

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

## How Washington Encourages Nuclear Proliferation

By: Ted Galen Carpenter - March 18, 2013

---

The current top priority for U.S. foreign policy is to prevent Iran from building nuclear weapons—or even acquiring the capability to build such weapons. That goal reflects the general U.S. policy, in place for more than six decades, of combating nuclear proliferation. U.S. leaders achieved a major diplomatic triumph with the signing of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) in the late 1960s, and subsequent administrations have fought hard to prevent signatories from violating its provisions and to lobby other states to join the nonproliferation regime.

But U.S. actions frequently undermine Washington's own nonproliferation goals. U.S. policy makers are adamant that such countries as Iran and North Korea have no legitimate reasons to want their own nuclear arsenals. That argument is either naive or disingenuous. Leaders in Pyongyang and Tehran have undoubtedly watched how Washington treats non-nuclear adversaries, and surveying the global scene has not offered any comfort.

Following the Persian Gulf War in 1991, a high-level Indian military official was asked what lessons could be drawn from that conflict. His response reportedly was: "Don't fight the United States unless you have nuclear weapons." That lesson was strengthened later in the decade when U.S.-led NATO forces bombed Serbia into relinquishing control of its restive Kosovo province.

Two more recent incidents made it clear that non-nuclear adversaries of the United States risk being targets of forcible regime change. In 2003, Washington invaded Iraq and ousted Saddam Hussein. This happened right on Iran's doorstep, and outspoken American hawks even asserted that a broader purpose of the Iraq mission was to intimidate Tehran—or, hopefully, even spark an uprising against the clerical regime.

An even more damaging precedent was set in Libya. Longtime Libyan strongman Muammar el-Qaddafi had pursued a nuclear program for years—albeit with only minimal progress. But he finally abandoned that effort and sought to normalize relations with the United States and its Western allies. For a short time, it appeared that his course change would pay dividends, as the Western powers greatly eased their economic sanctions, and even such a strident hawk like Senator John McCain praised Qaddafi during a visit to Libya.

The honeymoon did not last long, though. When insurgent forces began an uprising against Qaddafi's rule, the U.S. and its NATO allies assisted the rebellion, even launching air strikes on government targets. Qaddafi's ouster and execution conveyed the message that a ruler who gave up his nuclear ambitions could not expect any lasting benefits from

the West. Indeed, remaining non-nuclear merely made a regime-change agenda easier and more certain.

Given such a track record, it is a bit much for U.S. officials to demand that North Korea and Iran walk into the same trap. And both governments show no intention of doing so.

It's possible that Pyongyang and especially Tehran might have pursued their nuclear quests even if the United States had not treated non-nuclear adversaries the way that it did. Regional considerations also play important roles. India and Pakistan eventually barged into the global nuclear-weapons club primarily because of their bilateral rivalry, and in India's case, worries about China. Concerns about U.S. intentions played only a secondary role. Given the bitter Sunni-Shiite rivalry throughout the Middle East and its own ambitions as a regional power, Tehran has relevant incentives to become a nuclear-weapons state irrespective of U.S. policy.

But Washington certainly has not helped its nonproliferation agenda toward Iran, North Korea, or other countries that are on unfriendly terms with the United States. Instead, U.S. actions have made the case that those governments would be wise to acquire a nuclear deterrent if they want to avoid being the next case of forcible regime change. That was assuredly not Washington's intention, but it is the inevitable result.