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2009-04-01

# Libya's Nuclear Intentions: Ambition and Ambivalence; Strategic Insights, v. 8, issue 2 (April 2009)

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## Libya's Nuclear Intentions: *Ambition and Ambivalence*

by [Maalfrid Braut-Hegghammer](#)

*Strategic Insights* is a quarterly electronic journal produced by the [Center for Contemporary Conflict](#) at the [Naval Postgraduate School](#) in Monterey, California. The views expressed here are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NPS, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

### Introduction

Libya's 2003 decision to end its pursuit of nuclear weapons is noteworthy for several reasons. First, it is a rare example of nuclear rollback and arguably the only one that did not follow from regime change or large-scale domestic political transition. Second, it helped to reveal the extent of the international black nuclear market and profit motives as a driver of nuclear proliferation. However, this particular case entails a paradox. Why did Libya's leader Colonel Muammar al-Qadhafi conclude that the pursuit of nuclear weapons was threatening national security after having pursued these weapons for more than three decades? This paper will examine the factors that led to this decision and, specifically, Libya's evolving perceptions of the costs and benefits of acquiring nuclear weapons.

Libya's nuclear turnaround, announced in December 2003, is particularly interesting due to the characteristics of the Libyan regime under al-Qadhafi. Since the officer coup of September 1969 the Libyan regime has had a remarkably low turnover of officials.<sup>[1]</sup> Thus, shifts in Libyan grand strategy during the 1990s (for example, the decision to end Libyan support for actors involved in international terrorism) cannot be attributed to dramatic changes on the Libyan political scene but were conceived and implemented by largely the same set of individuals that have been in power since 1969. This would appear to increase the costs of changing course and the likelihood of path dependency. It therefore seems particularly important to explain the processes and dynamics that shaped the motives and intentions upon which the Libyan regime's commitment to acquiring nuclear weapons was based.

Analyses of Libya's nuclear rollback tend to point to external factors as the causes of Libya's turnaround. To some extent, this may be explained by the lack of access to Libyan sources and the absence of other domestic reforms or political changes taking place in Libya at the same time. However, this tendency might also reflect the desire of some of the actors involved to identify the so-called 'Libya model' as a success story of counter-proliferation efforts, whether these are defined as 'hard' (sanctions), 'soft' (diplomacy), or a combination.<sup>[2]</sup> As a result, we have an incomplete understanding of Libya's motives for wanting to acquire nuclear weapons or how these evolved in response to internal and external developments. Furthermore, the impact of various external measures on Libya's perspectives on the costs and benefits of going nuclear have not been specifically analysed.

Three main questions will be examined in this paper. First, what were the motives driving Libya's nuclear weapons project? Second, how did these motives evolve? Third, what caused these motives to change? Answering these questions helps to shed new light on the dynamics behind Libya's reassessment of its pursuit of nuclear weapons. Moreover, this may help to identify what

is unique and particular about the Libyan case and what lessons, if any, can be drawn for the future. The paper draws on sources from the Libyan regime, including interviews conducted by the author with key Libyan officials, and seeks to construct an analysis of perspectives from Tripoli in explaining why al-Qadhafi concluded in 2003 that continuing the pursuit of nuclear weapons would be harmful to Libya's national security.

It will be argued that the motives driving Libya's nuclear weapons project can be divided into three phases. Initially, the efforts to acquire nuclear weapons were primarily driven by a desire for prestige and regional prominence. Subsequently the regime's motives for pursuing nuclear weapons were increasingly driven by more conventional concerns about national security. Then, from the mid-1990s, the regime's efforts to acquire a nuclear deterrent capability were reinvigorated as Libya's conflict with the international community deepened. However, throughout Libya's pursuit of nuclear weapons these efforts were shaped by a fundamental ambiguity. The consequences of this ambivalence help to explain Libya's seemingly surprising choices regarding the nuclear weapons project. By 2003 the costs of pursuing nuclear weapons capabilities had grown steadily, while the potential gains of a nuclear deterrent seemed increasingly irrelevant. In the post-9/11 environment nuclear proliferation was becoming increasingly fraught with risk. The increasing actual and potential costs of continuing to pursue nuclear weapons, combined with a rapprochement between Libya, the United States (U.S.) and the United Kingdom (UK), both necessitated and facilitated a rethinking of Libyan grand strategy and the role of the nuclear weapons project. Thus, the combination of sticks and carrots offered by the U.S. and the UK persuaded Libya to voluntarily give up the regime's longstanding nuclear ambition. Ultimately, and perhaps ironically, the nuclear weapons project held the key to the Libyan regime's security and survival.

## Nuclear Ambitions: Origins

Why was al-Qadhafi's regime determined, from the outset, to acquire nuclear weapons? Nuclear aspirations were integral to the ambitious agenda of the officers that seized power in Libya in September 1969. Indeed, the foreign policy ambitions of the regime were among the most characteristic features of the early days of al-Qadhafi's rule. Libyan officials have argued that the regime pursued nuclear weapons for a complex set of reasons, and observers have argued that the regime pursued these capabilities "for different reasons at different times."<sup>[3]</sup> From the outset, however, regional ambitions and the prestige associated with possessing nuclear weapons were arguably the most important concerns driving this early ambition. Before examining these motives in more detail, however, Libya's initial efforts to acquire nuclear weapons will be considered.

The al-Qadhafi regime sought to purchase nuclear weapons within months of assuming power.<sup>[4]</sup> The regime reportedly attempted to buy nuclear weapons on several occasions, though without success.<sup>[5]</sup> As a result, suspicions that the Libyan regime sought to acquire nuclear weapons began to emerge. As these attempts failed, it became clear to the Libyan regime that it would be necessary to develop an indigenous capability in order to have the option to acquire nuclear weapons. Libya's Nuclear Energy Commission was established in 1973.<sup>[6]</sup> According to a Libyan official the decision to commence building the basis for a Libyan nuclear weapons programme came in the wake of the 1973 Yom Kippur war.<sup>[7]</sup> Second, the surge in income resulting from the oil crisis provided the regime with the funds to invest in expensive and prestigious projects. Subsequently, Libya endeavoured to acquire know-how and material from abroad to lay the foundation for an indigenous nuclear infrastructure.<sup>[8]</sup>

Libyan officials have pointed to strategic incentives as the main motive driving Libya's efforts to acquire nuclear weapons.<sup>[9]</sup> According to a senior Libyan official national defence became a "top priority" in the early days of the regime due to regional instabilities (primarily the Arab-Israeli conflict) and recent memories of brutal colonization.<sup>[10]</sup> In this context a deterrent posture carried strong appeal, and nuclear weapons presented the possibility of a powerful deterrent mechanism. A nuclear deterrent appeared to be a technological security 'fix': requiring little manpower (which

was desirable, given Libya's small population) yet facilitating protection of Libya's vast territory from external threats. Moreover, a nuclear deterrent could have helped to reduce the role and size of the Libyan armed forces which in turn could help circumscribe potential threats to the regime.

Despite these incentives, which had appeal in a government comprised of young officers, the security dimension was not necessarily the most important, or well-considered, of the motives in favour of acquiring nuclear weapons at this early stage. According to al-Qadhafi, "In 1969 and early 1970s we did not reflect on where or against whom we could use the nuclear bomb. Such issues were not considered. All that was important was to build the bomb."<sup>[11]</sup> This (retrospective) statement suggest that the strategic dimension of going nuclear was not particularly thought-through and, arguably, that concerns about prestige and political ambitions initially weighed more heavily than military concerns in the regime's motives for pursuing nuclear weapons. Indeed, the nuclear project was one of several Libyan technological acquisition efforts that seem to have been driven by a desire to be perceived as a country possessing cutting-edge military technology rather than pragmatic assessments of specific security problems and military needs. During the 1970s and 1980s in particular, Libya's military procurement appears to have been undertaken to increase the country's prestige as opposed to being useful for (or tailored to) the armed forces.<sup>[12]</sup> In some cases this appears to have been counter-productive in terms of the resulting military capability.

The Libyan regime's initial efforts to pursue a nuclear weapons capability were inspired in no small part by the notion that nuclear weapons could elevate Libya to a regional and international role matching the regime's ideological principles and ambitions. It has also been argued that Colonel al-Qadhafi's personal ambition of international leadership was a motivating factor.<sup>[13]</sup> The political implications of the technological gap between Israel and Arab countries and, specifically, Israel's nuclear weapons, in the context of the regional conflict appear to have been an important motive for the Libyan regime's early nuclear aspirations.<sup>[14]</sup> According to a Libyan Foreign Ministry official "the most important factor" for Libya's desire to acquire a nuclear weapon "was Israel's nuclear weapons."<sup>[15]</sup> Al-Qadhafi's insistence (at that point) that the solution to the "problem of Israel" was military demonstrated the regime's attempt to recast an important foreign policy objective as a military problem.<sup>[16]</sup> At this early stage, the nuclear weapons project was considered a unilateral "pan-Arab project"—a task that Libya would take upon itself on behalf of the wider Arab world.<sup>[17]</sup> Acquiring a nuclear weapon could provide Libya a leading regional role in the confrontation with Israel and, at the same time, enable Libya to replace Egypt as the leading Arab state.<sup>[18]</sup> Thus, a nuclear weapon could serve as a "short cut" to regional leadership despite Libya's lacking of some of Egypt's other leadership credentials.

The conceptualisation of nuclear weapons as a symbol of progress and power was an important element underwriting the Libyan regime's interest in nuclear weapons. First, because the ability to develop a nuclear weapons capability signified advanced technological and scientific capabilities, and second, because joining the exclusive "nuclear club" was prestigious. However, the regime's ambition of developing an indigenous nuclear weapons capability faced considerable obstacles due to Libya's developmental challenges. According to an Libyan official "falling behind in areas of education, health, technology and services, in addition to the increasing gap between [Libya and its neighbouring countries] and close European neighbours especially in industrial-technological productivity and services... [contributed] to feelings of insecurity."<sup>[19]</sup> However, Libya's reported attempts to purchase nuclear weapons suggest that simply obtaining a nuclear weapon was considered more urgent than the prestige associated with developing an indigenous nuclear weapons capability.

## **Doubt, Revision and Reinvigoration**

During the 1980s and 1990s Libya's relations with its neighbours, with other countries in the Middle East region, and with the West became increasingly strained. This led to doubts and

debates within the Libyan regime on the nuclear weapons issue. The scaling down of Libyan regional ambitions as a motive driving the nuclear project was connected with how Libya came to be perceived by in the Middle East during the 1970s and 1980s. By the mid-1980s the Libyan regime concluded that its bid for regional leadership was not supported by other countries in the region.<sup>[20]</sup> Therefore, acquiring a nuclear weapon no longer seemed to offer a shortcut to assuming a leading role in the regional confrontation with Israel. According to a Libyan official, at this point the role of Israel as a motive for Libya's objective of acquiring nuclear weapons diminished.<sup>[21]</sup> An alternative explanation for this development is that the 1979 peace treaty between Egypt and Israel effectively ended the era of Arab military confrontation with Israel at the state level. What seems clear is that the objective of regional leadership in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict was no longer a primary motivating factor for the regime's nuclear ambitions.

In the mid-1980s concerns about national security became an increasingly prominent motive driving Libya's nuclear efforts. In 1986 the United States launched a bombing raid on Tripoli and Benghazi, the Libyan capital and second-largest city, following suspicion that Libya had been involved in the *La Belle* discotheque bombing in Berlin.<sup>[22]</sup> Furthermore, clashes between American and Libyan pilots in the Gulf of Sirte on several occasions during the 1980s demonstrated how powerless Libyan forces and defences were in the face of U.S. manoeuvres.<sup>[23]</sup> The 1986 bombings demonstrated that Libyan forces were unable to effectively defend and protect the capital (including al-Qadhafi's residence). Subsequently, national security appears to have become the main motivation for the regime's pursuit of nuclear weapons. The 1986 attacks appear to have shocked the leadership. In the aftermath of these attacks, al-Qadhafi said "[i]f we had possessed a deterrent—missiles that could reach New York—we would have hit it at the same moment. Consequently, we should build this force so that they and others will no longer think about an attack... the world has a nuclear bomb, we should have a nuclear bomb."<sup>[24]</sup> According to a Libyan official, the regime's desire to create a nuclear deterrent to prevent foreign (and, in particular, American) intervention in Libya surged after the 1986 attacks.<sup>[25]</sup> In the mid-1980s "there was a renewed purchasing campaign" in the nuclear programme, "driven less by status than by a desire to ensure Libya's survival."<sup>[26]</sup> Despite these efforts, between 1981 and 1995 Libya's nuclear efforts were marked by arrested development, which was in no small part due to the increasing difficulties the Libyan regime faced in terms of procurement.<sup>[27]</sup>

In the early 1990s, however, doubts regarding the costs and potential strategic benefits of the nuclear project seem to have emerged. While these doubts ultimately were overtaken by reinforced commitment, they reflect the underlying ambivalence in the Libyan regime's commitment to acquiring nuclear weapons. A combination of domestic, regional and international factors sparked these doubts. First, growing popular discontent with the domestic economic situation appears to have fuelled longstanding debates about the costs of Libyan foreign policy adventures for the regime's domestic standing. Second, the 1991 Gulf War demonstrated the superiority of the American military and the limited utility of WMD (specifically, chemical weapons stockpiles and a nuclear weapons programme) in a conflict between the United States and a Middle Eastern state. According to Libyan officials, this fuelled debate in the regime where the costs and benefits of continuing the pursuit of nuclear weapons were deliberated. In particular, the potential strategic utility of nuclear weapons was discussed. According to a senior Libyan official, it was argued that nuclear weapons were not particularly "useful" for Libya's strategic needs.<sup>[28]</sup> The regime appears to have concluded that nuclear weapons are not "enough for countries without complete, conventional military potential," based on the regime's analysis of wars between nuclear and non-nuclear states (e.g. the Falklands war and Israel's invasion of Beirut in 1982).<sup>[29]</sup> According to Libyan officials, the preparedness to consider abandoning the pursuit of non-conventional weapons was signalled to the United States in the early 1990s. <sup>[30]</sup> However, these approaches were rejected as the George Bush, Sr. administration wanted Libya to comply with United Nations (UN) resolutions before entering into a dialogue.<sup>[31]</sup> After the imposition of UN sanctions and mounting international pressure, Libyan officials seem to have

concluded that discontinuing the nuclear weapons project would be a *de facto* capitulation to the West.[32]

In 1992 UN sanctions were imposed after Libya was accused of being responsible for the Lockerbie bombing of 1988. This had two important consequences with regards to the nuclear question, namely a change in the Libyan regime's commitment to acquiring nuclear weapons capabilities and in the particular concerns that informed the regime's intentions and motives. First, Libya's increasingly isolated and perilous situation appears to have intensified the regime's commitment to acquire nuclear weapons. Second, Libya's motives for pursuing nuclear weapons moved away from the earlier emphasis on regional prestige and leadership and assumed a more conventional security-orientated focus. The political value of acquiring nuclear weapons receded while the potential benefits for national security became increasingly important. This development was mirrored in other areas of domestic and foreign policy, notably in the cessation of Libya's support for actors involved in international terrorism in the 1990s.

Libya's increasingly difficult relationship with the United States seems to be an important factor in explaining why the regime did not act on the alleged agreement to end the nuclear weapons project in the early 1990s. A source close to al-Qadhafi argued that after being accused of carrying out the Lockerbie attack, the regime "became afraid that Libya would become the main target of the Middle East region for the United States." [33] Furthermore, during the early 1990s the regime faced considerable domestic problems, including loss of support, coup attempts, and a three-year long conflict with Islamists in the east. Thus, the economic consequences of the sanctions gave the regime real cause for concern in terms of domestic stability. In response to this increasingly pressured situation, it appears that the regime began to pursue a two-track policy.[34] The regime's prime objective appears to have been to improve its relations with the West (primarily the United States) while the pursuit of nuclear weapons was continued as an 'insurance policy' in case rapprochement failed. Thus, the regime continued its pursuit of nuclear weapons in tandem with efforts to address the root cause of the Libyan regime's security concerns—namely the conflict with the United States (and, thus, the economic situation under the UN sanctions). This two-track approach suggests that the ambiguous commitment of the regime to the nuclear weapons project persisted in the context of an increasingly difficult international situation during the tumultuous 1990s. The trend towards *realpolitik* in Libyan grand strategy during the 1990s reflected the increasing power of revisionists over revolutionaries in Libyan foreign and domestic policy.

In July 1995 al-Qadhafi made a strategic decision to reinvigorate Libyan efforts with regards to nuclear weapons. According to a Libyan official, the regime decided to "construct a program that will produce enriched uranium." [35] The emphasis on procuring the necessary resources for a nuclear weapons programme from abroad had characterised Libya's approach from the outset. An unprecedented window of opportunity arose in the form of the Abdul Qadeer Khan network. This represented a breakthrough for Libya for two reasons, first because acquiring the necessary hardware and software from other countries had become increasingly difficult, which led to stagnation in the nuclear programme in the 1980s, and because the Khan network acted as a broker who offered to acquire everything Libya needed for an enrichment programme.[36] Therefore, this opportunity appears to have been considered too good to be missed in the difficult circumstances the Libyan regime experienced in the mid-1990s. Notably, the regime wanted to purchase "an entire nuclear weapons capability from start to finish... a turnkey program." [37] Over the next few years Libya obtained the building blocs for an enrichment programme. However, due to the limitations of indigenous expertise and management the Libyans were in some cases unable to assess or make use of these items. In other words, the Libyan manpower could not keep up with the inflow of equipment from the Khan network. Thus, despite rapid advances in the area of procurement it was clear that Libya faced considerable obstacles before they would be able to produce nuclear weapons.

## Rollback

There are three sets of reasons why the Libyan regime concluded that nuclear weapons could not provide security, but in fact did the opposite. First were the “root causes,” i.e., factors that over time led to doubts within the regime about the nuclear weapons project. Second were the “facilitating causes”, notably the general improvement of relations between Libya and the West from the late 1990s onwards. Third were the “necessary causes,” namely developments following 9/11 that made it imperative for the Libyan regime to make up its mind regarding nuclear weapons. Growing concerns about the spread of nuclear weapons and the international community’s conflict with Iraq made it urgent for Libya to determine whether or not it would continue to pursue nuclear weapons. These three sets of causes contributed to the nuclear rollback decision in different ways. The opportunity to address the main causes of the regime’s security concerns from 1999 onwards, the increasing risks associated with pursuing nuclear weapons after 9/11, and longstanding reservations within the regime regarding the actual gains beyond a deterrent effect against the United States persuaded the regime to abandon its nuclear weapons ambitions.

The Libyan regime’s concerns about indirect consequences of the nuclear project were rooted in longstanding domestic political and economic dissatisfaction. Investments in the nuclear project represented “missed opportunities” for domestic economic development, which could further erode the regime’s domestic standing. In the 1990s Libya faced an increasingly difficult situation with regards to the international community and popular dissatisfaction. The economy suffered due to sanctions, falling oil prices, “the cumulative effect of years of economic mismanagement” and an inflation rate reaching 50 percent in 1994.<sup>[38]</sup> The regime also faced “its most significant popular rebellion,” namely a home-grown Islamist opposition movement that remained undefeated for three years.<sup>[39]</sup> The emergence of such a considerable armed opposition movement was of grave concern to the regime, and demonstrated its weaknesses. The regime’s domestic standing suffered, and an uprising in one of the most important tribes was a warning signal. As a result of these difficulties, the regime concluded that changes in Libya’s relations with the outside world were necessary. By the second half of the 1990s al-Qadhafi had decided that Libya’s international standing had to improve in order to “enable Libya to regenerate itself and its economy.”<sup>[40]</sup>

Towards the end of the 1990s Libya’s gradual rapprochement with the United States and the UK through the negotiations over how to settle the Lockerbie issue heralded positive changes for Libya. The trilateral negotiation of the Lockerbie issue facilitated discussions enabling Libya to address the causes of its protracted conflict with the United States (and given opportunities to rehabilitate itself internationally). These developments appear to have encouraged a rethinking of the nuclear project. Furthermore, it was made clear to Libya that ultimately the WMD issue would have to be addressed. Libya signalled its readiness to do so, but this was postponed until the Lockerbie issue had been fully resolved.

How important were the UN sanctions in leading to Libya’s decision to abandon nuclear weapons? Sanctions appear to have had a mixed impact on the regime’s commitment to its nuclear project. While the sanctions were undoubtedly an important factor for the regime’s conclusion that improving relations with the international community was necessary, their influence on the regime’s nuclear proliferation rationale seems less clear. If the Libyan regime was prepared to abandon its nuclear weapons project, and then reinvigorated its nuclear weapons programme as its conflict with the international community deepened, the impact of sanctions does not seem to have been straightforward. Ironically, Libya’s nuclear programme flourished under sanctions. Nonetheless, getting the UN and U.S. sanctions lifted was an important Libyan objective addressed during the Lockerbie negotiations and the subsequent intensive negotiations that focused specifically on WMD.<sup>[41]</sup>

Two factors help to explain why the regime decided to discontinue the nuclear weapons project in 2003. After 9/11 it became clear that pursuing nuclear weapons was becoming increasingly dangerous for states that were not on good terms with the United States. The nuclear weapons project entailed negative consequences for the regime's security at two levels. Not only did the direct costs of the nuclear weapons project adversely affect the regime's domestic standing, pursuing a nuclear deterrent could also pose a more immediate threat to the regime as it might lead to a U.S. intervention to topple the Libyan regime. According to a Libyan official's account of the decision to end Libya's pursuit of nuclear weapons, in "2001 Libya was rethinking its policies and future programming, international relations, the importance of having nuclear weapons or weapons of mass destruction. In view of all this revision, Libya... realized that having weapons of mass destruction will not guarantee its security and certainly will not contribute to the prosperity of its people."[\[42\]](#) This account points to two recurring motives, namely security and development.

Libya's nuclear weapons efforts had progressed to a point where the regime had to decide whether they would commit to acquiring nuclear weapons. Libya was several years away from developing a nuclear weapons capability. This must have been clear to the regime, as a "completion date" had allegedly been discussed.[\[43\]](#) In other words, the costs of the nuclear weapons programme increased while substantial progress was lacking.[\[44\]](#) In light of the regime's ambivalent commitment to its nuclear project it is perhaps not surprising that some have concluded that the regime was less than fully committed. It has been suggested that Libya's nuclear efforts in the 1990s primarily sought to ensure a strong bargaining hand in relation to the West.[\[45\]](#) The idea that Libya was not seriously committed to its pursuit of nuclear weapons in the 1990s is not supported by the evidence. However, Libya's actions reflected the regime's ambiguity on the nuclear issue.

By 2003 senior Libyan regime figures considered the pursuit of nuclear weapons as counterproductive for national security (i.e. regime survival) and the role Libya aspired to play internationally. The international community's conflict with Iraq and the interception of the BBC China in 2003 may have cemented the regime's conclusion, and perhaps accelerated its implementation. The logical conclusion was that the best way to secure the Libyan regime would be to abandon this project and thus achieve the secure position it had strived for since 1969. Al-Qadhafi brings the external and internal factors together in his account of the background for Libya's decision:

We said to ourselves: if a country such as Libya manufactures the nuclear bomb, what does it want to do with it? Furthermore, Libya risked becoming involved in producing weapons at an inappropriate level. This, because such weapons need a solid base, great technological expertise, and vectors. Moreover, in which field could such weapons be used, in which theatre of combat?[\[46\]](#)

Thus, the nuclear weapons effort lacked a clear strategic/military purpose (after revising Libya's ambitions in the Middle East and improving relations with the United States), their pursuit was an expensive undertaking, and the project faced significant developmental challenges. Furthermore, Libyan officials were concerned about the project's implications for Libya's evolving international role. According to former Libyan Prime Minister Shukri Ghanem "[m]anufacturing weapons of mass destruction costs a lot of money and... gives an erroneous sense of power. It creates more problems than it resolves."[\[47\]](#) The Libyan regime concluded that being militarily strong, but isolated, was not a viable option.

Libya's pursuit of nuclear weapons lasted for more than three decades, and the desire to acquire nuclear weapons has been described as an "old dream."[\[48\]](#) Therefore, the speed by which the Libyan regime decided to discontinue this effort and implemented its decision following the trilateral negotiations that were initiated in March 2003 was striking. Why did Libya's nuclear turnaround happen so fast? Why weren't Libya's policies more shaped by path dependency, given how much time and money had been invested in the nuclear weapons project? Part of the

answer lies with the nature of the Libyan regime and, specifically, al-Qadhafi's unique position and strong leadership. According to a Libyan diplomat, several factors influenced the regime's decision to discontinue the pursuit of nuclear weapons, but the "key reason" was "changes in the Leader's perspective."<sup>[49]</sup> The Libyan leadership's perception of the costs and benefits of pursuing nuclear proliferation were dramatically and successfully influenced by the trilateral negotiations and developments after 9/11.<sup>[50]</sup> For example, the international community's conflict with Iraq in 2002-2003 may have accelerated Libya's need to make a decision on the nuclear issue sooner rather than later. However, the Libyan regime had for some time been aware that the WMD issue would also have to be addressed in the trilateral negotiations in order for U.S. sanctions to be lifted.<sup>[51]</sup> Thus, while the decision and its implementation were quick and resolute, Libya's preparedness to deal with the WMD issue had matured over time. When al-Qadhafi determined that ending Libya's pursuit of nuclear weapons was in Libya's interest and that it would benefit the security of the regime, decisive action was taken at a speed that surprised many. Thus, Libya's decision was the result of rational calculation and the Libyan leader's ability to rapidly alter the course of Libyan politics. Furthermore, the lack of popular commitment to the objective of acquiring nuclear weapons facilitated the implementation of this decision without constraints based on popular opinion.

## Explaining Libya's ambivalence

The evolution of Libya's rationale for pursuing nuclear weapons demonstrates that the regime's motives and commitment were ambivalent. This seems puzzling given how much had been invested by the Libyan regime in the nuclear weapons project. Compared with more determined proliferators, the Libyan regime's apparent indecision regarding the "endgame" of its pursuit of nuclear weapons is striking. A fundamental ambivalence underlies, and runs through, the concrete changes in the Libyan regime's motives for pursuing nuclear weapons that have been described. Arguably, the inconsistent political momentum behind the Libyan efforts to acquire nuclear weapons is one of the notable characteristics of the Libyan regime's pursuit of nuclear weapons capabilities. This seems paradoxical given that the regime committed to acquiring nuclear weapons shortly after coming to power. It has been argued that Libya's early attempts to purchase nuclear weapons demonstrated the regime's decision (and, presumably, determination) to acquire nuclear weapons at this early stage.<sup>[52]</sup> While this is undoubtedly true, it does not necessarily mean that the Libyan regime's commitment to acquire nuclear weapons through indigenous efforts was equally firm. Indeed, Libya's nuclear endeavours were characterized by inconsistent backing from the senior level of the regime.<sup>[53]</sup> This had the effect that Libya's pursuit of nuclear weapons capabilities in the 1970s and 1980s were, in the words of a Libyan official, "dwindling."<sup>[54]</sup> Going through the lengthy process of assembling a domestic basis for a nuclear weapons programme presented the regime with choices that made it clear that its reasons for wanting to acquire nuclear weapons were not particularly thought through.

The first factor contributing to the Libyan regime's ambivalence on the nuclear weapons question concerns the nature of the Libyan regime and its policy-making processes. Arguably, ambivalence was not exclusive to the nuclear weapons issue. Libyan governance under al-Qadhafi has been described as the "politics of contradiction."<sup>[55]</sup> Further, it has been argued that "self-destructive ambiguities of Libyan policy makers... [are] inherent in the process of Libyan foreign policy."<sup>[56]</sup> Divisions in the Libyan regime on the nuclear question reveal that senior regime figures had different views on this important strategic issue.<sup>[57]</sup> Further, al-Qadhafi's inconsistent signals to the outside world with regards to Libya's intentions in the nuclear area may have reflected his changing perspective. These signals may also have been intended to create confusion in the outside world regarding the Libyan regime's intentions. This may have resulted in different perceptions within the Libyan regime as to al-Qadhafi's intentions concerning nuclear weapons, or signalled that these were not necessarily set in stone. These examples suggest that some of the policy-making characteristics of the Libyan regime were instrumental in creating the ambivalence of the Libyan regime's nuclear policies.

The second factor creating this ambivalence was that the Libyan regime's inconsistent commitment to pursuing nuclear weapons reflects that while Libya could afford to pursue nuclear weapons, it did not particularly need them. The motives driving Libya's pursuit of nuclear weapons were general objectives of regional influence and national security, but it appears that it was less clear to the regime precisely how acquiring nuclear weapons would make Libya more secure and powerful. The initial decision to pursue nuclear weapons was motivated by notions of prestige and what appears to have been a rudimentary linkage of nuclear weapons with increased regional power and influence. According to al-Qadhafi's own admission, at this point the Libyan regime had not conceptualised what particular purposes nuclear weapons would serve. Further, it appears that the regime's revision of the costs and benefits of acquiring nuclear weapons in the early 1990s was perhaps the first proper discussion of the potential military benefits that nuclear weapons could offer Libya. When the costs and potential risks of the nuclear weapons project mounted after 9/11, tensions between Libya's motives for pursuing nuclear weapons and its domestic and international ambitions became more pronounced. While pursuing nuclear weapons initially had been an affordable luxury for the Libyan regime, as the costs and risks increased the potential gains of a nuclear deterrent seemed less appealing.

The third factor contributing to the ambivalence of Libya's commitment to acquiring nuclear weapons capabilities was the changing influence of Libyan foreign and security policy on Libyan nuclear policies. As the emphasis in Libya's nuclear motive went from foreign policy objectives to security concerns, the influence on nuclear policies went from raw ideological ambition (associated with foreign policy issues) to pragmatism. According to Mary-Jane Deeb foreign policy issues that are somewhat removed from Libya's core interests will be characterised by an "ideologically motivated policy" while issues relating to the Libyan regime's core interests, "which are security-led in nature," tend to be pragmatically dealt with.<sup>[58]</sup>

Why did this transition from primarily foreign policy-related towards more security-oriented influences over Libyan nuclear policies take place? First, after the 1986 bombing the Libyan regime realized that the consequences of Libya's "revolutionary" foreign policy (which had been strongly influenced by revolutionary zealots since the late 1970s) created real security problems. Therefore, the regime gradually began to move away from radical foreign policies and became increasingly focused on protecting the revolution in their own country. During the 1990s in particular, the influence of revolutionary elements waned and more pragmatic elements in the regime exercised a moderating influence over Libyan domestic and foreign policy. According to a Libyan official, as Libya's conflict with the West deepened the pursuit of nuclear weapons was driven by the need to protect the Libyan revolution.<sup>[59]</sup> While the Libyan regime had always been concerned about its own security and standing, during the 1990s these concerns became particularly prominent.

What were the implications of these changing influences on Libya's ambivalent nuclear policies? First, decisions based on ideology tend to be more consistent than those based on pragmatism. Second, policies driven by pragmatism are more contingent on changing circumstances than those driven by ideological precepts. In the case of Libya, the difficult circumstances of the 1990s led to tension between the regime's objective of normalising its relations with the international community (which would protect the regime from domestic and external security challenges) and the objective of acquiring a nuclear deterrent against a possible U.S. attack. As a result of the developments that followed 9/11, there appears to have been growing tension between the regime's evolving grand strategic ambitions and the objective of acquiring a nuclear deterrent. The dual-track policy attempted to strike a difficult balance between two objectives that were not easily combined, and ultimately could not be maintained.

## **Conclusion: Lessons from Libya?**

What lessons can be drawn from the case of Libya in order to replicate a welcome non-proliferation success story? It has been convincingly argued that Libya is a rare example of

successful coercive diplomacy.[60] A combination of punitive measures and incentives offered by the United States and the UK persuaded the Libyan regime in 2003 to end its longstanding pursuit of nuclear weapons capabilities. However, the case of Iraq demonstrated how difficult it can be to convince a country to abstain from WMD by offering a combination of sticks and carrots. Why was Libya a welcome success story?

The Libyan regime had become convinced that little could be gained from pursuing nuclear weapons capabilities if Libya were able to normalise its relations with the United States and the UK. Furthermore, the increasing risks of pursuing nuclear weapons led to the conclusion that doing so was becoming a threat to the Libyan regime's security. Developments in the international community's concerns about nuclear proliferation after 9/11 and the consequences of the nuclear weapons project for the regime's international and domestic standing were key factors in leading the regime to this conclusion. Thus, the Libyan regime decided to act quickly on its persuasion that abandoning its nuclear weapons ambitions held the key to securing the regime's position. Some of the characteristics of the Libyan regime were instrumental in facilitating this process. The Libyan regime was able to debate and revise the nuclear project at different intervals, despite how much had already been invested in the project. Furthermore, the nature of the regime enabled it to turn around its policy and implement a policy of rollback with stunning speed once the decision had been made. The nature of al-Qadhafi's leadership meant that there were no difficulties in abandoning a longstanding project, despite some protests from within the regime.

The trilateral negotiations had several characteristics that were important in leading to this success story. The establishment of trust between the parties during the Lockerbie negotiations was an important factor, and the urgency of all three countries to settle the WMD issue is likely to have been significant. A particularly important factor for the Libyan regime was the realization that regime change was not the United States' policy or intention.[61] More generally, the value of engaging in a broader process with concrete benchmarks where all parties agree to engage in pragmatic negotiations, rather than regime change, seems clear in the case of Libya. Furthermore, the intensive engagement between Libya, the United States and the UK was highly successful in dealing with difficult issues and rapidly proceed to act on their agreement. The small number of officials involved, and the absence of large bureaucracies such as international organizations, proved highly efficient. The Libyan case also demonstrated the efficiency of combining carrots and sticks and striking a balance between coercion and diplomacy.[62] While it will be challenging to strike this balance in other contexts, the main question is perhaps whether there will be a similar willingness on the part of the United States to engage pragmatically with other "rogue states" to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons.

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