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## The Risks of Spreading Weapons: A Historical Case

D. G. Brennan

WRITERS concerned with the spread of nuclear weapons have often pointed to the possibility that some dissident or irresponsible group in a country having nuclear weapons might seize control of some weapons and use them to create mischief, perhaps on a large scale. This possibility is usually thought of only as one that might trouble less developed and less highly organized countries, especially small underdeveloped states that could conceivably acquire nuclear weapons in the farther future. That such an event might take place in a large and highly advanced country is not often considered.

However, it appears that the first event of this kind almost occurred as early as 1961—and it happened, not to some small or backward country, but to one of the leading nations of the World: France. The incident involved is not widely known, but it should be, and thus deserves reporting.

I first heard of the incident from Dr. X, a senior official of the French nuclear establishment, in the late summer of 1961. There has been corroborative evidence from other quarters. The following description of the event is, thus, probably correct, but it cannot be absolutely guaranteed in all details.

In mid-April 1961, the French were preparing for their fourth nuclear weapon test (three had taken place in 1960) at their Sahara test site near Reggan in central Algeria. On 22 April, General Maurice Challe, former Commander-in-Chief of French forces in Algeria, initiated the rebellion in Algeria that came to be known as "The Revolt of the Generals". The French scientists at the test site were immediately nervous about the security of their incipient nuclear explosive, and began hurried preparations to detonate the device, so as to remove it from any possibility of seizure. According to Dr. X, the French general in charge of the test site, while not participating in the revolt, was a friend of General Challe, and he did not want the device detonated. However, the scientists at the site got authorization from Paris to set it off anyway. They exploded the device early on the morning of 25 April, 3 days after the start of the revolt.

It was set off with hastily-improvised and incomplete detonation arrangements, and because of this, it gave a very low yield of less than one kiloton. (The French

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D. G. Brennan is a student of national and international security affairs, and Co-Editor of this Journal.

Government communique announcing the shot described it as of "weak power".) Observers in various countries other than France who became aware of the nature and yield of the explosion thought the test a failure, and it was often described openly as a "fizzle". However, according to Dr. X, the explosive was "optimized" to be only the fastest way of unambiguously and irrevocably getting rid of the fissile material on hand for the weapon, not to provide high yield. For this objective, the "test" was of course a complete success.

It could have been important that it *was* a success, in this sense. The rebels were already making claims to have taken over control of the whole of Algeria. Although this claim proved false as far as the test site was concerned, it is highly probable they would have made major attempts to seize it if they had known an incipient nuclear explosive remained there.

While it is difficult to see how possession of that explosive by the rebels would have altered the outcome of the rebellion (which collapsed the next day), it is not difficult to believe they might have attempted to use it to blackmail the government, and it is even possible to conceive that some fanatics might have used it destructively as a last act of bitter revenge. Of course, possession of a number of usable weapons would have given them many more possibilities.

It seems strange in retrospect that there was not even public speculation about possible linkage between the "Revolt of the Generals" beginning 22 April and the nuclear explosion of "weak power" on 25 April, both in Algeria. It may be that the collapse of the revolt on 26 April diverted attention from possible connections. Far more attention was paid to unsubstantiated reports [1-3] in early 1967 that the military commander of Sinkiang Province in China had threatened to seize the nuclear base there if Maoists attempted to take over the provincial government. Speaking of this alleged threat, C. L. Sulzberger said: "For the first time, a nation's nuclear armament became the stake in an internal power struggle when China's Cultural Revolution Engulfed Sinkiang".<sup>4</sup> Sulzberger's "first time" phrase indicates how little appreciation there is of the then 6 yr-old French-Algerian adventure even in well-informed quarters, although at a certain level (the fact of the revolt beginning on 22 April followed by the explosion on 25 April) the indication of possible trouble was visible on the front page of *The New York Times* (issue of April 25).

This incident shows that one need not confine apprehensions about the spread of nuclear weapons only to countries resembling the mythical "Lower Slobbovia".

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- [2] *The Wall Street Journal*, New York, 1 February, p. 1, (1967).
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# Ballistic Missile Defense and Arms Control

Laurence W. Martin

Most of the strategic analysis upon which our notions of arms control are based has been developed upon the assumption that there could be no defense against the long-range ballistic missile. It was generally accepted that the Soviet Union and United States had reached a relationship of mutual vulnerability which, given a minimum of precautionary measures on each side, no quantitative or qualitative efforts could upset. This confidence bred a sense of having attained a plateau both technical and intellectual. American taxpayers were assured that the Minuteman and Polaris missiles constituted a force effective for years to come and a parallel belief spread that the problems of deterrence and strategic stability had been definitively analysed and understood, at least in America, while, with a little kindly help from Western writers, the Russians might soon attain comparable sophistication.

The realization within the last 2 or 3 years that it may in fact be possible to intercept ballistic missiles not merely in small numbers but on a scale that may be strategically useful at acceptable cost, consequently constitutes a real revolution in strategic expectation that must greatly affect thinking about arms control. The most obvious question to arise is whether anti-ballistic-missiles (ABM) should or can be controlled by international agreement. On a wider view, however, the advent of ballistic missile defense (BMD) alters the whole strategic context within which all schemes of arms control must be considered and requires reassessment of our notions of how strategic stability can be achieved within the bounds of dynamic technology. These notions condition in turn other fundamental determinants of the international climate, such as estimates of the likelihood of war, confidence in unilateral efforts to assure national security, attitudes to diplomacy in crisis and the overall sense of tension or relaxation in world politics. Even a brief consideration of the implications of BMD for arms control must therefore begin with a general examination of the manner in which BMD has come to appear more attractive militarily than hitherto and of the performance that can reasonably be expected of it in the near future.

Several influences stimulated American interest in BMD, among them a growing awareness of Russian efforts in this direction and concern with the emergent nuclear power of China. None of these would have had its full impact however had not the United States' own research and development programs quite suddenly suggested that the technical possibilities for intercepting missiles were much better than had previously been suspected.

Laurence W. Martin is Professor of International Politics, University College of Wales, Aberystwyth.

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