
Correspondence

Argentina and the Bomb

To the Editor:

In his provocative essay “The So-Called Proliferator that Wasn’t: The Story of Argentina’s Nuclear Policy” (*The Nonproliferation Review*, Fall 1999), Ambassador Julio C. Carasales tries to show that Argentina “always kept to the path of peaceful utilization of nuclear energy.” In the absence of a smoking gun, especially an executive decree authorizing development of nuclear weapons, he argues that Argentina never was seriously interested. While undoubtedly correct that no such decree existed and that Argentina gradually developed a national consensus in which the bomb had little or no place, it stretches credulity to conclude that consequently no such program ever existed. For the Southern Cone, where nuclear risks have since evaporated, Carasales’ argument may be of exclusively historical interest. But the approach he uses has baleful implications, especially if applied to other regions.

Argentina, as Carasales rightly points out, was not determined to acquire a nuclear weapons capability. With no obvious strategic role for nuclear weapons—even in its war with Britain in 1982—its motives were dominated by prestige. But rather than be content to point out the ambiguity of Argentine intentions, he tries to make a stronger case by shifting the burden of proof, insisting that there is no direct evidence of Argentine determination to fabricate nuclear weapons.

This clearly is true, but it is impossible to disregard the indirect evidence. Above all one faces the inherent ambiguity of a major, military-controlled, nuclear program designed to create a complete fuel-cycle, the *sine qua non* of weapons development. It is hardly persuasive to dismiss the Argentine Navy’s leadership of the program as a bureaucratic coincidence or to maintain that opposition to the NPT and safeguards was just a matter of pride. Even more persuasive in this case was the large investment in the 1980s in an intermediate-

range ballistic missile, the obvious concomitant of a nuclear weapons program. Indeed, if the nuclear weapons program was an illusion, it is impossible to understand why the Argentine Air Force clung so determinedly to the Condor-2 in the face of President Menem’s efforts to kill it.

Nuclear weapons may never have been the highest national priority, but powerful forces in the country clearly sought to develop and preserve the option. Like many potential proliferators, Argentina—never dedicated but long interested—pursued its nuclear capability opportunistically, exploiting technology as it became available. This minimized the economic and political costs while keeping the possibility of nuclear weapons alive. It was a lack of foreign technology and money that slowed the program in the 1980s, not opposition from the democratically elected government of Raul Alfonsín. Had resources been more plentiful in the 1970s, the situation might have been very different indeed. To read into this failure a lack of intention is to miss the point of most weapons procurement programs.

By asserting that Argentina did not “judge it opportune or necessary to possess nuclear weapons,” Carasales points to one of the most persistent and important controversies in efforts to evaluate nuclear proliferation. This is the often overlooked question of what constitutes nuclear proliferation. Is proliferation exclusively an either/or *end* or is it a more/less *process*? Need a country be politically committed and technically determined in order to be considered a proliferation risk, or is it sufficient to observe an interest and potentially relevant work among key state agencies?

The dangers of excessive legalism—of insisting on absolute proof—is clear when considering the broader international implications. If ambiguity is not a basis for nonproliferation action, there is little that can be done against many potential proliferation threats. Using

Carasales' criteria, which led to the conclusion that Argentina never was a proliferation risk, it would have been impossible to press North Korea to halt its nuclear program in the early 1990s. It also would be necessary to exclude Iran as a proliferation risk today. Nor could India be called a dedicated proliferator up to the moment of the March 1998 decision that led to its nuclear tests two months later. The same is true of Pakistan.

Far from proving peaceful intentions, this approach only muddles. The situation is clearer if we stick to the established principle of evaluating Argentina's past policy and the policies of potential proliferators today on the basis of their rejection of transparency and treaty commitments. In lieu of such assurances, the international community must be suspicious and ready to act. If serious doubt no longer is a sufficient basis for action, if calculated ambiguity, refusal to accept international standards, and even recourse to unprovoked war can be dismissed and the state still judged to be "neither erratic nor dangerous," then when can the nuclear nonproliferation system be invoked? With the burden of proof shifted to obligate the international community to resolve the purposeful ambiguity of a potential proliferator, it is extremely difficult to justify activation of much of the nuclear nonproliferation regime. Unable to act on the basis of ambiguity, export controls and sanctions could be used only after it is too late.

Dr. Aaron Karp
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To the Editor:

I have read the Letter to the Editor sent to you by Dr. Aaron Karp, commenting on my article on the story of Argentina's nuclear policy. I respect many of the points made by him, even if I do not agree with most of them. I will not try to answer them one by one, because there is no space for that in a section reserved for letters.

If you analyze the core of the arguments used by Dr. Karp, you will find that, in the end, in his view suspicions, rumors, and actions not specifically addressed to the production of nuclear weapons are enough to impose the severe sanctions contemplated by the nonproliferation regime. In short, regime members could sanction, even with serious measures, sovereign countries on the basis of hearsay published in the bulk of magazines appearing generally in only the United

States—paradoxically the world's biggest proliferator in terms of vertical proliferation.

I witnessed what happened with Argentina, which for 30 years was the subject of suspicions and mistrust and affected internationally without any proof or any serious evidence of the actions of which it was accused. Let us not forget that when Argentina began its nuclear activities, there were many countries that had strong hopes of the usefulness of peaceful nuclear explosions. Experience showed later that those hopes were unfounded, but you can hardly blame a developing country for having an interest, in the 1950s, in that subject. Certainly Argentina was not the only one.

Ambassador Julio Carasales
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