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March 29, 2011

## Will Libyan War Push Rogue States to Nuclearize?

By **David Paul Kuhn**

It was December 2003. Muammar el-Qaddafi stunned the world and agreed to dismantle Libya's nuclear weapons program. Libya would "regain a secure and respected place" in the world, President Bush said. Western leaders met personally with their unlikely bedfellow in subsequent years. The United States normalized relations. Britain hailed its "new relationship." France signed a \$16 billion nuclear reactor trade deal. Qaddafi was harvesting the fruit of de-nuclearization.

Now American, British and French forces are attacking Qaddafi's military. And uncomfortable questions linger. Would NATO be enforcing a no-fly zone if Qaddafi had not dismantled Libya's program and allowed full inspections? Does the current military action against Libya send a signal to rogue states, like Iran, that the security gained by de-nuclearization is anything but?

The West's actions in Libya might provide rogue states greater incentive to gain the bomb. Kim Jong Il's regime has already made this connection. A North Korean foreign ministry spokesman said last week, according to Pyongyang's propaganda agency, that "the Libyan crisis" is "teaching the international community a grave lesson" because it "confirmed once again ... that one should have power to defend peace."

The State Department dismissed the association. "Where [Qaddafi's regime is] at today has absolutely no connection with them renouncing their nuclear program," State Department spokesman Mark Toner told reporters. "The international community came together to take action to stop that humanitarian disaster. For me to say that that's some kind of retribution for giving up nuclear weapons is -- I don't see how the argument holds."

There are, unfortunately, examples of how varieties of this argument can hold. In the early years of the Afghan war, Al-Qaeda moved from Afghanistan to Pakistan. Parts of Pakistan's security forces have reportedly supported al-Qaeda and affiliate groups. But the U.S. military response has proceeded with exceptional diplomatic caution and military restraint. Concern about destabilizing the nuclear power was too great.

The United States has long approached North Korea with kid gloves for the same reason. That was true before the reclusive state publicly tested the bomb.

North Korea watched Iraq closely. Faced with the threat of U.S. invasion, Iraq begrudgingly allowed United Nations inspections by 2003. Meanwhile, North Korea was escalating its brinkmanship. It admitted to a secret nuclear weapons program and withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. We also knew, at the time, that North Korea exported missile technology to Pakistan in exchange for Pakistani centrifuges.

But North Korea's deterrent was too great. There would be no pre-emptive strike on the Yongbyon reactor. This member of the "axis of evil" was so scary it was safe. Pyongyang has said that it believes the United States would not have invaded Iraq if Saddam Hussein had at the time, like North Korea, a demonstrable nuclear program. Whether North Korea believes that, or merely wants us to believe that, no one really knows.

There certainly are disincentives to nuclearize. Syria and Iraq's nascent nuclear facilities were bombed by Israel. North Korea and Iran have suffered serious sanctions as result of their nuclear ambitions. Yet the competing lessons of modern history go far less mentioned.

The United States is hardly the only nation to balk in these circumstances. The Soviet Union almost surely would have sent soldiers into Chinese territory in 1969 had China lacked a nuclear deterrent. The United States isolated China for decades. But Washington normalized relations with Beijing a mere six years after China nuclearized.

The United States has long sought to corral nuclear weaponization. President Obama made nonproliferation the keynote to his first presidential trip abroad in April 2009. The president



**David Paul Kuhn**  
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called for "a world without nuclear weapons." Obama's New Start treaty with Russia was a practical step toward that abstract goal.

But Obama's effort to woo Iran and North Korea away from their programs has so far failed. No progress is the norm. Yet now the West has possibly created a fresh and countervailing nuclear lesson. This president might have unwittingly undermined his grandest foreign policy aim.

Back in 2003, Bush said "I hope other leaders will find an example" in Libya's action. North Korea and Iran might. It just might not now be the example the West was hoping for.

*David Paul Kuhn is the Chief Political Correspondent for RealClearPolitics and the author of [The Neglected Voter: White Men and the Democratic Dilemma](#). He can be reached at [david@realclearpolitics.com](mailto:david@realclearpolitics.com) and his writing followed via [RSS](#).*

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