# Pakistan's Nuclear Proliferation and U.S. Policy

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

Recent media reports suggest that rogue Pakistani scientists have been peddling nuclear secrets across the Middle East for many years. The revelation offsets recent good news from the region -- Iran's acceptance of nuclear inspections and Libya's agreement to give up weapons of mass destruction. The spread of nuclear secrets in Pakistan is particularly worrisome for Washington; if Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf were killed or overthrown, the country's nuclear arsenal could be aimed at U.S. forces in the Persian Gulf region or at Pakistan's longstanding rival, India.

Pakistan's Nuclear Program

For many years, the West has been concerned about Pakistan's nuclear activities and its cavalier attitude toward proliferation. Nonetheless, Western governments have compromised on policy because of the need for Islamabad's cooperation against Soviet troops in Afghanistan and later against Osama bin Laden and the Taliban. Pakistan's centrifuge technology, crucial for enriching uranium, leaked from a joint British-Dutch-German facility in the Netherlands in the 1970s. Reciprocal visits with Iraqi scientists reportedly occurred in the late 1980s. Also in the 1980s, the Pakistani regime swapped centrifuge secrets with China in exchange for a working design for a nuclear weapon. Those same secrets were traded in the 1990s for a North Korean production line making missiles capable of carrying a nuclear warhead.

Successive Pakistani governments have encouraged rival teams of the country's scientists to compete against one another in the development of a nuclear deterrent. One team has worked with plutonium, the type of bomb dropped by the United States on the Japanese city of Nagasaki in 1945; the other has worked on a highly enriched uranium device, similar -- though superior in design -- to the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Both teams successfully tested their devices in 1998. Pakistan defended the tests, noting that the incoming hardline government of its neighboring rival, India, had just carried out that country's second nuclear test (the first was in 1974).

At the same time, both Pakistani teams have also engaged in a race to produce a nuclear-capable missile. The plutonium team worked out a deal with China, acquiring the M-11 missile (known in Pakistan as the Shaheen). The uranium enrichment team collaborated with North Korea, acquiring its Scud-derivative, the Nodong (called the Ghauri in Pakistan; Ghauri was a Muslim warrior who defeated his Hindu rival, Prithvi, the name of India's

equivalent missile).

International Ties

Saudi Arabia and Libya have often been reported as early financial backers of Pakistan's proliferation efforts. Western fears of reciprocal deals between Pakistan and those countries heightened in 2002, when Saudi and Libyan representatives attended a test-firing of the Ghauri missile. Libya's nascent nuclear program is now believed to have been based on Pakistani-type centrifuges. Moreover, Saudi officials reportedly mused about alternatives to a U.S. nuclear umbrella just before the de facto Saudi leader, Crown Prince Abdullah, paid an official visit to Pakistan last October.

Another cause for concern is Pakistan's unauthorized cooperation with Iran, whose leadership admitted to the UN watchdog International Atomic Energy Agency that Iranian centrifuge technology came from Pakistan. Last month, Pakistani authorities questioned three senior scientists from Pakistan's uranium enrichment facility, as well as the facility's former head, Abdul Qadeer Khan, all of whom are suspected of spreading nuclear secrets. Officials were quoted as saying the men acted out of personal greed, though it seems just as plausible that they were acquiring money to fund Pakistan's internal nuclear arms race. The result of the interrogations is unknown; still, Khan claims he is being set up and, contrary to the reported remarks of President Musharraf, asserts that he has never been in Iran.

In addition, Khan argues that a middleman in Dubai, responsible for delivering nuclear equipment from European suppliers to Pakistan, duplicated orders for this material and delivered the equipment to Iran as well. Did Pakistan's government know the details at the time? It might well depend on how one defines "government." In Pakistan, nuclear projects come under the purview of the army, of which Musharraf was chief of staff when he seized power in 1999; he still retains this position. On the other hand, a civilian political leader in Pakistan can be ignorant of state secrets; the twice-elected prime minister, Benazir Bhutto, now in exile, was never allowed to visit the uranium enrichment plant at Kahuta despite its close proximity to the capital, Islamabad. Perhaps Musharraf is using the ambiguity of his dual roles to shroud the extent of his knowledge.

The Iran scandal is the second nuclear embarrassment for the president. Soon after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, U.S. pressure forced Musharraf to detain two retired scientists from the plutonium project, fervent Muslims who had met with Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan. (By contrast, Khan, although a nationalist, is not an Islamic extremist -- he is even known to have sent Christmas cards to European acquaintances.)

Pakistan's Stability and Its Nuclear Program

The challenge for Washington is to ensure that Musharraf, or a similar pro-Western leader, retains power while the hunt for bin Laden and residual elements of al-Qaeda continues in Pakistan's mountainous border area with Afghanistan. Musharraf himself appears to maintain a tenuous grip on power, having survived two assassination attempts by Islamic extremists last month alone. Such forces will have been further enraged by last week's summit with India and the indications of a possible compromise on the vexing Kashmir issue. The Pakistani leader's tactics can often appear erratic. He was army commander when units, fighting alongside specially trained Islamic militants, launched a surprise but ultimately abortive offensive against Indian mountain positions in 1999. In July 2001 he rushed into a summit with his Indian counterpart that failed to achieve either a breakthrough or a joint statement. Later that year, shortly after September 11, Islamic militants assumed to have connections with Pakistani intelligence launched suicide attacks on the Indian parliament in New Delhi, prompting a crisis that brought both countries to the brink of nuclear exchange.

Two nightmare scenarios exist for Pakistan: either a further diminution of the military-bureaucratic elite's pro-Western stance, or a takeover (including the nuclear arsenal) by Islamic politicians and military supporters. Both

scenarios would jeopardize Pakistan's reluctant alliance with the United States as well as the hunt for bin Laden and his associates. After September 11, Washington offered Pakistan technology to improve the security of its nuclear arsenal. It is not clear whether this offer was taken. If the rapprochement with India fails, the Bush administration could repeat the denuclearization program as instituted in former Soviet-bloc countries like Kazakhstan and Ukraine. Another policy option would be to seize Pakistan's arsenal, using pro-U.S. elements. To put it mildly, either alternative would pose great challenges.

Simon Henderson is a London-based associate of The Washington Institute who has followed developments in Pakistan since the 1970s, when he worked in Islamabad as a foreign correspondent. He is author of the latest Institute Policy Paper, **The New Pillar: Conservative Arab Gulf States and U.S. Strategy (templateC04.php?CID=33)** (2003).

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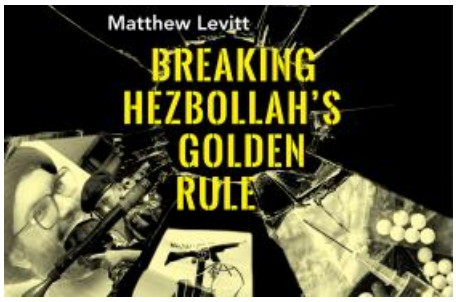


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