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How South Africa Gave up on the Bomb

Although South Africa's nuclear weapons program started in the early days of the Cold War, Pretoria didn't hesitate to dismantle it after Apartheid ended. According to Vincent Intondi, it's an example that today's nuclear-armed states should follow.

By Vincent Intondi for ISN

When discussing the history of Africa, scholars rarely examine the impact of nuclear weapons. However, one could argue that since the United States dropped the bomb on Hiroshima, Africa has consistently been affected by the nuclear arms race. The U.S. obtained uranium for atomic bombs from the Belgian-controlled Congo. France tested its first nuclear weapon in the Sahara. On the other hand, nuclear disarmament was a major focus when twenty-nine Asian and African nations gathered for the Bandung Conference in 1955. Four years later, Ghanaian leader Kwame Nkrumah, along with African-American activists Bayard Rustin and William Sutherland, organized the Sahara Project, which aimed to stop the French nuclear tests. Yet, as black leaders tried to stop a nuclear weapon from exploding in West Africa, the apartheid government in South Africa began its mission to build a bomb.

Cold War Origins

South Africa initially set out to create its nuclear program in the late 1950s with the United States' help. The collaboration began after World War II with a program to develop South Africa's uranium production. In 1957, South Africa became the fourth nation to obtain a full-scale cooperation agreement under President Eisenhower's Atoms for Peace program (following Britain, Canada, and Australia). David Albright, who has written extensively on nuclear weapons, explains that throughout the 1960s, South Africa's civilian nuclear program continued to receive assistance from abroad while staff members traveled to Europe and the United States to train in various nuclear fields. During this period, the United States supplied South Africa with the Safari-1 research reactor. As a result, South Africa constructed a solid nuclear infrastructure, which became crucial in [its efforts](#) to obtain a nuclear weapon.

By the next decade however, South Africa's political situation began to drastically change. The international community instituted sanctions against the apartheid government. One-time allies halted the flow of conventional weapons. The U.S. specifically targeted South Africa's nuclear program. Technological and scientific [expertise ceased](#), along with shipments of fuel to the Safari reactor.

At the same time, South Africa was facing an anti-apartheid revolt from within, a buildup of Cuban forces in Angola, and the possibility of a Soviet invasion. Isolated and fearful of losing power, the apartheid government set out to build a nuclear weapon. While there remains a debate as to why

exactly South Africa chose this path, one can conclude the reasons were for financial, political, and military purposes. Gar Alperovitz explains that the bomb has historically been used as leverage in the international arena. For the apartheid government, “atomic diplomacy,” was key to self-preservation. Having nuclear weapons would not only make the Soviet Union think twice about invasion, it would also send a signal to the U.S. that it needed to assist South Africa rather than risk a nuclear war.

In addition, energy experts were predicting that the world would eventually experience a major shortage of uranium. A nuclear-armed South Africa with the ability to enrich uranium would, therefore, become a major player on the world stage. Indeed, Atomic Energy Board Vice President Louw Alberts confidently declared, “We now have the bargaining power equal to that of any Arab country with a lot of oil.” Accordingly, rather than end apartheid and re-enter the world community, Pretoria made the decision in the 1970s to secretly collaborate with Israel to build nuclear weapons.[\[1\]](#)

The Israel Connection

While both countries repeatedly denied this relationship, rumors persisted of a secret agreement whereby Israel exchanged technical knowledge for an assured supply of South African uranium. Rumors of the partnership steadily increased when South African Prime Minister John Vorster visited Jerusalem in 1976. Vorster, along with Israeli officials, signed an agreement, which increased economic and scientific cooperation and established a joint ministerial committee to annually review Israeli-South African relations. Vorster’s visit also produced an agreement to work on multiple military projects in addition to the missile and patrol boats Israel was already supplying to South Africa. By 1977, bilateral trade stood at more than \$100 million a year. [\[2\]](#)

Tensions between the U.S. and South Africa heightened in the summer when it appeared that South Africa was planning to test a nuclear weapon. While South African officials denied any such test, Soviet intelligence detected preparations and alerted the United States. U.S. intelligence quickly confirmed the existence of a test site in the Kalahari Desert. On August 28, the *Washington Post* quoted a U.S. official: “I’d say we were 99 percent certain that the construction was preparation for an atomic test.” During the next two weeks, the U.S., Soviet Union, and various European powers, urged South Africa to abandon the test, and as a result the site was shut down. [\[3\]](#)

U.S. President Jimmy Carter quickly moved to put the issue to rest, assuring the public that South African officials had made clear that “they do not have and do not intend to develop nuclear explosive devices for any purposes, either peaceful or as a weapon.” However, Carter added that the United States would “continue to monitor the situation very closely” and would renew its efforts to persuade South Africa to put all its nuclear facilities under international safeguards and sign the treaty to stop the spread of nuclear weapons. [\[4\]](#)

While it appeared the U.S. and other western powers had successfully stopped South Africa from testing a nuclear weapon, the situation remained tense. A few days after Carter’s reassurance, South Africa’s Finance Minister Owen Horwood attacked Carter for his role in the nuclear controversy and pressuring South Africa to have a majority rule. Horwood stated that the government reserved the right to depart from its assurances that its nuclear program was for peaceful purposes only, and if South Africa wanted to develop a nuclear bomb it “will jolly well do so.” Within hours of Horwood’s declaration, Foreign Minister Roelof Botha tried to remedy the situation and reaffirmed South Africa’s “support for the idea that nuclear energy be used solely for peaceful purposes.” While Carter remained committed to ending apartheid and preventing nuclear war, South Africa, with help from Israel, continued on its path towards becoming a member of the “nuclear club.” [\[5\]](#)

Final Years

In 1989, NBC News reported that the two countries were jointly developing an intermediate-range ballistic missile. A test launch of the missile was reportedly conducted on July 5, 1989, from South Africa's Overberg test range. The missile traveled about 1,500 kilometers before falling into the sea near the Prince Edward Islands, in the southern Indian Ocean. While the purpose of developing such a missile is unclear, according to a 1989 CIA assessment, [the program](#) would not make sense unless the missile was intended to carry a nuclear warhead.

The tide began to turn however in 1990. The new president, F.W. de Klerk wanted to join the international community and realized that South Africa's nuclear weapons program had become a liability. In February, the same month that Nelson Mandela was freed from prison, de Klerk issued written instructions to terminate the nuclear weapons program and dismantle all existing weapons. By 1991, South Africa had formally entered into the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

While many in the world community applauded de Klerk's decision, one ex-South African diplomat offered a different reason for dismantling the program. He explained that South Africa's decision to sign the NPT was "motivated by concern that it didn't want any undeclared nuclear material or infrastructure falling into the hands of Nelson Mandela" and the African National Congress (ANC). Once the ANC took over some wondered if [the program](#) would be revived and they would develop the first "Black Bomb."

The Mandela Factor

Clearly, they did not know the man that they had imprisoned for 27 years. Nelson Mandela despised nuclear weapons. Moreover, the ANC consistently demonstrated an anti-nuclear position and for years led efforts to expose and cancel the South African program. Its leaders were emphatic that nuclear weapons were not part of South Africa's future and on August 30, 1993, Mandela [told the South African Institute of Civil Engineers](#): "The ANC will abide by the Nuclear Non- Proliferation Treaty...We fully support the declaration by the Organization of African Unity calling for the establishment of the African continent as a nuclear-weapons-free zone."

Five years later, addressing the UN General Assembly, Mandela [announced](#) that South Africa, along with seven other countries, was putting forth a resolution entitled, "Towards a Nuclear Weapons Free World: The Need for a New Agenda." The South African president implored the world to eliminate nuclear weapons: "We must ask the question, which might sound naïve to those who have elaborated sophisticated arguments to justify their refusal to eliminate these terrible and terrifying weapons of mass destruction—why do they need them anyway?"

The fall of apartheid and dismantling of South Africa's nuclear weapons program meant that the country could now become part of the world community. With the release of Mandela, democracy was ushered in, trade and foreign investment dramatically increased, and South Africa eventually became the largest economy in Africa. It is clear that the rise of a middle-class, technological advances, and South Africa's growing status on the world stage would not have happened had a nuclear-armed apartheid government remained in power.

Indeed, South Africa remains at the forefront of efforts to abolish nuclear weapons to this day. Speaking on the [Second Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons held in Mexico](#), Archbishop Desmond Tutu said: "This conference is not only a much-needed reminder of what nuclear weapons do to human beings, but also a vital chance for the international community to chart a new course...as Madiba understood well, a world free of nuclear arms will be a freer world for all." The world can learn so much from studying the recent history of South Africa. It is the one country that shows that nuclear weapons programs can be successfully eliminated.

[1] <http://isis-online.org/publications/southafrica/ir0594.html>; Hultman and Kramer, "South Africans Have a Nuclear Trump Card Yet to Play"; Jim Hoagland, "S. Africa, With U.S. Aid, Near A-Bomb," *Washington Post*, February 16, 1977, p. 12; "The South African Bomb Scare," *Washington Post*, August 24, 1977, p. 2E; Gar Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam; The Use of the Atomic Bomb and the American Confrontation with Soviet Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

[2] Jeffrey Antevil, "Israel & South Africa: A Nuclear Family?" *New York News*, August 28, 1977, p. 69; David Albright and Mark Hibbs, "South Africa: The ANC and the Atom Bomb," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 49, no. 3 (April 1993): 33-34, <http://www.thebulletin.org>.

[3] "France Says Data Show South Africa Plans Atomic Test," *New York Times*, August 23, 1977, p. 1; "South Africa and the Bomb," *Baltimore Sun*, August 28, 1977; "France's Warning to South Africa," *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot*, August 25, 1977; "South Africa and the Bomb: Yes or No?", *New York Times*, August 28, 1977, p. 2E; Jim Hoagland, "France Warns South Africa on Nuclear Testing," *Washington Post*, August 23, 1977, p. 1; "South Africa is Calm Amid Nuclear Furor," *New York Times*, August 28, 1977, p. 6; Murrey Marder and Don Oberdorfer, "How West, Soviets Moved to Heard Off S. African A-Test," *Washington Post*, August 28, 1977, p. 1.

[4] Graham Hovey, "South Africa Tells U.S. It Doesn't Plan Any Nuclear Testing," *New York Times*, August 24, 1977, p. 1; Marder and Oberdorfer, "How West, Soviets Moved to Heard Off S. African A-Test"; Murrey Marder, "Carter Says S. Africa Denies Intent to Develop Any Nuclear Explosives," *Washington Post*, August 24, 1977, p. 1.

[5] John F. Burns, "South African Stirs New A-Arms Flurry," *New York Times*, August 31, 1977, p. 2; David B. Ottaway, "South Africans Indicate Split on Nuclear Policy," *Washington Post*, August 31, 1977, p. 1.

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