where nuclear weapons and materials had been based before the Soviet Union had split apart, although only Ukraine could have been considered a self-sustaining nuclear power in that it had produced missile delivery vehicles – namely the SS-8, SS-24, and key components of the SS-25 – while it was still part of the Soviet Union.

In Ukraine, the head of the nationalist Velika Ukraina (Great Ukraine) Party, Igor' Berkut, assessed that “now the governments of all countries understand that ... if you do not have nuclear weapons, influence can be exerted against you. Of course, if Libya had had nuclear weapons there would have been no aggression by the NATO countries.” In addition, he now doubted the guarantees which had been promised to Ukraine in exchange for relinquishing its nuclear arsenal: “These guarantees exist, they are written on paper; but it is difficult to say what they are worth.”⁵⁷ When a Ukrainian media pundit discussed his country's emerging national strategy, it was perhaps not surprising that he interjected: “Let's remember Libya,” and noted the need for the latest air defense and anti-missile defenses, as well as adding, “[t]he development of a nuclear potential requires exceptional political courage from the country's leadership and the ability by the population of Ukraine to undergo difficulties, since clearly they will impose an economic embargo even for just the attempt to develop nuclear weapons.”⁵⁸

Likewise, a press editorial addressing the lessons of Libya for Ukraine concluded that Libya had been an inviting target, and saw worrying parallels with Ukraine in terms of the importance of nuclear weapons: “By relinquishing its nuclear weapons and the last reserves of enriched uranium, Ukraine long ago lost its role as a geopolitical player and was transformed into a pawn on the international chessboard.”⁵⁹

To be sure, the Ukrainian government has reassured the international community that it opposes nuclear weapons. However, at the same time, the government seems to have felt it was on the defensive on this issue and saw the need to justify to its own population its earlier abandonment of Ukraine's nuclear arsenal. Thus, the President of the country's Parliament, Vladimir Litvin, argued that Ukraine had had little choice but to do so: “If Ukraine had not relinquished its nuclear weapons no one would have recognized it [i.e., Ukraine],” adducing as a supporting argument the country's inability to finance the upkeep of a nuclear arsenal.⁶⁰

In Belarus, there was now also increased skepticism of the security guarantees which had been granted in return for nuclear disarmament. The State Secretary of the Security Council of Belarus, Leonid Mal'tsev, for example, noted that the other nuclear powers had signed a document when nuclear weapons had been pulled out of Belarus guaranteeing that “they would prevent interference in the domestic affairs of our country... What is that document worth today? How can one trust such guarantees?”⁶¹

Likewise, the media in Belarus raised the specter of a repetition of the Libyan case, with a foreign intervention intended to change the regime, warning that, once the situation in Libya had been resolved, “it is not excluded that, after Syria and Iran, Belarus with its ‘bloody regime’ will also be in line for ‘democratization’ ... and so, the Qaddafi regime is living its last days. Will it be Belarus’

turn too?”⁶² Yet another article, conversely, highlighted the effectiveness of nuclear weapons in deterring even the United States from intervening in another country, alleging that in order for the United States to be victorious in Afghanistan it would have had to invade Pakistan, but that it could not do so specifically because the latter had nuclear weapons.⁶³

Already a year earlier, after not being invited to the Washington Nuclear Security Summit from which Qaddafi had also been excluded, Belarus President Aleksandr Lukashenko had already concluded that giving up the country’s nuclear weapons had been “a major error,” to which he had agreed only under great pressure from Russia and the United States. As he noted, “[i]f we had that weapon, they would now be talking to us in a different manner.”⁶⁴

In a move reminiscent of Qaddafi’s own earlier attempt to use the remaining uranium in his possession for political leverage, in August 2011, President Lukashenko suspended shipments from Belarus’ enriched uranium stockpile. The motive was apparently to retaliate against the economic sanctions the United States had imposed on Belarus for breaking an international embargo by supplying Iran with nuclear-related technology, and Belarus perhaps regretted that the leverage which nuclear weapons themselves could provide was no longer available.⁶⁵ As a Belarus journalist interpreted the response, his conclusion was that his country’s leaders believed that if Belarus had retained its nuclear weapons “the imposition of those sanctions would not have been possible.”⁶⁶

Belarus, like other countries which themselves are not in a position to go through a long and expensive process to acquire nuclear weapons, may seek a nuclear umbrella from an established nuclear power to guarantee regime security. Thus, the Prime Minister of Belarus, Mikhail Myasnikov, condemned “the destabilizing role of foreign influences and the incitement of subversive activities” that had been evident in “the events” of the Middle East and North Africa, but was confident that that would not happen to Belarus because it could rely on the “security guarantees in all possible forms from nuclear countries,” no doubt alluding to neighboring Russia.⁶⁷ One Belarus press article noted that Russia was anxious not to see instability in a neighboring country, which would also affect Russia, and took comfort that outside forces would therefore think twice, since “to destabilize a great nuclear country is too dangerous a scenario to be taken seriously.”⁶⁸

Even when expressed in less dire terms in the former Soviet countries, Qaddafi’s perception of unfulfilled – albeit unrealistic – expectations and the ensuing disappointment often struck a sympathetic chord. As the President of Ukraine’s Parliament noted, he regretted that Ukraine had not sought suitable financial compensation for its agreement to relinquish its nuclear weapons: “I think that, judging by today’s standards, we could have and should have made the world pay us lavishly for that.”⁶⁹

Prospects and Implications

Perceptions of the Libyan experience with disarmament suggest that the lessons learned will serve as a catalyst for other countries to consider, begin, or accelerate programs for the acquisition of nuclear weapons. A clear consensus appears to have crystallized to the effect that foreign intervention is considerably more likely in a country that does not possess a credible nuclear

deterrent and, moreover, the sense of legitimacy of a country's previous acquisition of nuclear weapons or its future efforts to do so will increase, in part thanks to a more understanding environment, especially among other countries with similar concerns.

Whether any country actually does go beyond discussions to the actual acquisition of such a capability in the short-term is unclear, especially given the technical and political hurdles, although the probability of taking this path has increased as a result of absorbing the lessons from Libya's experience. Such lessons learned coincide in some countries, such as in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, with more general suggestions coming from official circles or from influential opinion-makers that nuclear weapons should be acquired, heightening the significance of the Libyan case.⁷⁰

Moreover, even the rhetoric evident in public discussions can serve to raise the level of political tension and exacerbate mistrust between neighbors often engaged in what are long-standing confrontations. What may be a heightened sensitivity to enhancing regime security may, as a corollary, also sharpen inter-state tensions as countries feel obliged to keep up with their competitors in the nuclear field or risk an unfavorable change in the regional balance of power and regime embarrassment.

Ultimately, the greatest impact of the Libyan experience may be in the changed and more complex security environment in which the United States and the international community have to operate.

Several recommendations in dealing with this situation flow from the preceding study which may be applicable to refining strategies intended to promote nonproliferation and counterproliferation.

First, while international efforts at nonproliferation and counterproliferation must remain paramount, the international community should pay greater attention to both material and symbolic rewards to cooperative countries, given the considerable importance of being able to point to such compensation for a regime's image, and should be sensitive not to appear to be treating denuclearized powers with either indifference or arrogance. Economic ties, technical help, and military aid can be important. However, the less tangible but no less real factor of political image could also affect regime considerations on whether to denuclearize or to forego acquiring nuclear weapons in the first place.

For example, perceptions within a country or region that the rewards in terms of political acceptance or influence were far below those expected in return for what was perceived as a great concession might well lead not only to a loss of face for a ruler. A perceived humiliation could also contribute to undermining regime stability if receiving such treatment is viewed as a sign of weakness and as presenting a policy open to criticism by dissidents. Balancing the results of achieving a non-nuclear state with dealing with a despotic regime is by no means easy, but may be a choice that policymakers will face.

Second, the international community should place less emphasis on public calls for regime change, as this might lower the sense of embattlement which some insecure regimes feel, and should reduce perceptions of outside threats to such regimes' survival. Public calls for regime change ought to be weighed carefully, given their potential for stimulating the pursuit of nuclear weapons as a deterrent to outside efforts in support of such calls. From available evidence, confirmed by the reaction to the recent events in Libya, some regimes view the foreign encouragement of domestic

stability as a dominant threat and as a key factor in their decision-making process on nuclear weapons. Here again, achieving a balance between pragmatic state interests and moral values may not be easy.

Third, modifying the regional threat environment – such as by bringing about a just resolution of the Arab-Israeli or Kashmir issues or Moroccan-Algerian competition – may alleviate the pressures for proliferation by removing or diminishing the sources of perceived insecurity which can magnify threat perceptions and serve as a potent stimulus to fuel proliferation. In particular, a diminished perception of regional threats may reduce domestic pressures for a stronger military and provide greater room for maneuver for governments to eliminate or avoid nuclear armaments.

Notes:

¹ See Mohamed Elbaradei, *The Age of Deception; Nuclear Diplomacy in Treacherous Times* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2011), 154-55, 158-59. Elbaradei was Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (1997-2009).

² For an insightful account of this process, see Malfrid Braut-Hegghammer, “Libya’s Nuclear Turnaround: Perspectives from Tripoli,” *Middle East Journal*, 62, 1 (Winter 2008): 54-72.

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Libya's Nuclear Disarmament

Lessons and Implications for Nuclear Proliferation

Norman Cigar

Recent events in Libya have already had a significant effect on the region and beyond, and perhaps one of the most compelling results has been the potential impact on regional powers for the future course of nuclear proliferation. Libya's nuclear disarmament experience has provided lessons learned for those states who have themselves acquired nuclear weapons recently, may be in the process of developing that capability, or may be considering the possibility of doing so. This study argues that the lessons learned from the Libyan case of disarmament will confirm the decision of those countries that have already acquired nuclear weapons and add momentum to the efforts of those countries on their way to developing or considering the acquisition of nuclear weapons as a means of enhancing national and regime security. This dynamic, not surprisingly, will thereby complicate future efforts at nonproliferation and denuclearization. In light of the impact of the Libyan experience on other countries, the author offers several recommendations as the international community pursues nonproliferation and counterproliferation policies, including paying sufficient attention to both material and symbolic rewards to cooperative countries, placing less emphasis on public calls for regime change, and modifying the regional threat environment.



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