

The Qaddafi Precedent

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Without actually meaning to do so, the Bush administration has pulled off one of the most remarkable nonproliferation victories since the advent of the nuclear age: Libya, a hostile, isolated dictatorship, pledged to give up its support of terrorism and its efforts to acquire nuclear weapons. This nonproliferation "walk-in"--a direct result of Bush's invasion of Iraq and U.S.-allied efforts to interdict illicit strategic weapons-related goods--breaks the mold of nonproliferation history and suggests not only what's possible, but what should be done next.

Muammar Qaddafi's nuclear renunciation is unprecedented. The handful of nations that previously relinquished their nuclear weapons capabilities--South Africa, Brazil, Ukraine, and Argentina--did so less out of fear than from confidence, which each of these nations experienced when they moved toward more democratic self-rule. Until Qaddafi's submission, there seemed little reason to believe that authoritarian proliferators would relent without liberalization (or overthrow). The hardest cases--Iran and North Korea--suggest this is still true.

Libya's example, though, provides hope for the cases in between. Neither Libyan backsliding nor a repeat of America's 1986 bombing run on Qaddafi's home now seems probable. If we are willing to enforce the nonproliferation rules we have--as we did with Iraq and are now doing against illicit nuclear trade--blocking the further spread of nuclear weapons may be possible, in brief, without bombing every proliferating prospect.

The question now is how to exploit Libya's nuclear exit to accomplish this.

Many nonproliferation experts-- including those that rushed off earlier this month to visit North Korea's known nuclear sites and those who still object to America's invasion of Iraq--insist that Libya's announcement means we should now cut nuclear deals with Pyongyang and Tehran. Shooting at these goals now, though, is a surefire loser. To begin with, Pyongyang and Tehran are hardly contrite about violating the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). When uranium enrichment equipment bound for Libya was interdicted this fall, Qaddafi showed penitence; he immediately signed a sweeping missile, nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons renunciation pledge (penned with British and American officials); and invited international nuclear inspectors in.

After U.S. officials confronted Pyongyang with evidence of nuclear cheating, it countered defiantly, threatening everything from nuclear testing to plutonium exports. Now North Korea refuses even to freeze its known nuclear facilities (much less its undisclosed uranium production plants) unless it is paid handsomely in advance with energy aid and security guarantees. Dismantlement is something Pyongyang claims it will consider doing only after two U.S.-promised plutonium-producing power reactors are completed (i.e., pretty much never).

Iran is no less shameless. Over the last four weeks, its leadership announced that President Bush deserved the same fate as Saddam, insisted Iran would resume enriching uranium (and admitted to expanding its enrichment capacity despite its pledge last October to freeze such work), demanded Bush apologize for accusing Iran of having a nuclear weapons program, blew off an American aid delegation headed by Senator Elizabeth Dole, and met with Russian officials to accelerate completion of a prodigious plutonium-producing power reactor at Busheir. Tehran is expanding its reactor and uranium enrichment efforts (both critical to making bombs) even though the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is still not yet able to find Iran in full compliance with the NPT.

Cutting a quick deal with Iran or North Korea, then, hardly guarantees another Libya. More likely, it will jeopardize the gains we have made. As a North Korean foreign ministry spokesman noted last week, the idea that Pyongyang might follow Libya's example by unconditionally renouncing its nuclear weapons capabilities is a delusion. "Expecting a change in our position," he explained, "is like expecting rain from a clear sky." Tehran's leaders, who insist on Iran's right to all forms of "peaceful" nuclear energy, are no less obdurate. If we make even partial concessions to their current demands, Qaddafi's worthy nonproliferation standard will be the first to suffer.

Focusing on Iran and North Korea as the next Libya is therefore, at best, a distraction. Meanwhile, adjacent to Libya, a clear nonproliferation opportunity has gone begging for attention. At Ain Oussera, in the middle of the Sahara, Algeria continues to expand a large nuclear "research" facility. This nuclear park, whose centerpiece is a large Chinese reactor covertly built during the 1980s, is capable of making approximately a bomb's worth of plutonium a year. Unlike Algeria's smaller research reactor operating in Algiers, the Ain Oussera facility is encircled with SA-5 air-defense missiles.

If this second reactor were clearly needed to make medical isotopes (as Algeria claims it is), it would still be plenty worrisome. Spanish intelligence as well as disarmament experts, though, fear it is simply a bomb factory. Worse, Algeria has only grudgingly revealed the bare minimum about it to IAEA inspectors and did so only after U.S. intelligence discovered the project by accident months before it was to go critical. With Qaddafi's nuclear renunciation, U.S., Libyan,

French, and Spanish officials should approach Algeria to close down Ain Oussera.

Then there's Egypt, which has chemical weapons and long-range missile programs (an overt, active SCUD program and a dormant Vector solid-rocket effort dating back to the 1980s). Egyptian officials claim they are planning to acquire a nuclear-desalinization plant, which, again, would make nuclear weapons-usable plutonium. Would Egypt be willing to renounce the plant if Israel shut down its own plutonium-production reactor, now well over 30 years old and in need of a billion-dollar-plus refurbishment? Finally, there is Syria, a state that has rockets and chemical weapons and recently tried to acquire a nuclear desalinization plant from Russia. Wouldn't our diplomatic hand be strengthened against Iran if we could get other Middle Eastern nations to swear off nuclear-power reactors, uranium centrifuges, desalinization plants, and large, unnecessary nuclear research facilities?

If the United States and its allies were to take this approach, it could succeed, but only if they insist that the NPT be read in a more sensible way--i.e., in a fashion that deprives members of the right to acquire all they need to break out and build a large arsenal of nuclear weapons within a matter of weeks. A good start here would be to demand that all countries, including the United States, terminate any large nuclear effort that isn't profitable enough to be fully financed by private capital. This rule would put a crimp on Iran's nuclear plans and those of many other would-be bomb-makers. It is one principle Washington and its friends should insist upon at the upcoming NPT review conference in 2005.

Finally, to give meaning to the NPT, the United States and its allies will have to act against violators well before they have photographic proof they have a bomb. The IAEA didn't suspect Libya was covertly working to enrich uranium. Even U.S. intelligence was incomplete until this fall's interdiction. And so it has been historically with every other nuclear proliferator, from the Soviet Union to Iran: By the time it's clear we have a problem, the best options for dealing with it have evaporated.

What this suggests--contrary to the post-Iraq war rants for more intelligence and greater caution--is that we be prepared to act more quickly on less information. Of course, it would be helpful if we did not wait until the only option for action was regime overthrow. This, among other things, recommends Bush's international Proliferation Security Initiative to interdict illicit nuclear weapons-related trade: It gives meaning to the rules and offers nonproliferation officials an action plan other than wringing their hands or devising new ways to cave in to proliferators.

We've certainly tried the latter over the last half-century and produced abysmal results. After Libya, we have clear cause to stop.