

**Securing Nuclear Arsenals for the Next Half Century: What Does
History Recommend?
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Comments on the Russia Case
by William Tobey**

Nikolai Sokov makes a valuable contribution in detailing incidents that very nearly led to the loss of effective control of nuclear weapons at the end of the Soviet Union.

Similarly, Matt Bunn's keen observations and practical suggestions would greatly advance the cause of nuclear security if acted upon.

Henry Sokolski has charged us with examining history's recommendations. Oxford University's modern history curriculum begins in 1685 and ends in the year of the first three atomic explosions. To Oxford, the atomic age is a matter of current events, not history. The history of nations, nonetheless offers recommendations for nuclear security.

In this regard, Nikolai's first point is in many ways the most important: Few imagined the demise of the Soviet Union--even as late as the mid-1980s.

It was the most formidable, powerful, terrifying instrument of power ever conceived, and it was backed by what appeared to be the strongest military forces on earth.

The Soviet Union rose, terrified, oppressed, conquered, and dissolved within the lifespan of an average European.

Pu-239 has a half-life of 24,000 years.

How are we to reconcile the very different life expectancies governments and atomic weapons?

Poetry and nuclear security rarely mingle, but reflecting on the Soviet examples, I could not help but think of the lines Shelley attributed to Ramses the Great:

"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings.
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair.

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
the lone and level sands
stretch far away."

From pharaohs to commissars, even the strongest governments have crumbled, and far from being anomalous, this is the natural state of affairs.

Our conceit is that stability is the norm, that states will endure. But, surely only weak governments are susceptible to coups or regime change? Not so. Of the ten largest economies in the world, seven have experienced coups d'etat or other regime change over the past 100 years; similarly, six of the nine de facto nuclear weapons states have suffered such dislocations. Instability is the norm, not an anomaly.

What sense can be made of this?

1. The institutions to control nuclear weapons will never outlast the natural lifespan of fissile material, so they must be constantly renewed.

Security systems are living organisms and must be sustained. Left untended, they will atrophy. Sustainment of security is as important as establishing it.

2. Confidence that social and political structures will always remain strong enough to control nuclear weapons is hubris.

Which would you consider stronger and more stable: the Soviet Union in 1985, or Pakistan today?

When North Korea eventually dissolves, as it must, what will become of its nuclear weapons?

3. More practically, the P-5 nuclear states must act to prepare to respond to instability threatening the security of nuclear weapons.

We are facing a test case with chemical weapons in Syria.

Contingency planning is difficult. Governments distrust hypotheticals, but in a crisis time and tempers are short. Advance preparation is necessary for effective action.

4. A final observation on stability of states and nuclear weapons.

We assume that among strong states, stability is the norm--that only states like Pakistan and North Korea present stability risks among nuclear-armed nations.

But if we expand our time horizons to a century, the blink of an eye relative to the half life of Pu-239, such is not the case.

Seven of the ten largest economies in the world have experienced forced regime change or coups over the past century, and six of the nine de facto nuclear weapons states have experienced such instability over that period. While some of these changes occurred before states acquired nuclear weapons, two de facto nuclear weapons states have experienced coups over the past quarter century--about the same pace.

Thus, instability may be the norm, not an anomaly, even among powerful states.