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Nuclear Islam

Last month Alan Cranston, the most influential Senate Democrat, caused a political and diplomatic rumpus by charging that China was secretly helping Pakistan develop nuclear weapons.

President Reagan, just back from Peking where he had signed a major agreement to share U.S. civilian nuclear technology with China, was deeply embarrassed. The prickly Chinese, strongly denying Cranston's charges, were outraged. Sino-American relations took a turn for the worse.

Why did Cranston single out Pakistan? It's an election year and Cranston, considered Israel's leading spokesman in the Senate, was evidently trying to curry favor with Jewish voters. His grandstanding points to the disturbing issue of nuclear proliferation among the world's lesser powers.

There is little doubt that Pakistan has been working to develop nuclear weapons. Its traditional enemy, India, has already exploded a nuclear device and is generally considered to have some operational nuclear weapons. Pakistani scientists have managed, in spite of strong opposition from the West, to develop nuclear technology by adaption of civilian technology or outright theft from Western laboratories.

The Israelis, ever sensitive to even the most remote threat, have long considered Pakistan's nuclear program a serious menace. They fear that Pakistan, which has close ties to other Muslim nations, might sell nuclear weapons to its hostile Arab neighbors. Some years ago, the Israelis made much noise about an alleged plot by Libya's Col. Moammar Khadafy to buy an "Islamic A-Bomb" from either Pakistan or China.

According to CIA estimates, Israel has at least 30 nuclear weapons, deliverable by air or missile. The Israelis are determined to maintain their nuclear monopoly in the Middle East. When Iraq began construction of its French-supplied Osirak reactor, the Israeli Air Force swiftly destroyed the installation even though the Iraqi plant was at least eight years away from being able to produce weapons.

Curiously, the good liberal Sen. Cranston has never had much to say about Israel's nuclear program. This is interesting since Israel and South Africa, that nemesis of all liberals, are working closely to develop weapons. The fact that Israel illegally obtained enriched uranium and weapon technology from the U.S. does not seem to bother the senator, either.

One gets the impression that the liberals in Congress don't much worry about Israel, considering it a sober, level-headed nation. In Mideast terms, it probably qualifies for that description — so far. Ironically, however, Israel may have come close to being the first nation to use nuclear weapons since 1945.

According to reports leaked from the CIA and DIA, Israel actually began arming its nuclear weapons as the Syrians were advancing across the Golan Heights during the first days of the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

Worried American officials

American intelligence planes, overflying Israel's nuclear storage centre near Dimona were, according to some U.S. military sources, fired upon by the Israelis. The failure of the Syrian offensive defused this dangerous situation, but U.S. officials were very, very worried.

The problem is not just Pakistan or Israel. Nuclear proliferation has become inevitable thanks to recent developments in atomic technology. If anyone is to blame for this situation, it is the West Germans. In the past, uranium had to be enriched by an extremely complex and expensive process of gaseous diffusion, requiring huge separation plants.

The Germans invented a simple, efficient centrifuge that produced enriched uranium and made this technology available to a number of nations — for peaceful uses, of course. This "Cuisinart" of the nuclear trade allowed even small nations to convert civilian nuclear processes to military use. All that was then needed was lots of money, advanced explosives and fusing technology, and delivery systems.

The proliferation of civilian nuclear technology, and the relative ease with which it can be converted to weapons use, has allowed a growing number of nations to embark on military programs. By latest count, Brazil, Argentina, North and South Korea, India, Israel and South Africa are all well on the way to becoming nuclear powers. Belgium, Switzerland, Canada, Japan, Italy, Sweden and Australia have the capability to develop nuclear weapons, should they so desire.

Efforts to contain nuclear technology have been frustrated by the important commercial benefits of exporting such systems. Canada, for example, provided the reactors and technology that allowed India to develop nuclear weapons. Atomic-weapons research in Argentina and Brazil has been based on German technology. It simply appears impossible to separate civilian from military technology.

Unfortunately and unavoidable, possession of nuclear weapons means greater national security and membership in the international big boys' club. France, for example, is expanding its nuclear forces. The French make no secret of the fact that their nuclear arsenal confer upon France power, prestige and importance. The Chinese and Indians produced nuclear weapons as a symbol of modernity and great power status.

The Russians and Americans, who have been working very closely to prevent the spread of nuclear technology, are most unhappy at this turn of events. Neither wants to see its trigger-happy clients acquire the ability to start a nuclear war. But both now lack the influence to halt growing proliferation.

Many new nations will join the nuclear club in the next few years. We already have Christian, Jewish, Buddhist and Hindu A-Bombs. How can we answer the rhetoric which asks: Why not an Islamic bomb too?