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## Nuclear Weapons and the Libyan Intervention

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As he faces the US-NATO onslaught in the weeks ahead, will Muammar Qaddafi conclude that he made a disastrous mistake when he gave up his nuclear weapons program in 2003 in return for Bush administration promises of aid and improved relations?

An official from North Korea says he clearly did, and “it is now being fully exposed before the world that Libya’s ‘nuclear dismantlement,’ much touted by the U.S. in the past, turned out to be a mode of aggression, a way of coaxing the victim with sweet words to disarm itself and then to swallow it up by force.”

Qaddafi is not likely to agree with the North Koreans because he knows that, in reality, his nuclear program was not as far advanced as he had pretended, and he had lost confidence that it would ever succeed. As Mohammed ElBaradei, former director of the International Atomic Energy Agency, observed, Libya’s nuclear effort was “in the very initial stages of development when it was discontinued” and was, in fact, beset by major technical difficulties. To be sure, Qaddafi tried to avoid these issues by buying parts for a uranium enrichment plant through the smuggling network operated by Pakistan’s nuclear czar A.Q. Khan, but Khan proved able to supply only 15 percent of the required parts. As David Albright has shown in definitive detail, Libya did not have the technology needed to make the rest of the parts itself.

Adding to Qaddafi’s disenchantment with his prospects for actually developing an operational nuclear capability was a compelling reality: he was in serious domestic trouble and badly needed

the economic quid pro quos offered by the United States to stay in power. Economic distress had led to urban riots, two military coup attempts and an Islamist insurgency in the eastern provinces.

Israel's ambassador to the United States, Michael Oren, completely ignores the limited progress of the Libyan nuclear effort in his simplistic argument that Qaddafi, eyeing the fate of Iraq, acted out of fear of a U.S. invasion.

Saddam Hussein, as it turned out, tried to make it look like he had nuclear weapons that he did not actually have mainly to frighten off Iran in the wake of the Iran-Iraq war with its horrendous casualties. This in turn produced alarm in Washington and Tel Aviv and the unintended consequence of a U.S. invasion.

The Iran-Iraq war was clearly the critical factor that initially accelerated the development of the nascent Iranian nuclear weapons program. But I learned on three recent visits to Tehran from key foreign-ministry and think-tank experts that Iran is not yet committed to acquiring a nuclear weapons capability.

Tehran accepts the logic of North Korea's position up to point. It wants the world to know that it is capable of weaponizing, but it will stop short of doing so while pursuing a broad security bargain with the United States. Alaeddin Boroujerdi, chairman of the Foreign Affairs Commission of the Majlis (Parliament), explicitly told me that "we do want to be able to weaponize to assert our sovereignty and our equality with other world powers, and we want you to know that clearly, but we also know that actually weaponizing would be crossing a dangerous red line." Boroujerdi spelled out the factors that impel the Iranian nuclear effort: the desire for great power status, the nuclear threats posed not only by Israel but also by the United States, especially by its tactical nuclear weapons on aircraft carriers in the Persian Gulf, and above all, the domestic political importance for the Ahmadinejad regime of the nuclear program as a nationalist rallying cry.

My visits to Tehran during the reign of the late Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi underlined the domestic political importance of the nuclear program even then. The Shah started the nuclear program as part of a broader effort to establish himself as a nationalist modernizer who would restore the position of regional preeminence that Tehran had intermittently enjoyed in earlier centuries. To erase his image as a CIA-installed U.S. puppet, the Shah continually appealed to Persian pride by evoking historical memories of past Persian empires and by developing ambitious military power projection capabilities. Ahmadinejad now does much the same—using the nuclear program as a means of securing his position at home and abroad.

The North Korean leadership, too, uses its nuclear weapons program both to bolster its domestic political prestige and to deter a U.S. attack. The United States pressed Pyongyang to give up its entire nuclear weapons capability at the outset of denuclearization negotiations, but it is precisely because Pyongyang recognized its deterrent value that it insists on a phased denuclearization process and criticizes Qaddafi for giving up his nuclear ambitions.