

South Africa's nuclear weapons experience – an opportunity for leadership in advancing the global arms control agenda?

by
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Arms control and South Africa's foreign policy objectives

The controversy surrounding Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and the growing tension regarding North Korea and Iran's nuclear programmes has once again brought into sharp focus the issue of nuclear weapons proliferation. In a last minute attempt to avert the war against Iraq, South Africa sent nuclear weapons experts to confirm the termination of Iraq's weapons programme. Regrettably, South Africa's efforts failed to prevent a war, which was justified largely by the alleged existence of an Iraqi nuclear weapons programme. To date South Africa's conclusion that Iraq had in fact terminated its nuclear weapons programme appears confirmed. However, international attention has now shifted to North Korea and Iran, where Washington has once again threatened action against alleged nuclear weapons proliferators. Given South Africa's commitment to nuclear disarmament, the question is how can South Africa advance the anti-nuclear campaign in the post-Gulf War II international environment? Some have suggested that a more complete and verifiable disclosure of South Africa's own clandestine weapons programme would be helpful and a positive incentive to further nuclear non-proliferation efforts.

The South African Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) "Strategic Plan 2002-2005" outlines a 'Security Calabash' within which arms control is identified as a priority for South Africa's foreign policy. Under the heading of 'Disarmament and Non-Proliferation' the DFA has outlined a long-term foreign policy goal of safeguarding South Africa's sovereignty while contributing towards global peace and security. DFA's specific strategy to achieve this objective is to continue playing a leading international role in disarmament and the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. In this context, the DFA has since 1994 played an effective and convincing role in advancing arms control and disarmament.

In a Cabinet decision of 31 August 1994, the South African government confirmed its commitment to a policy of non-proliferation and arms control, opening a new chapter in South Africa's nuclear history. At the same time, it was emphasised that the primary goal of policy was to reinforce and promote South Africa as a responsible producer, possessor and trader of advanced nuclear technologies. This policy was intended to promote the benefits of non-proliferation and arms control, specifically for African countries and members of the Non Aligned Movement (NAM). As the only country in Africa and the NAM which was an active member of all the nuclear suppliers groups, South Africa was able to serve as an important diplomatic link between nuclear weapons states (NWS) and the non-nuclear weapons states (NNWS).

The role of diplomatic bridge-builder was clearly demonstrated at the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference where South Africa was the catalyst in securing a compromise between NAM and the NWS. In his statement to the conference, former Foreign Minister Alfred Nzo emphasised that the 'NPT remains the only international instrument on nuclear disarmament to which all five nuclear-weapon states are bound'. Thus the NPT placed an ongoing commitment on the NWS to disarm. Moreover, Nzo argued that the inequalities inherent in the treaty as well as the criticisms with regard to disarmament, peaceful uses of nuclear energy and security guarantees should be de-linked from the debate in order not to threaten the NPT itself. Given that there was no official NAM position, South Africa took the lead in arguing that the NPT 'should not be placed in jeopardy' by anything other than a permanent extension. Nzo came out strongly in favour of the NPT arguing that 'South Africa took the decision to destroy its nuclear weapons and to become a state party to the NPT because we saw our security being guaranteed

by its provisions. It is for this reason also that South Africa has become an active sponsor of an African nuclear-weapons-free zone treaty'.¹

South Africa thus strongly supported the indefinite extension of the treaty on the basis of putting into operation a set of 'checks and balances' to ensure adherence by all signatories. During the 1995 conference, South Africa came up with what the Chairperson, Sri Lanka's Jayantha Dhanapala, described as a 'brilliant package' which bridged the gap between the NWS and the NNWS. The South African proposal suggested that in return for a permanent renewal of the NPT, the NWS would agree to strengthen the monitoring on how the treaty was being observed with annual reviews; the implementation of a comprehensive ban on nuclear testing and a commitment by the NWS to eventually eliminate all nuclear weapons. This 'consensus package' based largely on the South African proposal, served to strengthen support among NAM members for the NPT. As a consequence of proposing the winning diplomatic formula at the 1995 conference, South Africa emerged as a major player in the field of arms control and disarmament. Dhanapala pointed out that South Africa's 'moral stature by virtue of having destroyed its nuclear weapons, (gave) it tremendous influence'.

Despite South Africa's limited international experience in multilateral fora, the momentum of the 1995 conference was maintained at the subsequent NPT preparatory committee (PrepComs) meetings in 1997, 1998 and 1999. The PrepComs became an important element of the review process as they focussed on how the NPT had been implemented by discussing principles, objectives and ways to promote full implementation of the treaty, with the objective of forwarding recommendations on to the review conferences. South Africa tended to take a liberal approach, seeing the PrepComs as a major opportunity to promote the goals of the NPT.

A key element of the diplomatic campaign has been to separate the NWS and their allies, by convincing the allies to support resolutions aimed at long-term global nuclear disarmament. This has manifested itself in the growing influence of the New Agenda Coalition (NAC) consisting of Ireland, Sweden, New Zealand, Brazil, Mexico, Slovenia, Sweden and South Africa. Behind the scenes, South Africa has played a decisive role in the NAC's drafting of proposals which are widely respected and supported, while avoiding the 'all or nothing' rhetoric which usually polarises the nuclear debate. South Africa's participation in the NAC and support for the NPT made a significant contribution to the success of the 2000 NPT Review Conference, which was described by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan as a 'significant step forward in humanity's pursuit of a more peaceful world'.² Annan's statement was prompted by a promise of the NWS to eliminate all their nuclear weapons over the long term. The breakthrough at the conference came as a result of private discussions between the NAC (including South Africa) and the NWS.

Promoting foreign policy objectives

Despite the apparent satisfaction of the IAEA concerning South Africa's nuclear weapon status in 1993, many questions were raised at the time – some of which remain unanswered. While a number of scholars have done an admirable job in piecing together South Africa's nuclear weapons programme, they have been forced to rely on interviews in the almost total absence of official documentation. Issues which remain open to question include: the origins of South Africa's nuclear weapons programme; reasons for initiating the programme; technical design of the bomb; proposed delivery systems; target selection (if any); deterrent strategy; nuclear weapons decision making; the uranium enrichment process; cost of the weapons programme; possible nuclear weapons tests and the report of the weapons dismantling process.

Arguably, the main benefits of any further declassification of South Africa's nuclear programme would be largely in the direction of supporting and advancing the global arms control agenda, a key policy objective outlined in the Cabinet's memo of August 31 1994. However, a more complete record would support the following foreign policy objectives: enhance South Africa's moral standing in the international community; provide support for the primary element of the NEPAD initiative, that is, promoting peace and stability in Africa; reinsorce NEPAD's stated commitment to democracy, transparency and good governance; set an example for other members of the African Union (AU); reinforce South Africa's broader security objectives as outlined in the DFA's 2002-2005 Strategic Plan;

contribute to the stated foreign policy aim of promoting global peace and security and strengthen South Africa's chances of winning a seat on an expanded UN Security Council.

Given South Africa's repeated commitments to arms control as emphasised in foreign policy objectives and advanced in the NPT process as outlined above, as well as South Africa's unique nuclear history, the country is well positioned to advance the objectives of global arms control through a more complete and comprehensive disclosure of past nuclear weapons activities. A full disclosure and extensive verification of South Africa's nuclear programme would support and advance the following arms control regimes:

- ***Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)*** – As a signatory of the NPT South Africa has a duty to other member states to lay to rest any suspicions or doubts which may still persist given the unanswered questions surrounding South Africa's nuclear weapons programme.
- ***Zangger Committee*** – Details of South Africa's secret uranium enrichment process and weapon manufacture would be helpful in promoting and supporting the Zangger trigger list and the work of the Zangger Committee in general.
- ***Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG)*** – Further details on South Africa's nuclear programme would support the NSG's ability to increase the effectiveness of IAEA full-scope safeguards and investigation of weapons-usable materials.
- ***The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT)*** – Details on South Africa's nuclear weapons test in the South Atlantic Ocean (assuming the test did in fact take place) would advance the objectives of the CTBT by confirming the capability of the International Monitoring System (the system which allegedly detected South Africa's nuclear test).
- ***The Fissile Material Treaty (FMT)*** – FMT has been deadlocked by disagreements over the exact quantity of fissile material in the different NWS. For success, adequate verification procedures need to be implemented in all fissile production and enrichment facilities not currently subject to international monitoring. Further details on the termination of South Africa's uranium enrichment process would support the development of processes necessary for verification and accurate accounting of fissile material.
- ***Nuclear-Weapons-Free Zones*** – Efforts to promote geographic limitations on nuclear weapons may receive encouragement and reassurance from a full disclosure of the South African case. (Such as boosting ratification of the Treaty of Pelindaba.)
- ***The Conference on Disarmament (CD)*** – The UN's Conference on Disarmament, the only permanent multilateral negotiating body in the field of arms control and disarmament, would be supported and strengthened by a full disclosure of South Africa's nuclear weapons programme. The CD has long campaigned for greater transparency and verification in disarmament processes.
- ***IAEA safeguards*** – Further disclosure of South Africa's nuclear weapons programme would assist the IAEA in its work of monitoring nuclear materials and related facilities. Information could be helpful in addressing the weaknesses of the IAEA inspection procedures.
- ***Nuclear Disarmament*** – Efforts by the nuclear powers to reduce and ultimately eliminate nuclear weapons have clearly been inadequate. Without meaningful nuclear disarmament, the horizontal proliferation of nuclear weapons, irrespective of the NPT, remains a serious risk and is likely to become more urgent as increasing

numbers of countries acquire the technology needed to produce nuclear weapons. In recent years, a number of carefully considered and detailed proposals have been offered as a way towards total nuclear disarmament. These include the Henry L Stimson Centers' *Second Report of the Steering Committee Project on Eliminating Weapons of Mass Destruction*; the Report of the US-Japan Study Group on Arms Control and Non-Proliferation After the Cold War: *The Future of Nuclear Weapons*; the National Academy of Science's report on *The Future of United States' Nuclear Weapons Policy*; the Conference on Disarmament's *Programme of Action*; the Canberra Commission on *The Elimination of Nuclear Weapons*; the Tokyo Forum's *Facing Nuclear Danger*; the Committee on Nuclear Policy's *Jump-START: Retaking the Initiative to Reduce Post-Cold War Nuclear Dangers* and the *Report by the Committee on Nuclear Policy*. All of the proposals offer very detailed and carefully considered arguments on why global nuclear disarmament is desirable and how it can be achieved. The disarmament proposals broadly support the conclusion of the Canberra Commission calling for the elimination of nuclear weapons based on three propositions: the destructive power of nuclear weapons robs them of any military utility and renders them politically and morally indefensible; nuclear weapons can not be retained in perpetuity and never used either on purpose, or by mistake; their possession by some countries is a major incentive for others to acquire nuclear weapons.

The disarmament proposals have been supported by an International Court of Justice decision ruling that the use of nuclear weapons is unlawful and is against the principles of humanitarian law. All detailed studies on the future of nuclear weapons reach basically the same conclusion: nuclear weapons are unusable, immoral, illegal and an unacceptable element of security policy. There is no moral, or legal argument which can justify the continued possession of nuclear weapons.

A non-proliferation leadership role for South Africa:

As the first state to clandestinely produce and then subsequently dismantle and destroy nuclear weapons, South Africa is an exceptional participant in the nuclear non-proliferation process. The full disclosure of South Africa's nuclear past would promote a global denuclearisation environment and enhance conditions for nuclear disarmament. Given the increasing dangers of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, a more accurately documented and transparent history of South Africa's nuclear weapons programme would help to advance the process of delegitimising nuclear weapons. Observers agree that the nuclear disarmament process should be transparent and verifiable. All procedures for the removal of nuclear warheads, transportation, storage and dismantling should be open to international verification measures and the details made available to all interested parties and the public in general. NWS should be required to provide a complete list of all nuclear weapons, as well as spare parts and related components in order to accurately measure the nuclear disarmament process. Regrettably, South Africa's nuclear weapons disarmament process was neither fully transparent nor verifiable.

A complete and verifiable record of South Africa's nuclear disarmament would give support to United States Resolution A/RES/53/77U – *Nuclear Disarmament with a View to the Ultimate Elimination of Nuclear Weapons*, introduced by Japan to the UN General Assembly and adopted with 160 in favour, none against and 11 abstentions. South Africa could take the lead on the proposed multilateral framework for nuclear disarmament contained in this resolution and could guide the long-term framework for the elimination of all nuclear weapons in accordance with UN disarmament objectives. Today the world is armed with countless nuclear and conventional weapons for which there is no rational need. The challenge of the 21st Century is to accelerate the post-Cold War trend of nuclear disarmament, bringing about maximum weapons reductions to the lowest possible level consistent with security. This goal has become more urgent, given the growing concerns surrounding North Korea's withdrawal from the NPT and the IAEA's demand for more comprehensive

inspections of Iran's nuclear weapons by providing a full record of its nuclear weapons programme and disarmament process.

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Suggested Reading:

The Middle Powers Initiative at
<http://www.middlepowers.org/about/innerpage.html>

Albright, D.: "South Africa's Nuclear Weapons Programme", Institute for Science and International Security, March 14, 2001 at
<http://www.web.mit.edu/ssp/spring01/albright.html>

Federation of American Scientists: 'Nuclear Weapons', at
<http://www.antenna.nl/wse/442/4376.html>

Federation of American Scientists: 'South Africa's Nuclear Weapons Programme', at
<http://www.fas.org/nuke/guide/rsa/nuke/index.html>

¹ Quoted in Maiza, Z. and Landsberg, C.: "Fission for Compliments? South Africa and the 1995 Extension of Nuclear Non-Proliferation", *Policy Issues and Actors*, Vol. 9, No. 3, 1996, Centre for Policy Studies.

² Quoted in Holum, J.: "2000 NPT Review Conference a Success", *Disarmament*, at <http://www.igc.org/disarm/DT500.html>, p. 15.