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## The End of Nonproliferation

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Nonproliferation long has been an American and European priority. Best achieved peacefully, the U.S. government nevertheless views the objective as important enough to warrant war. Even today Washington refuses to forswear military action against Iran and North Korea. Until now, Libya was used to showcase the policy of peaceful nonproliferation. But the West's attack on that nation has turned the Libyan example inside out. The allies have effectively destroyed the chance of persuading any state at odds with the West from acquiring a nuclear bomb. No government which imagines itself in Washington's gunsight is likely to ever again voluntarily give up the one weapon capable of deterring America.

With the U.S. and European states launching a "humanitarian" crusade against a government which they were treating as a valued partner just weeks ago, some observers have commented on the West's prescience in negotiating away Muammar Qaddafi's weapons of mass destruction. "Imagine the possible nightmare if we had failed to remove the Libyan nuclear weapons program and their longer-range missile force," observed Robert Joseph, who was involved in negotiations with Libya.

Few observers doubt that Qaddafi would have used any and all weapons at his disposal to remain in power. Military action could have been disastrous—and thus would have been unthinkable. If the war turns out badly, U.S. policy makers may come to wish they had been deterred from acting. But today they are glad that Qaddafi disarmed.

The extent of Tripoli's nuclear program was uncovered along with the West's discovery of A.Q. Khan's Pakistani Nukes-R-Us operation. Mohamed ElBaradei, the Director-General of the International Atomic Energy Agency, dismissed the Libyan program as "at a very early stage," but it was much more extensive and advanced than expected by Washington. After being invited to Tripoli, one Bush administration official told CNN: "It's enormous. We have grave concerns about the program."

The Libyan revelations came at a fortuitous time—after the United States had defenestrated Saddam Hussein but before the Iraqi adventure had so dramatically deteriorated. Thus, fears of allied military action may have encouraged Qaddafi to accelerate negotiations to end his regime's isolation by accepting responsibility for the Lockerbie bombing. Reports indicated that Qaddafi's son Saif was a strong advocate of reaching a settlement to encourage Western investment and trade. British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw pointed to "painstaking diplomacy . . . going back six or seven years where we sought to re-establish a diplomatic relationship." Tripoli agreed to drop its nuclear program, turn over chemical stockpiles, eliminate long-range ballistic missiles and adhere to its promise under the Biological Weapons Convention.

President George W. Bush promised that Libya's "good faith will be returned." Flynt Leverett, who served in the Bush State Department, said "The lesson is incontrovertible: to persuade a rogue regime to get out of the terrorism business and give up its weapons of mass destruction, we must not only apply pressure but also make clear the potential benefits of cooperation." Despite some hiccups along the way—Qaddafi reportedly was dissatisfied with the benefits that he had received and had yet to disgorge the last of his stockpiles of mustard gas before the West's current bombing campaign—Libya is a far less fearsome international player as a result.

Subsequently Libya was offered as a model for negotiations with Iran and North Korea. Said the West: Give up your WMDs and all sorts of benefits will be yours, ranging from trade and investment to diplomatic respectability. Iran and North Korea refused to sign but negotiations continued. The U.S. and Europeans still hope to reach a similar deal, despite the many obvious roadblocks. No longer. Muammar Qaddafi gave up the one weapon which today could have sustained him against the U.S. and its European allies. For nearly eight years everything went as expected. But the moment he was vulnerable the West tossed him overboard. William Tobey, who served in the Bush Energy Department, said simply: "They were bulldozed."

Kim Jong-il has taken note. The North Korean Foreign Ministry charged: "Libya's nuclear dismantlement much touted by the U.S. in the past turned out to be a mode of aggression whereby the latter coaxed the former with such sweet words as 'guarantee of security' and 'improvement of relations' to disarm and then swallowed it up by force." A nuclear deal was "an invasion tactic to disarm the country." Recent events demonstrated that Pyongyang's military-first policy was "proper in a thousand ways." State Department spokesman Mark Toner responded: "Where [the Libyans are] at today has absolutely no connection with them renouncing their nuclear program or nuclear weapons." He missed the point. Only Qaddafi's decision to abandon WMDs made the current allied military operation possible. Had he not done so, he now might be mopping up the opposition in Benghazi.

Ruediger Frank, a professor at Korea University, believed that North Korean officials "must feel alarmed, but also deeply satisfied with themselves" after the attack on Libya. He surmised that they considered Libya's deal alongside the Soviet Union's decision end its arms competition with the U.S. and Iraq's willingness to accept UN nuclear inspections before the Washington invaded. He explained: "In the eyes of the North Korean leadership all three countries took the economic bait, foolishly disarmed themselves, and once they were defenseless, were mercilessly punished by the West."

Pyongyang presumes the U.S. and its allies had a plan for premeditated treachery where none likely existed. Nevertheless, the effect was the same.

The Qaddafi regime disarmed. Tripoli was vulnerable. The uprising created opportunity. The West decided to do what it had wanted to do all along: oust Qaddafi.

This lesson could be quite costly. True, there always were persuasive reasons to doubt either Iran or North Korea would voluntarily abandon their nuclear weapons programs. But it is inconceivable that either government will do so today. The ripples from the Libyan war may carry even further. For instance, Syria may decide that even recent Israeli military action is an insufficient deterrent to pursuing a nuclear program. Analysts long have warned that an Iranian nuclear bomb might spur Saudi Arabia and Egypt to follow suit. So might the latest allied attack on another Arab country.

There will always be practical barriers to countries obtaining nuclear weapons, but the incentive to try is now stronger than ever even for unlikely candidates such as Burma and Venezuela. Today no foreign government, no matter how close it seems to be to Washington, can feel secure from the West's born-again nation builders. The war against Libya is a mistake for many reasons. Not least is the impact on Washington's long-standing fight against nuclear proliferation. The U.S. government's aggressiveness has demonstrated yet again that the only sure protection against American military action is possession of nuclear weapons. Washington's policy of peaceful nonproliferation where it matters most is dead.

*Image by Daniella Zalcmán*

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