

Dec 8 2011

South Africa's nuclear dismantlement continues to astonish

LSE IDEAS

With the world's focus now on Iran's nuclear ambition, Dr Scott Firsing argues that South Africa's nuclear dismantlement and its leading role in nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation continues to amaze over two decades later. He looks back at some of South Africa's achievements and its affect on United States-South African relations.

By Dr Scott Firsing

Lecturer and Acting Head: International Studies
Monash South Africa

The world is currently focused on Iran. Today, 06 December 2012, Australia joined the United States (US), Canada and the United Kingdom in widening sanctions against Iran as the EU debates the possibility of an oil embargo. Various questions are now being pondered including will the US and/or Israel attack Iran's nuclear facilities?

While reading these articles, one cannot help but think of the bravery and vision of South Africa to possess the world's most powerful weapon then voluntarily dismantle its entire program. Although the Iranian and South African case studies are very different in regards to the internal and external political and security aspects, one can continue to hope [as I am sure Washington is] that Iran will follow in South Africa's footsteps and abandon its nuclear ambitions.



It has been over 20 years since South Africa signed the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) as a non nuclear-weapon state. In the wake of the April/May 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference, Martha Bridgman of the South African Institute for International Affairs observes that American pronouncements on South Africa created an impression that the two countries were taking great strides in their defense relations.^[i] America believed the NPT should be indefinitely extended under which the developed world could maintain some control over the spread of nuclear weapons while working to reduce its own stockpiles. South Africa, as part of the Non Aligned Movement (NAM), faced a difficult decision in that the developing nations were opposed to such an extension. NAM instead favored a fixed period extension, in order

for future negotiations to take place that could change the status quo under which NAM countries were at a distinct disadvantage.

South Africa itself refused to admit to a nuclear weapons program before making the decision in July 1991 to sign the NPT.^[ii] As part of the stipulations of the NPT, South Africa had to submit its nuclear inventory to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Controversy soon became rife between the South African government and the future governing party, the ANC. The latter continuously stated that it was against nuclear weapons development and that it wanted the former to release all information regarding the nuclear weapons program.^[iii]



The US government later got involved and offered to buy South Africa's highly enriched uranium. According to a US official in 1993, 'The ANC is bound to view the sale of the weapon- grade stock as a signal that the governments involved in the transaction do not trust a prospective black-majority government. But ANC's stated position opposing the building, stockpiling, and use of nuclear weapons would make it difficult for the party to oppose the sale.'^[iv]

It was only on 24 March 1993, that South African president de Klerk admitted to his country's nuclear weapons program, and that the arsenal was dismantled in 1991.^[v] The IAEA later confirmed this. Even with the new information, the ANC still pronounced the need to permanently extend the NPT.

The US was clear that South Africa should support the American position and the US ambassador to South Africa quietly warned the South African elite what was expected from them, although research shows that it appeared there already was a

shared viewpoint despite the warning. Even so, the US saw South Africa in a strong moral position to lead the NAM as they swore off the development of future nuclear weaponry. In the end, South Africa lobbied for the American position, and persuaded NAM to follow suit. [vi]

The US thoroughly praised South Africa's stance at the NPT conference in light of this. Speaking at the first meeting of the US-South African Binational Commission (BNC) in late 1995, US Vice President Al Gore proclaimed that 'clearly South Africa has a tremendous amount to offer the United States and the entire world. Your leadership on the issue of nuclear non-proliferation provides a model for the rest of the world.' [vii] A former high level State Department official who was interviewed by the author recalls that South Africa really came across as the leader at the NPT conference and it was one of the great cooperative moments between the US and South Africa. [viii]

It should be remembered that in 1994, under pressure from the US, South Africa also agreed not to build long-range missiles and to destroy the plants and equipment it was using to build large space rockets. South Africa also terminated its nuclear weapons program and demolished its key rocket sites and was allowed to join the Missile Technology Control Regime; a group of 28 countries that agreed to restrict the spread of long-range missiles in the summer of 1995. [ix]

The acclaim continued in September 2004 when the US praised South Africa in the field of nuclear trafficking after South Africa acted against Pakistan's scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan's secret nuclear network. South African businessman Johan Meyer appeared in court in the town of Vanderbijlpark, south of Johannesburg, a day after his arrest on charges of being in possession of nuclear-related material and of illegally importing and exporting nuclear material. According to reports, Meyer had allegedly used the network in efforts to help Libya develop an atomic weapons program between November 2000 and November 2001. [x] "And without trying to provide any detail, because the detail really needs to be provided by the South Africans to the extent and whenever they're prepared to do so, I would say that we do congratulate South Africa for its efforts to act against the A.Q. Khan network," US State Department spokesperson Richard Boucher said. [xi]

Khan, the so-called father of Pakistan's nuclear program, confessed in February of 2004 that he had shared nuclear secrets with North Korea, Libya and Iran. Boucher went on to say that action by South African authorities would help in the global effort to destroy what remained of Khan's network. South African intelligence is also said to have worked closely with their US and Israeli counterparts in a year-long investigation into nuclear smuggling that led to Meyer's arrest. Abdul Minty, the chairperson of the South African Council for the Non-Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction, said the arrest follows an investigation into a number of companies and individuals in cooperation with other countries and the IAEA. [xii]

Numerous South Africa-based individuals had been involved previously in the proliferation of WMD materials and equipment. Most notably was a South Africa-based Israeli businessman, Asher Karni, who was arrested in Denver on New Year's Day 2004. He was accused of using front companies and falsifying documents to buy nuclear bomb triggers in the US for shipment to Pakistan. [xiii] Two other individuals identified as German engineer Gerhard Wisser and Swiss engineer Daniel Geiges, living permanently in South Africa, were arrested in Germany in August 2004 for participating in a nuclear technology smuggling ring. [xiv] Wisser was the owner, and Geiges a colleague and employee, of Krisch Engineering in Randpark, a Johannesburg suburb. Wisser was accused of acting as a middleman in a 2001 request to provide pipes to Libya for use in a uranium enrichment facility. Reports stated that a company in South Africa manufactured the pipes, but they apparently were not delivered to Libya. [xv]

Overall, the US sees South Africa in a positive light because it helped bring down part of Khan's nuclear proliferation network, being one of the few countries to do so. Moreover, America holds South Africa in high esteem, as it dismantled its nuclear weapons program in 1991, chemical and biological warfare program in 1993, and missile program in 1994; brought about an 'African Nuclear Weapons Free Zone' in 1995 and participated in NPT review conferences in 1995, 2000, 2005 and 2010. Lets hope Iran will do the same.

[i] Bridgman, M., 1999. Between "Partnership" and Disengagement: MAPPING THE CONTOUTS OF US POLICY TOWARDS POST APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA. Dissertation presented for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Stellenbosch. Department of Political Science. December.

[ii] Albright, D., & Hibbs, M., 1993. South Africa: The ANC and the Atom Bomb. *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. April. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.bullatomsci.org/issues/1993/a93/a93AlbrightHibbs.html> [accessed 04 April 2011].

[iii] Ibid

[iv] Ibid

[v] Baeckmann, A.V., Dillon, G., & Perricos, D., 1995. Nuclear verification in South Africa. *IAEA Bulletin*, 37 (1), p. 42. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.iaea.org/worldatom/Periodicals/Bulletin/Bull371/baeckmann.html> (accessed 04 April 2011).

[vi] Bridgman 1999:131

[vii] UNIS (United States Information Service), 1995. Gore praises South Africa's Leadership on Nuclear Non-Proliferation. 05 December in Bridgman 1999:132.

[viii] Anonymous, 2008 [Interview]. Former US Government official. 14 November. Washington DC.

[ix] Wisconsin Project on Nuclear Arms Control, 1996. South Africa Gives Up Nukes and Missiles; Now Gets High-Tech Imports. *The Risk Report*. 2 (1). January-February. [Online]. Available at:

<http://www.wisconsinproject.org/countries/safrica/southafrica-high-tech.html> [accessed 04 January 2008].

[x] SAPA (South African Press Association), 2004. US praises SA action against nuclear network. 04 September.

[xi] Ibid

[xii] Associated Press, 2004. Businessman denies WMD links. 03 September.

[xiii] SAPA 2004

[xiv] Cauli, T., 2004. Two More Arrested in South Africa in Investigation into Nuclear Arms Equipment Trafficking. *Associated Press*. 09 September.

[xv] SAPA 2004

This entry was posted in [Africa](#), [IDEAS Blogs](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).