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Halting the nuclear black market

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Globalization and the Cold War's end have given rise to a nuclear black market with chilling implications for the future of arms control. Rogue nations and terrorist groups have greater access to the makings of a radioactive "dirty bomb," or even a nuclear device, than ever before.

In the most recent example of this alarming trend, Pakistan's senior bomb-maker was recently found to have linked companies and banks in Europe, Asia and the Middle East that provided high-tech equipment and financing for nuclear weapons programs in Libya, Iran and North Korea, and perhaps others.

The main document governing how countries handle these issues, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, was never expected to address such a dispersed network. To convince states to fore-swear nuclear weapons -- while letting the United States, Britain, France, Russia and China, in the midst of the Cold War, keep theirs -- the treaty codified the right of non-nuclear states to receive and develop the means for peaceful applications of nuclear energy, such as medicine, agriculture and the creation of power. Under this guise, countries can develop or import essentially all the equipment they need to produce a nuclear weapon. Such countries do not even have to reveal the existence of these facilities or let inspectors visit them until they are ready to begin operation.

This freedom to obtain equipment and facilities without transparency means that the system relies only on the discretion of the supplier. A number of countries have been somewhat reluctant to sell to rogue countries any equipment that could be used to develop a nuclear capability. But Iran, Libya and North Korea were able to import all manner of sophisticated equipment from new, essentially private suppliers.

The United States, with outside assistance, is now attempting to shut down this supplier network, but new suppliers may come along if the international community does not act immediately. Strong economic and diplomatic action must be taken against countries such as Iran, even if it means additional costs and lost investment opportunities. Such actions have been proven effective: After years of sanctions and U.S. leadership, Libya has given up its weapons of mass destruction, including a significant nuclear program.

Until recently, I was one of the leading proponents of sanctions against Libya; earlier this year, I learned firsthand what a key role international pressure played in the sea change Libyan leader Moammar Khadafy made. In meetings with him and members of his government earlier this year, it became clear that Khadafy decided Libya could better assure its security through a positive relationship with the United States and the West than with a risky and costly policy of developing weapons of mass destruction. Libya's leaders also told me that their nation faces growing economic difficulties that can be resolved only by redirecting resources into development, integrating closely into the world economy and seeing sanctions ended. If the leadership of other countries, such as Iran, reaches the same

conclusion, it will be a great boon to the cause of nonproliferation.

I have just introduced a bill that makes it clear that Iran, as a state abusing its access to the means of peaceful nuclear development, has forfeited the right to produce nuclear material for reactors and must be deprived of new nuclear-related trade, investment and trade agreements until it permanently and verifiably ceases all suspect nuclear activities and dismantles any fuel- production facilities. Furthermore, U.S. nuclear trade sanctions law must be amended to meet these new challenges. Existing law targets governments for illicit nuclear trade, not private individuals, banks or corporations.

I will soon introduce the Nuclear Black Market Elimination Act, which would empower the president to halt all U.S. business and financial transactions with any individual or company that engages in black-market nuclear trade and would require the president to inform Congress of foreign companies that undercut U.S. sanctions.

The technology to produce nuclear weapons has become too dispersed among too many nations to rely solely on Cold War-era approaches. All countries -- those implicated in the black market, those seeking to protect and extend investment in Iran despite its nuclear activities, and the United States -- must now exercise responsibility for their own and their citizens' activities that may support, materially or politically, the creation of more nuclear weapons.

Rep. Tom Lantos, D-San Francisco and San Mateo counties, is the ranking Democrat on the House International Relations Committee, which is conducting a hearing today on nonproliferation.

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