

Pakistan: How Washington helped create a nuclear 'rogue state'

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18 February 2004 — As proof continues to mount that US President George Bush's administration systematically lied about Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) to justify invading the oil-rich Persian Gulf country, it has been revealed that Pakistan, one of Washington's closest allies, has been peddling nuclear weapons technology for more than a decade.

On February 4, Abdul Qadeer Khan, dubbed the "father" of Pakistan's nuclear bomb by the corporate press' cliché mills, appeared live on national television. He confessed that he single-handedly commanded a complex trade network in nuclear weapons technology with Iran, North Korea and Libya, which has operated since at least 1989.

In a carefully scripted address, Khan stated that "there was never, ever any kind of authorisation for these activities from the government".

Within 24 hours, Pakistani military dictator Pervez Musharraf announced that Khan had been pardoned on the recommendation of the military-dominated National Command Authority, which controls Pakistan's nuclear arsenal, and cabinet.

Washington was equally quick to absolve Pakistan's military government of all responsibility, describing the pardoning of Khan as an internal matter. Associated Press reported on February 8 that, according to Pakistan's foreign ministry, US Secretary of State Colin Powell phoned Musharraf on February 6 to express "appreciation over the results of the investigations and the manner in which they were conducted".

CIA director George Tenet on February 5 declared the case closed: "Khan and his network have been dealt a crushing blow."

According to the Pakistani military official who briefed the press on February 1, Khan was the "mastermind" behind a sophisticated web of contractors and conduits, stretching across at least three continents. This network manufactured, sold or bartered and delivered uranium-enrichment components and designs to Iran, North Korea and Libya. Washington claims that Libya has turned over a blueprint for a nuclear weapon sold to it by "the Khan network".

Khan supposedly had tens of millions of dollars at his fingertips to pay the players in the conspiracy (while creaming millions off the top for himself), and could simply pick up a phone and order Pakistani air force cargo planes to transport nuclear parts to North Korea, and return with missile parts.

All this somehow continued, between at least 1989 and 2003, under the noses of Pakistan's powerful

military and intelligence services without them noticing. According to the February 3 *Washington Post*, Khan's laboratory was guarded by "two army brigadiers and a detachment from Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency, or ISI".

“Dr No”?

The fantastic scenario of a nefarious, real-life Dr No orchestrating a vast secret worldwide “nuclear black market” might make sensational copy for the world's capitalist gutter press, but it is a ludicrous piece of fiction designed to let the Pakistani military regime, and its backers in Washington, off the hook.

It was too much for the *Washington Post* to swallow. An editorial in the February 5 *Post* stated: “For more than two years, the administration has embraced Mr Musharraf as a strategic ally and overlooked his suppression of Pakistani democracy and his coddling of Islamic extremists. Now the administration must confront the reality that Pakistan's military leadership has done more to threaten US and global security with weapons of mass destruction than either al Qaeda or Saddam Hussein. Were Pakistan not a professed ally of the United States, its behaviour would meet the criteria for preemptive military intervention outlined in Mr Bush's national security strategy.”

After years of denying that Pakistan was trading in nuclear technology, the Pakistani military was forced to come up with a plausible cover story after the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) revealed that its inspectors late last year had conclusively identified Pakistani components in Iran's uranium enrichment facilities. The plant, which produces fuel for Iran's atomic power stations, bore a striking similarity to Pakistan's enrichment facility. Documents turned over by Iran in October confirmed the source as being Pakistan.

The pressure mounted on Musharraf, after Libya in December showed IAEA inspectors hundreds of unopened crates of centrifuge parts, many of which had been imported direct from Pakistan or via Malaysia. Libya also provided documents fingering Pakistan.

Khan's “confession” followed weeks of talks with senior military commanders, including ISI head Lieutenant General Ehsan ul-Haq. The goal was to strike a deal that would result in Khan agreeing to become the scapegoat, while maintaining his status of “national hero” (and his fortune), in return for being set free without penalty.

(It has also been reported that Khan's daughter is in London with documentary evidence of the Pakistani military's involvement in the nuclear trade, which she will release if her father is prosecuted.)

Islamabad and Washington had every reason to keep Khan out of an open court. According to the February 3 *Washington Post*, Khan told ISI investigators that his activities were carried out with the full knowledge and approval of Pakistan's top military leaders, who are the true rulers of Pakistan.

Approved by military chiefs

A senior Pakistani investigator told the February 3 *Post* that Khan said General Mirza Aslam Beg, Pakistan's army chief of staff from 1988 to 1991, had approved his dealings with Iran. Khan also disclosed that Musharraf and General Jehangir Karamat, army chief from 1996 to 1998, knew of his technology swaps with North Korea.

The February 3 *Post* was told by a retired army commander that the bartering of Pakistani nuclear technology in exchange for North Korean ballistic missile technology stepped up after a December

1993 visit to Pyongyang by Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. The arrangements were made at the urging of General Abdul Waheed, the army chief at the time. Musharraf was Waheed's director-general for military operations at the time.

Soon after, Khan led a delegation of Pakistani technicians and military officers to North Korea to discuss the barter arrangements. The retired commander added that Karamat, who replaced Waheed as army chief of staff in 1996, secretly visited North Korea in December 1997. In April 1998, Karamat was guest of honour at the successful test of Pakistan's Ghauri missile, which was a rebadged Nodong missile from North Korea. Musharraf took command of the Ghauri missile program when he took over the army chief of staff position in October 1998, the investigator told the Post. Musharraf seized power in a coup in 1999.

The idea that four army chiefs of staff, including Musharraf himself, and two prime ministers were not aware of, or did not bother to ask, what Pyongyang was getting in return for its missile technology is beyond belief.

However, the military official who briefed reporters on February 1 let slip a sliver of the truth that lies hidden behind the carefully constructed tale of Khan's intrigue. "Everybody knew ours was a covert program [to develop nuclear weapons and their delivery systems], and every successive government and the security agencies overlooked allegations about Dr Khan's assets in the interest of the program and because of the trust in this person", the February 3 *New York Times* quoted the officer as saying.

Far from being the work of a recent freelance network of greedy smugglers — as Musharraf and Washington would have the world believe — organised theft, spying and smuggling, as well as secret government-to-government and military-to-military deals, have always been an integral and essential part of Pakistan's quest to become a nuclear-armed state. While Khan was a leading figure in these operations, they were approved by, and directed from, the very top of the Pakistani government and military.

According to Carey Sublette's comprehensive history of Pakistan's nuclear weapons program [1], the crash program for an atomic weapon was officially launched on January 24, 1972, when Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto called together the country's top nuclear scientists in the wake of Pakistan's defeat by India a month earlier in the Bangladesh war.

On Bhutto's orders, wrote journalist Tim Weiner in the June 1, 1998, *New York Times*, "Pakistan set up a world-wide smuggling ring to buy, copy or steal nuclear weapons technology, according to US officials and declassified government documents".

The Pakistani military government's relationships with future "trading partners" were established in the early 1970s and '80s. Bhutto held a series of meetings in 1973 and 1974 with the Libyan and Saudi Arabian governments to line up financing for Pakistan's nuclear weapons program. Clearly, the expectation was that Pakistan would share the future fruits of its program with its benefactors.

AQ Khan's place in the network dates from September 1974. He was then a metallurgist employed at an Amsterdam facility associated with European uranium enrichment consortium Urenco. With Bhutto's enthusiastic assent, Khan set about stealing Urenco centrifuge designs and information about suppliers. On the basis of Khan's pilfered information, components began to be purchased for Pakistan's secret uranium enrichment program in 1975.

By July 1976, Bhutto had placed Khan in charge of the covert program to enrich weapons-grade uranium for Pakistan's nukes, operating out of the Engineering Research Laboratories (ERL) at Kahuta, near Islamabad.

Sublette notes that the ERL purchased many of the parts needed for its centrifuge and nuclear weapons projects on the open market. Suppliers in the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, France and Belgium agreed to sell Pakistan the critical components. What could not be bought openly or legally was smuggled.

After Bhutto was overthrown in the 1977 military coup led by General Mohammed Zia ul-Haq, the nuclear weapons program continued under the military's firm control, with the ISI playing a key role in soliciting and securing the components and technology Pakistan still required.

After Zia was assassinated in a plane explosion in 1988, the military allowed general elections to take place three months later and permitted Bhutto's daughter Benazir Bhutto to become prime minister. However, the nuclear weapons program, including the KRL, remained tightly under the generals' control.

In 1990, fearing that Washington would impose sanctions over the military's covert preparations to produce nuclear weapons, Benazir Bhutto demanded a greater say over the program. On August 6, President Ghulam Ishaq Khan, Zia's former finance minister, sacked her. Bhutto described it as being a "nuclear coup".

According to Sublette, by 1990 Pakistan had conducted more than 24 cold tests of nuclear devices and designed a bomb small enough to be delivered by Pakistan's US-supplied F-16 fighter-bombers. As tensions with India over Kashmir increased in 1990, the Pakistani military ordered that seven "bomb cores" of highly enriched uranium be prepared to enable the rapid construction of nuclear weapons.

On February 7, 1992, Pakistani foreign minister Shahryar Khan admitted to the Washington Post that his country had the components to assemble at least one nuclear weapon. While Pakistan was not to conduct test explosions of its nuclear weapons until 1998, it was already a member of the nuclear club.

Washington looks the other way

Pakistan could not have emerged as a nuclear power without decades-long assistance and acquiescence by the US government. During the Cold War, Washington sought to cultivate the Pakistani military as a counter to the Soviet Union's friendly relations with India. Under the "Atoms for Peace" program, Washington trained scores of Pakistan's nuclear scientists from 1956 until 1972. In 1962, the US gave the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission (PAEC) its first research reactor and supplies of nuclear fuel rods.

Despite a US law passed in 1976 (the "Symington amendment") that required the US to suspend economic and military aid to non-signatories of the Nuclear Non-proliferation that engaged in uranium enrichment, Washington did not respond to the mounting evidence of Pakistan's nuclear program. It was not until the dying days of US President Jimmy Carter's presidency, on April 6, 1979, that US aid to Pakistan, worth \$85 million, was finally halted.

However, this half-hearted concern at Pakistan's nuclear shenanigans was short-lived. Following the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan in December 1979, Carter offered Pakistan resumed economic and military aid of \$400 million. Islamabad held out for more.

In June 1981, President Ronald Reagan announced an agreement to provide Pakistan with \$3.2 billion in economic and military aid over the next six years. In December 1981, Congress approved the aid package and granted Pakistan a six-year exemption from Symington amendment sanctions.

Billions more in covert assistance from the CIA, Britain, Saudi Arabia and other sources flooded into the Pakistani military's coffers in the 1980s. The ISI took charge of funnelling arms and money to the feuding gangs that made up the reactionary mujaheddin fighting to overthrow Afghanistan's Soviet-backed, left-wing government. For Washington, defeating the Afghan "communists" and their Soviet backers was far more important than stemming Pakistan's nuclear ambitions.

In July 1985, Congress passed another \$4 billion six-year aid package for Pakistan, but also passed the "Pressler amendment", which required the US president to certify each year that Pakistan "does not possess a nuclear device" and was not involved in nuclear smuggling before the aid could be delivered.

Unfazed, Reagan certified Pakistan's compliance in 1986 despite the fact that, according to the November 4, 1986, *Washington Post*, US intelligence reports and non-proliferation experts had concluded that Pakistan was between two weeks and "two screwdriver turns from having a fully assembled bomb".

In 1987, Congress approved another \$480 million in aid for Pakistan and extended the Symington amendment exemption for another two and half years.

Despite overwhelming evidence, including public boasts by Pakistani politicians and scientists, that Pakistan had a nuclear bomb, Reagan and his successor, President George Bush senior, certified Pakistan to be free of nukes every year until 1990 (the Soviet Union had withdrawn its troops from Afghanistan in early 1989). In October 1990, Washington halted economic and military aid to Islamabad, worth \$564 million, and froze government arms sales.

However, the damage had been done. It was too late to put Pakistan's nuclear genie back into its bottle. As US senator John Glenn, one of the sponsors of the Symington amendment, observed in the June 26, 1992, *International Herald Tribune*: "Nine years of US assistance had helped Pakistan release funds for its nuclear weapons program and given it the means for delivering the weapons."

In 1995, the US Congress waived the Pressler amendment provisions for one year to allow the delivery of \$368 million worth of "non-strategic military equipment" as part of a resumption of "counterterrorism" military training.

Under the US Arms Export Control Act, President Bill Clinton was supposed to impose military and economic sanctions on both Pakistan and India following their May 1998 nuclear tests. However, fearing that US agribusiness and other economic interests would be disadvantaged, a month after the tests Congress granted both countries an exemption from sanctions for one year. Days later, the president was given additional authority to waive sanctions for a year at a time.

Clinton swiftly restored funding for military training and commercial credit programs to both countries. He also gave the green light to renewed International Monetary Fund loans to both countries. Clinton also gave permission for Islamabad to be paid \$325 million in cash and \$140 million in goods as compensation for 28 F-16 aircraft that Pakistan had partly paid for, but were never delivered due to the 1990 sanctions.

Following Musharraf's coup, Washington briefly imposed tepid new sanctions. However, these (as well as all sanctions against India) were waived two weeks after the September 11, 2001, attacks in the US as President Bush junior moved quickly to enlist both countries as close allies in his "war on terror". In a replay of its dealings with General Zia, Washington chose to place its strategic alliance with Musharraf's regime above the need to rein in the Pakistani nuclear rogue state.

John Glenn made a prescient statement in his 1992 *IHT* article, which applies equally to the current Bush gang's policies: "The Reagan and Bush administrations have practised a nuclear non-

proliferation policy bordering on lawlessness. They have undermined the respect of other countries for US law and have done great damage to the nuclear non-proliferation effort.

“Keep that in mind the next time someone in the administration extols the need for military action to deal with some power- hungry dictator seeking to acquire nuclear weapons.”

P.S.

* From: International News, Green Left Weekly issue #571 18 February 2004.

Footnotes

[1] At <http://nuclearweaponarchive.org/Pakistan>