

Heritage Lectures

No. 1043

Delivered June 27, 2007



Published by The Heritage Foundation

September 18, 2007

Keeping Pakistan's Nuclear Weapons Out of the Hands of Terrorists

Lisa A. Curtis

The potential for the intersection of terrorism and nuclear weapons is arguably the greatest threat to American national, even global, security. As the U.S. seeks to deter the possibility of terrorists gaining access to nuclear weapons, it must consider carefully its policies toward Pakistan. The results of investigations into Pakistani nuclear scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan's nuclear black market and proliferation network demonstrate in stark terms the devastating consequences of nuclear proliferation by individuals with access to state-controlled nuclear programs.

Some observers have incorrectly characterized the threat of nuclear terrorism in Pakistan as stemming from the danger of radical Islamists overrunning the country and gaining control of the country's nuclear assets. However, given that the religious parties lack wide popular support and that President Pervez Musharraf and his senior army commanders largely oppose the Islamist agenda, the probability of this scenario occurring is relatively low. When it comes to preventing terrorists from acquiring nuclear bombs, the more worrisome trend in Pakistan is the links between some retired military and intelligence officials and nuclear scientists to Taliban and al-Qaeda terrorists.

U.S. policy should therefore center on helping to prevent the penetration of the nuclear establishment over time by individuals sympathetic to al-Qaeda goals. Despite Pakistan's arguments that its nuclear weapons are safely guarded, the U.S. must construct and implement policies that proactively thwart the unwelcome possibility of Pakistan's nuclear weapons falling into the wrong hands. Given the tangled histo-

Talking Points

- The results of investigations into Pakistani nuclear scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan's nuclear black market and proliferation network demonstrate in stark terms the devastating consequences of nuclear proliferation by individuals with access to state-controlled nuclear programs.
- Revelations about meetings between former Pakistani military officials and nuclear scientists with Osama bin Laden around the time of 9/11 remind us of the continuing threat of the intersection of terrorism and nuclear weapons in Pakistan.
- U.S. policy should center on helping to prevent the penetration of Pakistan's nuclear establishment through implementation of programs that improve safety and security at nuclear facilities.
- The U.S. should continue to encourage India-Pakistan dialogue that will improve Pakistan's regional security perceptions and address the underlying motivations behind the development of Pakistan's nuclear weapons program.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/AsiaandthePacific/hl1043.cfm

Produced by the Asian Studies Center

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

ry of U.S.–Pakistan relations, especially with regard to Pakistan’s nuclear weapons program, the development of workable solutions to address the nuclear terrorism threat will be challenging and complicated. The best chance for success will lie within a framework premised on a robust U.S.–Pakistan partnership based on trust and mutual understanding.

U.S.–Pakistan Ties and Islamabad’s Quest for Nuclear Weapons

Pakistan’s regional security concerns have led it to acquire nuclear weapons in the face of persistent and often severe international penalties. After the 1964 Chinese nuclear test, then Foreign Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto concluded that India would also go nuclear and that Pakistan would have to follow in its footsteps. Pakistan’s humiliating defeat in the 1971 war with India, which resulted in the dismemberment of the country, further convinced Bhutto (by then president of the country) of Pakistan’s need for a nuclear deterrent against India’s conventional superiority. It was at this point that Bhutto decided Pakistan would secretly pursue a nuclear weapon. India’s 1974 nuclear test accelerated the Pakistani efforts to acquire nuclear weapons, and by late 1975 Bhutto had placed metallurgist Abdul Qadeer Khan in charge of a clandestine effort to produce enriched uranium for nuclear weapons.¹

Another India–Pakistan military crisis in 1987, sparked by a large-scale Indian military exercise called Operation Brass Tacks, only strengthened Pakistani resolve on its decision to develop a credible nuclear weapons program. The Pakistanis believed Operation Brass Tacks was cover for a planned Indian invasion and so began amassing their own troops near the border. At the peak of the crisis, A.Q. Khan announced to an Indian journalist that Pakistan had a nuclear weapons capability.²

In 1985, two years prior to Operation Brass Tacks, the U.S. Congress passed legislation (referred to as

the Pressler Amendment) requiring the U.S. President to certify that Pakistan did not possess a nuclear weapon as a pre-condition for further U.S. assistance. When President George H.W. Bush decided he could no longer certify that Pakistan did not possess a nuclear weapon on October 1, 1990, the U.S. suspended its \$564 million aid program to Pakistan for fiscal year 1991. The loss of \$300 million annually of arms and other military supplies was a heavy blow to Pakistan’s defense establishment, while the cut-off of economic assistance added to problems that were already severely weakening the Pakistani economy.³

Pakistan conducted its first nuclear tests in May 1998 in response to a round of testing by India after it broke a 24-year self-imposed moratorium on nuclear testing. The Clinton Administration imposed fresh sanctions on Pakistan (and India) following the 1998 tests but gradually lifted the restrictions. Following the September 11, 2001, attacks, the Bush Administration lifted all remaining nuclear sanctions against both Pakistan and India. After the 1998 nuclear tests, A.Q. Khan boasted that he made Pakistan’s program more advanced and reliable than the Indian program, citing Pakistan’s mastery of the uranium enrichment process.⁴

Pakistan’s Strategic Neighborhood

Pakistan–India Relations. Pakistan’s nuclear program is driven primarily by Islamabad’s perception that it needs to counter the Indian threat, and to a lesser extent by its desire to establish itself as a major Islamic power. There is genuine concern in Pakistan that India will take advantage of the U.S. civil nuclear deal to expand its weapons program. Reports over the last year about Pakistan’s construction of a major heavy-water nuclear reactor at the Khushab facility have raised concern that Islamabad will significantly boost its plutonium production capabilities, thereby fueling a regional arms race that could involve China.

The six-month-long India–Pakistan military crisis sparked by a terrorist attack on India’s parliament

1. Dennis Kux, *The United States and Pakistan: 1947–2000* (Karachi: Oxford University Press), p. 224.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 284–285.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 308–309.

4. Zahid Hussain, *Frontline Pakistan: The Struggle with Militant Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 161.

in December 2001 was defused after U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage secured a commitment from President Musharraf to end the infiltration of Kashmiri militants into Indian-held Kashmir. Shortly before the stand-off ended, the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi evacuated the families of diplomats on the grounds that a military conflict between the two adversaries could escalate into a nuclear exchange. Although India says nuclear war was never a possibility, the Pakistani security establishment appears to believe that the crisis proved the effectiveness of its nuclear deterrent against India.

Pakistan and India formally launched a composite dialogue process in January 2004 that includes talks on nuclear confidence building. In June 2004, New Delhi and Islamabad agreed to continue a bilateral moratorium on further nuclear tests; to provide each other advance notice of nuclear-capable missile tests; and to establish a hotline between each other's foreign ministries. These talks marked the first follow-up discussions to the 1999 Lahore Memorandum of Understanding, designed to reduce the risks of a nuclear exchange due to accident or misunderstanding. Earlier this year, India and Pakistan furthered these talks by inking an agreement to notify each other immediately via their hotline links in the event of any accident relating to nuclear weapons.

Pakistan–China Relations. Pakistan and China have had long-standing strategic ties. China is Pakistan's largest defense supplier and the Chinese view Pakistan as a useful counterweight to Indian power in the region. In the run-up to Chinese President Hu Jintao's visit to Pakistan last November, media reports speculated that Beijing would sign a major nuclear energy cooperation agreement with Pakistan.⁵ In the end, however, the Chinese leader provided a general pledge of support to Pakistan's nuclear energy program but refrained from announcing plans to supply new nuclear reactors.

China has helped Pakistan build two nuclear reactors at the Chasma site in the Punjab Province and has provided Pakistan with nuclear technology as far back as the 1970s. China also is helping Pakistan develop a deep sea port at Gwadar in the Pakistani province of Baluchistan, near the mouth of the Persian Gulf.

One source of tension between Beijing and Islamabad that has surfaced in the past has been over the issue of rising Islamic extremism in Pakistan and the ability of Chinese Uighur separatists to receive sanctuary and training among other radical Islamist groups on Pakistani territory. To mollify China's concerns, Pakistan in recent years has begun to clamp down on Uighur settlements and on religious schools used as training grounds for militant Islamists.⁶ Their tensions over Islamic extremism surfaced when Islamic vigilantes recently kidnapped several Chinese citizens they accused of running a brothel in Islamabad. The extremists released the kidnap victims shortly after they were captured, saying they did so in the interest of maintaining Pakistan's good relations with China.⁷

Pakistan–Iran Relations. Pakistan's relations with Iran have been far from smooth over the last three decades. Relations soured following the 1979 Iranian Revolution due to Pakistani President Mohammad Zia ul-Haq's previous support of the Shah's regime and his encouragement of Sunni militant organizations that pushed a strict Sunni interpretation of Islam and targeted the minority Shiia population in Pakistan. Iran, in turn, began to export to Pakistan Shiia militants to counter the Sunni extremists. Sectarian violence has ebbed and flowed over the last fifteen years in Pakistan and continues to have a chilling impact on Iranian–Pakistani relations.

Pakistan's support of the Sunni Taliban in the mid-1990s significantly raised tensions between Tehran and Islamabad. These tensions climaxed in

5. Jo Johnson, Farhan Bokhari, and Edward Luce, "U.S. Fears China–Pakistan Nuclear Deal," *The Financial Times*, November 16, 2006, at www.ft.com/cms/s/0/0bcea362-75e1-11db-aea1-0000779e2340.html, (September 12, 2007).
6. Ziad Haider, "Clearing Clouds Over the Karakoram Pass," *YaleGlobal Online*, March 29, 2004, at <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/display.article?id=3603&page=2> (September 12, 2007).
7. "Lal Masjid Frees Hostages," *Daily Times*, June 24, 2007, at www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2007\06\24\story_24-6-2007_pg1_3 (September 12, 2007).

August 1998 when the Taliban killed several Iranian diplomats in the northern Afghan city of Mazar-e-Sharif. Iran responded by amassing its military along the border with Afghanistan. If fighting had broken out between Iranian forces and the Taliban, Pakistan would have likely been drawn into the conflict in support of the Taliban. It is difficult to imagine Pakistan would have officially sanctioned nuclear cooperation with such an unsteady neighbor, although some analysts believe the bulk of the nuclear cooperation occurred in the early 1990s before the Taliban had emerged and shortly after the U.S. had cut off assistance to Pakistan.

Pakistan's halt to official support for the Taliban following 9/11 has helped to improve Pakistani-Iranian ties, and both countries are actively engaged in talks on developing an Iran-Pakistan-India oil and gas pipeline.

Terrorism and Nuclear Weapons

Former Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet reports in his memoirs that A.Q. Khan rebuffed several approaches by Osama bin Laden for access to nuclear know-how, although it was not clear why.⁸ Perhaps Khan understood that cooperating with the renowned terrorist leader was a bridge too far, as it risked contributing to a scenario of nuclear Armageddon that could cause mass destruction and loss of life in his own country.

Although A.Q. Khan avoided engaging al-Qaeda on nuclear issues, earlier revelations about a group of former Pakistani military officials and nuclear scientists who met with Osama bin Laden around the time of 9/11 remind us of the continuing threat of the intersection of terrorism and nuclear weapons in Pakistan. On October 23, 2001, acting on an American request, Pakistani authorities detained Bashiruddin Mahmood and Abdul Majeed, two retired Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission (PAEC) officials. Since their retirement from the PAEC in 1999 they had been involved in relief work in Afghanistan through a non-governmental organiza-

tion they established called Ummah Tameer-e-Nau (UTN). In November 2001, the coalition forces found documents in Afghanistan relating to UTN's interest in biological weapons. This prompted Pakistani security forces to arrest seven members of UTN's board, most of whom were retired Pakistani Army officials and nuclear scientists.⁹

George Tenet speculates in his memoirs that UTN's contacts with the Taliban and al-Qaeda may have been supported by some elements within the Pakistani military and intelligence establishment. Tenet says Pakistani interrogations of the seven board members were initially insufficient. He further notes that despite CIA warnings to Pakistani officials about UTN's activities before 9/11, it was only when President George W. Bush dispatched him to Pakistan in November 2001, following revelations of a meeting between bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and UTN leaders, that Musharraf took serious action.¹⁰

Outcome of Khan Investigations

Similar foot-dragging by the Pakistani authorities was evident in the case of the A.Q. Khan proliferation network. U.S. officials had repeatedly raised their concern about Khan's activities with President Musharraf, but it was not until Washington provided indisputable proof of its knowledge of Khan's activities and threatened to go public with the information in late 2003 that Musharraf took direct action to halt Khan's activities.¹¹

Even after details emerged about the tremendous damage done by the A.Q. Khan proliferation network, there was no formal prosecution of the Pakistani associates of Khan, and Khan himself is merely under house arrest. President Musharraf claims he cannot formally prosecute Khan or allow him to be questioned by U.S. or international authorities because of the hero status Khan enjoys for contributing to the development of Pakistan's nuclear weapons program.

8. George Tenet, *At the Center of the Storm* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), p. 261.

9. Hussain, *Frontline Pakistan*, pp. 154–155.

10. Tenet, *At the Center of the Storm*, pp. 262–268.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 286.

U.S. Policy Recommendations

There are steps the U.S. can pursue to help ensure nuclear weapons do not fall into the wrong hands in Pakistan and to prevent a dangerous nuclear arms race between Pakistan and India. Washington has already begun to pursue such initiatives but will need to increase its attention and resources to expanding and strengthening such measures.

Leveraging, Not Conditioning, U.S. Assistance: Based on the negative consequences brought by the U.S. cut-off of assistance to Pakistan in 1990, it is unlikely that a narrow policy of cutting or even conditioning assistance to Pakistan through U.S. legislation now would help meet the above goals. The 1990 aid suspension cost the U.S. valuable leverage with Islamabad, damaged military-to-military relationships, and stoked strong anti-U.S. sentiment that still exists in the country. Efforts to publicly condition assistance to Pakistan could actually weaken Musharraf's hand in convincing his military commanders that the U.S. is a reliable partner. President Musharraf already contends with public opposition to his support for U.S. counterterrorism goals in the region, and conditioning aid through legislation would awaken memories of 1990 and weaken Pakistani public support for pursuing relations with the U.S.

Instead of conditioning aid on specific actions by Islamabad, Washington should target its assistance programs more effectively to accomplish specific goals. On the nuclear issue, the U.S. should seek to implement programs that help improve safety and security at nuclear facilities. Press reports indicate that the U.S. may already be cooperating with the Pakistanis on this front, but given Pakistani sensitivities on the issue of maintaining sovereign control of its nuclear assets, such cooperation will remain largely out of the public eye.

Perhaps over time, as the U.S.–Pakistan partnership solidifies, it will be possible to develop a Nunn–Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR)

program with Pakistan, similar to what the U.S. has established with Russia. Potential areas for cooperation with Pakistan include nuclear reactor safety, safeguarding nuclear material, rapid response to nuclear-related emergencies, and expanded export control cooperation. The Pakistan Parliament adopted export control legislation in September 2004 for nuclear and biological weapons and their delivery systems.¹²

Tailoring a CTR program of assistance for Pakistan would be challenging since Pakistan is not a signatory to the Nonproliferation Treaty. The U.S. is prohibited both by legal and treaty obligations from assisting the nuclear programs of states outside the nonproliferation regime. Another obstacle is the basic premise of the Nunn–Lugar legislation that requires recipients of CTR assistance to make “substantial investment of its resources for dismantling or destroying such weapons.”¹³ It would be impossible to develop a CTR program with Pakistan along these lines without addressing the fact that Indo–Pakistani rivalry is what drives Pakistan's nuclear program.

Encourage India–Pakistan Nuclear Confidence Building: India and Pakistan have made significant strides in their dialogue over the last three years, including the maintenance of a ceasefire along the Line of Control that divides Kashmir since November 2003, the opening of rail and bus links across their borders, and increased people-to-people exchanges. Efforts to build confidence on nuclear-related issues have been slow, however. Addressing the Indo–Pakistani nuclear issue also relies to some extent on perceived progress on resolving the Kashmir dispute, as well as the status of China's nuclear programs.

Talks about the vexing Kashmir issue were expected to make progress this year following President Musharraf's announcement last December of forward-leaning proposals to resolve the dispute. However, the judicial crisis in Pakistan sparked by

12. Richard Cronin, K. Alan Kronstadt, and Sharon Squassoni, “Pakistan's Nuclear Proliferation Activities and the Recommendations of the 9/11 Commission: U.S. Policy Constraints and Options,” Congressional Research Service, RL32745, March 16, 2005, at www.fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/RL32745.pdf (September 12, 2007).

13. “Authority for Programs to Facilitate Cooperative Threat Reduction,” U.S.C. 22, § 5952, at www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/html/uscode22/usc_sec_22_00005952----000-.html (September 12, 2007).

the government's March 9 dismissal of the country's Chief Justice and ensuing street demonstrations have sidetracked the Musharraf government and raised concern in New Delhi about negotiating with Islamabad during the political uncertainty.

Conclusion

Preventing Pakistan's nuclear weapons and technology from falling into the hands of terrorists should be a top priority for the U.S. Revelations about the devastating impact of the A.Q. Khan proliferation network and nuclear black market will prevent Washington from considering a civil–nuclear cooperation agreement with Pakistan similar to that being pursued with India. U.S. policy toward Pakistan's nuclear program should instead focus specifically on nuclear safety and security cooperation and encouraging India–Pakistan dialogue that will improve Pakistan's regional security perceptions.

Washington needs to maintain a robust partnership with Islamabad based on mutual trust and

understanding. U.S. policymakers should refrain from compartmentalizing our myriad interests in Pakistan, and instead integrate the various components of U.S. policy toward Pakistan. In other words, pursuing nuclear safety and security and nonproliferation in Pakistan should not be viewed as “competing” with other U.S. goals such as denying Taliban and al-Qaeda safe haven on Pakistani territory, shutting down madrassahs that feed terrorist groups, encouraging peace talks with India, or pressing for steps toward democracy. These goals are interrelated and mutually reinforcing, and will eventually encourage Pakistan toward a stable and moderate path.

—Lisa A. Curtis is Senior Research Fellow for South Asia in the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation. These remarks were delivered June 27, 2007, before the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittees on the Middle East and South Asia, and Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade.