

Mesmeric Weapons: South Africa's Nuclear Program

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

Global Research, January 26, 2024

Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Militarization and WMD](#)

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The lessons of the South African nuclear weapons program are deep, profound and largely ignored by non-proliferation dogmatists. They show that a regime, even one subject to sanctions and exiled to the diplomatic cold room, can still show aptitude and resourcefulness in creating such murderous weapons. The white regime of Apartheid South Africa was marginalised, the globe's notorious pariah, yet managed to chug along, developing a formidable arsenal with external aid and local resourcefulness. Where there is a pathological will, there will be a way.

The South African example also shows that members of the nuclear club are an easily rattled lot. The admission of new members is almost never allowed, tickets rarely granted. If they do, they tend to be done in the breach of a perceived understanding, roguish challengers to the status quo of accepted nuclear-weapons states.

Such an understanding, for decades, has been one of the great confidence tricks of international relations, with the clubbable nuclear powers essentially promising the eventual dismantling of their nuclear arsenals on the proviso that non-nuclear weapon states resist the urge of acquiring them. The result: club members retain their hideous arsenals, modernise and refurbish them with avid seriousness, leaving concerned non-club members either unilaterally defy the status quo (North Korea) or flirt with the prospect of doing so (Iran).

The parallels between South Africa and North Korea are disturbingly and relevantly cogent. They also yield other lessons. For example, if unpopular on the international stage or caught in the crosshairs of a dispute, never claim to have no weapons. If anything, claim to have more, not fewer. Keep such matters close to the chest.

On August 6, 1977, US President Jimmy Carter received a [message](#) from Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev. "According to information received, the Union of South Africa (USA) is completing work on the creation of a nuclear weapon and the carrying out of the first

experimental nuclear test.” To permit the apartheid state to acquire such weapons would “sharply aggravate the situation on the African continent and, as a whole, would increase the danger of the use of nuclear weapons.” The policy of nuclear non-proliferation, he warned, would be imperiled, necessitating “energetic efforts toward the goals of preventing the emergence of new nuclear states and barring the proliferation of nuclear danger.”

On August 18 that same year, an [interagency study](#) coordinated by representatives of the US intelligence community considered the policy considerations of a South Africa nuclear test, suggesting that “domestic political concerns would argue in favor of testing; and that these concerns weigh more heavily than foreign policy considerations in a decision whether or not to test”. That said, there was “no over-riding pressure” on the country’s leadership to test a weapon with any sense of urgency. A more “flexible approach” was being countenanced.

This was not intended to give the non-proliferation sorts any cheer. “While we thus ascribe some flexibility, or ‘give,’ to the South African position regarding the timing of a test, we do not see any circumstances which would lead to a termination of their long-standing program to develop a nuclear weapon.” There was “no credible threat” posed by the West to discourage Pretoria from pursuing a test; indeed, they might have the opposite effect.

Brezinski, in a [memorandum](#) to Carter, advises that Washington should “get as much information about what the South Africans are really doing, as soon as possible, and before the Lagos Conference where this will be a key issue.” Doing so would involve “a demand for an on-site inspection of the Kalahari site,” and carried out preferably as a joint US-French effort, and if not, unilaterally by the US. “We will not however wait for the French. It was judged useless to try to get IAEA participation.” Such views reveal snatches of Brezinski’s prickly disposition towards international bodies, preferring, as other national security advisors before and after him have, a freer hand for US power. Such agencies, when required, could be sneered at.

To show that he was also alert to the ceremonial deceptions that accompany diplomacy, Carter [scrawled](#) on the same document, “Zbig – what we want is: no test – If they have to lie about what their plans were, let them do so – Let them save face.” The testing, and the lying, duly followed.

Another aspect of the South African nuclear weapons program was its near perfect conditions of secrecy – at least when it came to knowledge among members of the US intelligence community. Throughout the phases of weapons development, there remained a persistent ignorance about how advanced the program was. Pretoria was also insistent in not joining the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which would have brought them into an international regulatory orbit. Staying outside the NPT regime meant that the program could also flourish without harassment.

Through the 1980s, the apartheid state faced something of a paradox. Domestically, its political-social system was proving increasingly unsustainable. Internationally, Pretoria found Carter’s successor far more accommodating. This was all part of President Ronald Reagan’s [notion](#) of “constructive engagement,” another term for calculated hypocrisy. It was a hypocrisy that enabled smuggling to thrive, with outside companies and entities keen to make a buck with the apartheid regime. But as the nuclear enterprise thrived, the political system was ailing.

In 1993, South Africa's last apartheid President F. W. De Klerk announced that all six operational nuclear weapons had been dismantled. This reassured Western intelligence officials that a country controlled by the revolutionary African National Congress would never benefit. A nuclear-armed Apartheid South Africa, officially condemned for its racist regime, retained often clandestine collaborative ties with the United States, Israel and a number of European states, including West Germany. But a South African nuclear state run by a *black* administration was simply too horrendous a notion, an intolerable aberration to the club. Imagine, for instance, the possibility, as the London *Sunday Times* (August 15, 1993) put it, of South Africa becoming a supplier of enriched uranium "either to Libya, Iran, or the Palestine Liberation Organization, all of which gave the movement support during the years in exile."

The scenario is certainly worth imagining. Libya would not have been attacked in 2011 under the feeble, fraudulent pretence of humanitarian intervention, leaving the rump state that it is today. A terrified Israel, having ironically aided Pretoria's own nuclear efforts (it takes one apartheid state to know another), would have been kept in check and compelled to make concessions as never before to the Palestinians. Adding Iran to the mix would have fed the calculus of terror.

As things transpired, a small group of engineers and scientists who had links with the program, rather than any enterprising ANC official, did moonlight on the proliferation stage. They included Gotthard Lerch, Gerhard Wisser, Daniel Geiges and Johan Meyer. Between the mid-1980s and 2004, the group [supplied centrifuge equipment](#) to Pakistan, Libya, India, and, it is suggested, Iran and North Korea.

Subsequent studies have seen South African denuclearisation as a miracle, an exemplar of good, humane conscience. "The case of South Africa shows that nuclear disarmament is possible even after a country has built nuclear weapons," write David Albright and Andrea Stricker in their [2016 study](#) on the program. "Its extensive cooperation allowed a rigorous verification of denuclearization by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which were aided and supplemented by nations with a special stake in ensuring that all of South Africa's weapons were dismantled and the highly enriched nuclear uranium accounted for." But other lessons of the project are equally significant: Why acquire these horrific yet mesmeric weapons in the first place, and under what conditions?

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Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He currently lectures at RMIT University. He is a Research Associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG). Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

Featured image: Bomb casings at South Africa's abandoned Circle nuclear bomb production facility near Pretoria. These most likely would have accommodated a gun-type nuclear package for air delivery (Licensed under Fair Use)

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