

Chapter 8 Nuclear Rollback

By the 1980's, several events were significantly changing the fundamental security situation in Southern Africa and increasing political support among white South Africans for an end to apartheid. These changes created the preconditions for denuclearization, even while support for nuclear weapons was growing in the South African military.

The June 1988 military exchanges between South African and Cuban troops along the Angolan/Namibian border appeared to shock both sides into finalizing a negotiated settlement. The US government was brokering a comprehensive peace settlement in Southern Africa in an effort led by Chester Crocker, then Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs.¹

On August 5, 1988, South Africa, Cuba, and Angola established a *de facto* cease fire, followed by the complete withdrawal of South African troops from Angola by September 1, 1988.² The agreement, called the "Geneva Protocol," was followed on December 22, 1988 with a tripartite agreement, signed at the United Nations by Cuba, South Africa, and Angola, which provided for Namibia's independence, the redeployment of Angolan and Cuban troops to northern Angola, and the withdrawal of 50,000 Cuban troops from Angola.³

The settlement of these long-standing issues in Angola and Namibia removed the major external security threat to South Africa. The withdrawal of South African forces from Namibia went smoothly, and its old enemy, SWAPO, won the independence elections. The process demonstrated to white South Africans that major change could occur without catastrophic results. It also opened the door to a new set of expectations, namely that South Africa might move away from a confrontational relationship with the international community to one of cooperation and development. The idea of South Africa as a regional leader for peace and prosperity started to emerge.

Parallel to achieving a settlement in Angola and Namibia, the leadership of Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev fostered the perception in the South African government that the Soviet Union was no longer the threat it used to be. In particular, Gorbachev reduced the impression among white South Africans that Moscow was behind all the imperialist ventures in southern Africa, and thus a major threat to its security. Since the African National Congress was viewed by Afrikaners as a stalking horse for Moscow, this shift in belief meant that the government could now begin a more realistic reevaluation of South Africa's domestic situation. Direct governmental negotiations with the ANC need not be seen by white South Africans as tantamount to national suicide. The collapse of the Berlin Wall in late 1989 brought an end to the Cold War and signaled the end of the Soviet threat in Southern Africa.

¹ Chester Crocker, *High Noon in Southern Africa* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992).

² "The Geneva Protocol, 5 August 1988," in Appendix 3, *High Noon in Southern Africa*, op. cit.

³ "Tripartite Agreement, 22 December 1988, in Appendix 6, *High Noon in Southern Africa*, op. cit. See also "Bilateral Agreement, 22 December 1988," in Appendix 5, *High Noon in Southern Africa*, op. cit.

A growing desire to end apartheid may also have contributed indirectly to a reevaluation of the South African nuclear weapons program. By the late 1980s, economic sanctions and the withdrawal of investments from South Africa, combined with racial unrest, had left South Africa in its deepest financial crisis ever. In light of South Africa's worsening economic situation, many important members of the ruling National Party had come to believe that apartheid was unworkable and that a political solution was needed to dismantle the system. Several years of secret discussions between key Afrikaaner leaders, Nelson Mandela, and other ANC leaders in the mid-to-late 1980s had convinced much of the white leadership of the ANC's moderation and its willingness to negotiate if all restrictions were lifted. It also convinced them that its rise in power within South Africa was inevitable,⁴ or at the very least, many members of the National Party realized that the ANC and its political allies could not be defeated.

Although the above changes were necessary for a nuclear rollback, they may not have been sufficient. In 1988 and 1989, Armscor was finishing a new set of nuclear weapon production facilities and was initiating a long-term modernization program of South Africa's nuclear arsenal. This included developing nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles and possibly increasing the total number of nuclear weapons. A change in political leadership appears to have been necessary as well.

The most important patron of this weapons program, and opponent of ending apartheid, was President Botha, whose well-known explosive temper and authoritarian manner earned him the nickname the "old crocodile." Although Botha was committed to reforming the apartheid system, he was unwilling to sacrifice Afrikaaner power in the process. For example, in the early 1980s, he created the powerful new office of State President and a tri-cameral Parliament. It gave separate houses to the Colored and Indian communities, a controversial action that split the National Party. This led to the creation of the Conservative Party, whose members saw even these modest reforms as going too far.

Despite the controversy over his policies, Botha's changes were seen by blacks as token reforms at best and served mainly to inflame them. His efforts to suppress the black rebellion were ruthless and intensified throughout the second half of the 1980s. It left him increasingly isolated in his efforts to defeat the rebellion before allowing any negotiations with black leaders, which, according to Botha's vision, would proceed only with "moderates" and not with the ANC.

Further serving to undermine reforms, Botha had created a parallel governing structure dominated by security elements. When he came to power in 1978, Botha launched basic changes in the governmental structures for decision-making and implementation that led to the concentration of security issues in the hands of a revived State Security Council. This council was composed of the so-called "securocrats"--mostly military, intelligence, and security officials, and a few of his closest ministers. The State Security Council, which was highly conservative, became the central instrument of control of the country, bypassing Botha's own National Party and the Parliament, a fact increasingly resented by the members of the National Party.

⁴ For a more complete discussion of these changes see Alister Sparks, *Tomorrow is Another Country* (New York: Hall and Wang, 1995).

Botha went further in concentrating power on certain secret projects, such as the nuclear weapons program. This project was never discussed in the State Security Council and only with those ministers who had a strict need to know.⁵ Cabinet level decisions on nuclear weapons, such as limiting the program in 1985, appear to have been made by an ad hoc group of ministers, including Defense, Foreign Affairs, Finance, and Mineral and Energy Affairs (see chapter 5).

In early 1989, an opportunity for significant political change appeared. Despite both the untenable domestic and international situation, Botha exhibited no intention to step aside. In January 1989, he suffered a stroke and then unexpectedly resigned as leader of the National Party. Botha retained his position as State President, however, which sparked a political crisis since South Africa's constitution provided that the leader of the strongest party is also head of government. Although the desire for change was mounting within the National Party, few expected significant change when, in February 1989, F. W. de Klerk won the party leader position over several candidates who were considered "reformists" but were too closely linked to the securocrat faction.⁶ The stage was now set for de Klerk to oust Botha and claim the Presidency. Following a dramatic confrontation with his cabinet ministers in August 1989, Botha resigned as president on August 14, 1989.⁷ De Klerk became acting president the next day, and won the whites'-only election held in September, ushering in a new era for South Africa.

As has been extensively documented elsewhere, the political rise of F. W. de Klerk led to a fundamental transformation in South Africa. This included the freeing of Nelson Mandela and hundreds of other political prisoners, the lifting of a ban on the ANC, the demilitarization of the government's decision-making processes, and the starting of negotiations with the ANC and other opposition parties to work out a new national constitution. Unseen and in parallel to these profound changes, de Klerk decided to secretly terminate South Africa's nuclear weapons program and dismantle the existing nuclear weapons.

De Klerk's Decision

Because he had been the Minister in charge of the Atomic Energy Corporation, namely Minister of Minerals and Energy Affairs several years earlier, de Klerk already knew about the nuclear weapons program. He had even attended the opening of the Kentron Circle Building in 1981 (see chapter 5). However, he had never been in Botha's "inner circle," so he never had an impact on the program or much to do with decisions about it. De Klerk said that by the time he became President in September 1989, "it was already evident to me, and also to my colleagues who were also informed, that it was in our national interest that a total reverse--also in respect to our

⁵ F.W. de Klerk, *The Autobiography: The Last Trek, A New Beginning* (London: Macmillan, 1998), p. 273. See also Nic von Wielligh and Lydia von Wielligh-Steyn, *The Bomb* (Pretoria: Litera Publications, 2015), Appendix.

⁶ *Tomorrow is Another Country*, op. cit., p. 88.

⁷ For a detailed description of this showdown between Botha and de Klerk see, Sparks, *Tomorrow is Another Country*, op. cit., pp. 88-90.

nuclear policy--was called for."⁸ Given the international and domestic changes that had occurred, President de Klerk believed that "a nuclear deterrent had become, not only superfluous, but in fact an obstacle to the development of South Africa's international relations."⁹ The desire to rejoin the international community was a primary motivation for many of his subsequent actions.

Waldo Stumpf, the head of the Atomic Energy Corporation at the time, tells an anecdote that sheds some light on de Klerk's thinking. One or two weeks after assuming office, de Klerk called a meeting of a few key Ministers and experts, including Stumpf. According to Stumpf, President de Klerk said that he wanted to make South Africa a "respected member of the international community, and we'll have to turn around the politics and we'll have to terminate this program, turn it around and accede to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty."¹⁰ The termination process, Stumpf says, started then.

De Klerk believed that world opinion had become increasingly opposed to nuclear weapons. He also thought that South Africa would acquire significant advantages if it acceded to the NPT, which would include international exchanges of nuclear technology beneficial to South Africa's future. When South Africa did so in the summer of 1991, de Klerk expressed his hope that joining the treaty "[would] facilitate the international exchange of nuclear technology, which is not only important for the maintenance and further development of South Africa's own nuclear program, but [would] also be to the benefit of its neighboring states and the international nuclear community."¹¹ Nuclear weapons would have spoiled any such cooperation.

At home, opposition to the nuclear weapons program had been growing within portions of the top leadership, particularly after South Africa's security situation eased in 1988 and the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact showed increasing signs of disintegration. Some of de Klerk's colleagues who knew about the weapons program had lost their faith in the potential usefulness of the arsenal. For example, Jeremy Shearer, then a senior member of the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) who had been responsible for nuclear matters, recalled that he and others in the government had begun to wonder what might actually occur if South Africa exercised its nuclear option in a military crisis with front-line states and their Warsaw pact allies.¹² He had come to believe that if South Africa implemented this strategy, the actual effect might be to invite the combined wrath of both the United States and Russia. The unintended result could be the end of the South African government, rather than its preservation.

⁸ "Speech by the State President, Mr. F. W. de Klerk, to a Joint Session of Parliament, 24 March 1993," Transcript of speech given in Cape Town. See also "De Klerk Discloses Nuclear Capability to Parliament," FBIS-AFR-93-056, March 25, 1993, pp. 5-9.

⁹ "Speech by the State President, Mr. F. W. de Klerk, to a Joint Session of Parliament, 24 March 1993," op. cit.; "De Klerk Discloses Nuclear Capability to Parliament," op. cit.

¹⁰ Transcript of speech by Waldo Stumpf, South African Embassy, Washington, D.C., July 23, 1993.

¹¹ David Ottaway, "South Africa Agrees to Treaty Curbing Nuclear Weapons," *The Washington Post*, June 28, 1991, p. A25.

¹² Interview with one of the authors, Vienna, September 1993.

Initial opposition appears to have been mainly centered in the Department of Foreign Affairs. A DFA memorandum from 1988 shows strong opposition to the AEC and Armscor's positions of maintaining the then nuclear weapons strategy and not signing the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. DFA's argument, which is in a response to a document circulated by the AEC and Armscor, centered on the point Shearer mentioned above. It also included a range of concerns that the policy of strategic nuclear uncertainty was not deterring South Africa's enemies, but rather leading to greater international condemnation, all at a time when South Africa needed greater international integration to solve its political, energy, and social problems.¹³

Among those that believed the strategy had worked to deter Cuba and the Soviet Union, many of them agreed in general that regional and international changes had made the program unnecessary. Even Armscor's leadership, according to former leaders of the program, had started to recognize the impact of these changes; at least they were not surprised by de Klerk's actions.

Questions have been raised regarding why de Klerk acted so quickly on the nuclear issue after becoming State President. Mitchell Reiss, who studied the South African nuclear program in the early 1990s, believes that de Klerk needed to seize the opening produced by his election victory to dismantle the program.¹⁴ He quotes a senior South African official: "If [de Klerk] had waited, he never would have gotten cabinet approval, since opposition to giving up the program in the defense community was great."¹⁵

Significantly, many senior Armscor officials, who could have been strong advocates of continuing the nuclear weapons program, did not oppose ending it.¹⁶ Although the program had considerable momentum, the growing consensus among key Armscor leaders was that it was no longer needed because of the dramatic changes occurring in Southern Africa and the former Soviet Union.

Moreover, at the time of the dismantlement decision, Armscor understood that its space launch program would survive. This high-tech program was considerably larger than the nuclear weapons program in terms of personnel, infrastructure, and funding. To Armscor, the demise of the nuclear weapons program had little institutional impact, although it had major strategic consequences and required careful consideration of how to end the program safely and securely. To Armscor's great disappointment however, a few years later it was forced to abandon its space

¹³ "Report, South African Department of Foreign Affairs, 'A Balanced Approach to the NPT: Armscor/AEC Concerns Viewed from a DFA Standpoint,'" September 1, 1988, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, South African Foreign Affairs Archives, NPT-IAEA Agreement/Negotiations on full-scope safeguards. Obtained and contributed by Anna-Mart van Wyk, Monash South Africa.

<http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114185> or
http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/assets/media_files/000/001/671/1671.pdf

¹⁴ Mitchell Reiss, *Bridled Ambition: Why Countries Constrain Their Nuclear Capabilities* (Washington, D.C.: The Wilson Center, 1995), p. 22.

¹⁵ Mark Hibbs, "South Africa's Secret Nuclear Program: The Dismantling," *Nuclear Fuel*, May 24, 1993, quoted in Reiss, *Bridled Ambition*, op. cit., p. 22.

¹⁶ Interview of Armscor officials by one of the authors, 1995.

launch vehicle program as well. This decision was much harder to swallow for Armscor officials.¹⁷

Members of de Klerk's government have consistently denied that the dismantlement decision was motivated by a desire to prevent nuclear weapons or unsafeguarded materials from falling into the hands of an ANC-led government, i.e. to prevent a "black bomb." In 1989 Stumpf reports that de Klerk was not really worried about the ANC getting the bomb; at least the discussion did not surface when he was present in meetings.¹⁸ Another former member of the program, who was also involved in implementing the dismantlement decision, similarly does not believe the question of inheritance was a major consideration of de Klerk.

However, according to André Buys, who in 1990 had become General Manager in charge of planning for Armscor, many in the program thought that a debate on the future of nuclear weapons would be harmful at that critical point in the transformation of South Africa.¹⁹ In addition, it is believable that de Klerk and his advisors did worry about whether a future multi-party government could successfully share control over the nuclear arsenal. Eliminating the arsenal before launching major reforms of the government, in this view, prevented potential conflict among the major parties and created a regional and international policy against nuclear weapons. Because the ANC had opposed the South African nuclear weapons program, it would find it hard to oppose what de Klerk had done.

Although there is little evidence that de Klerk's thinking was dominated by concerns about a future ANC-led government inheriting nuclear weapons, Western intelligence agencies and right-wing military officials apparently worried a great deal about this possibility. To these groups, the prospect of an ANC-controlled nuclear program that might have included stocks of nuclear weapons or highly-enriched uranium was a major concern up to the time of the first democratic elections in April 1994. According to a 1993 article in the London *Sunday Times*, Western intelligence officials were concerned about the "unstable security situation in South Africa," and had expressed "deep disquiet that a future ANC government might be tempted to start its own weapons-making program, or to sell the [highly enriched] uranium either to Libya, Iran, or the Palestine Liberation Organization, all of which gave the movement support during the years in exile."²⁰

Much later, after de Klerk publicly revealed the existence of the nuclear weapons program, South African and US officials expressed surprise to one of the authors at the support for nuclear weapons they heard from a few important members of the ANC. Individual members of the ANC, some of whom were destined for high office, expressed their opposition to the de Klerk government's decision to abandon nuclear weapons.²¹ These opinions, however, were never the mainstream opinion of the ANC leadership, and in particular not those of Nelson Mandela.

¹⁷ Hannes Steyn, Richardt van der Walt, and Jan van Loggerenberg, *Armament and Disarmament: South Africa's Nuclear Weapons Experience* (Pretoria: Network Publishers, 2003), pp. 98-103.

¹⁸ Interview with one of the authors, Pelindaba, February 1994.

¹⁹ Interview with André Buys, January 23, 2003.

²⁰ Richard Ellis, "Pretoria Seeks Haven for its Nuclear Stocks," *The Sunday Times*, August 15, 1993.

²¹ See also *Die Bomb*, op. cit., p. 277.

As an informal advisor in 1993 and 1994 to the ANC nuclear policy group chaired by Roger Jardine, one of the authors (Albright) was struck by the ease with which Mandela publicly supported the NPT well before his election to the Presidency. Albright had raised the issue with Jardine of Mandela endorsing the NPT one day in the summer of 1993. Jardine approached Mandela. Within a few days, Mandela in a public statement on August 30, 1993 pledged: "The ANC will abide by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and 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."²² Despite many differences over the timing and details of past government announcements about the nuclear weapons program, Mandela unambiguously agreed that nuclear weapons would not be a part of South Africa's future.

²² Shirley Woodgate, "Science Must Serve Democracy -- Mandela," *The Star*, August 31, 1993.