

DECEPTION

**Pakistan, the United States,
and the Secret Trade
in Nuclear
Weapons**



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& Catherine
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IN NUCLEAR WEAPONS



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Pakistan, India and neighboring countries



Africa and the Middle East



Western Europe



Pakistan and its nuclear facilities



Iran and its nuclear facilities



INTRODUCTION: THE CORE

This is a story of how our elected representatives have conjured a grand deception, the terrible consequences of which may not become clear for decades to come. It is a chronicle of moral lapses, abysmal judgments, failures of oversight, careless and frequently lazy analyses of the changing world around us which have served to further destabilize it and to empower those bent on global jihad.

The deception was first glimpsed in 2004 when the government of Pakistan announced that its most revered scientist, Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan, was to make a confession live on Pakistan TV. Dr. Khan, a figure normally cloaked in intrigue, having been associated with Pakistan's covert nuclear program for three decades, appeared on 4 February, speaking in English for the benefit of the wider world, rather than in Urdu for a home audience that would normally cling to his every word.

"My dear brothers and sisters," Khan began, before admitting to what he described as "unauthorized proliferation activities." Khan signed off: "May Allah keep Pakistan safe and secure. Long live Pakistan!" To ensure that what he had done was fully understood in the West, the Pakistan military conducted explanatory briefings in which Khan was said to have run, pretty much on his own, a black market in nuclear weapons technology for client states that President George W. Bush had identified as the "Axis of Evil"—Iran, Libya and North Korea.

The ramifications were appalling. There was heated conjecture around the world about why Khan, caricatured as the Typhoid Mary of nuclear proliferation, had done it—out of political and religious conviction, or for self-aggrandizement? Editorials speculated for whom Khan had done it—the rogue regimes themselves, jihadis in Afghanistan, Osama bin Laden, or perhaps terrorist cells hoping to let off a nuclear device in Europe or America.

President George W. Bush subscribed to the deceit, announcing several days later: "Khan has confessed his crimes and his top associates are out of business." Khan and a small band were guilty of shocking offenses, but there was no need to put them on trial. Bush explained: "President Musharraf has promised to share all the information he learns about the Khan network, and has assured us that his country will never again be a source of proliferation." Pakistan was so on top of the situation that there would be no need to extradite the scientists to the West.

In reality, Khan's confession was a ruse. It takes more than one person to make a mess of this proportion. Khan was the fall guy and his performance papered over the true nature of what many now believe was the nuclear crime of all our lifetimes and undoubtedly the source of our future wars. The nuclear bazaar Khan claimed to have orchestrated certainly existed, but where the public and private stories diverged was that the covert trade in doomsday technology was not the work of one man, but the foreign policy of a nation, plotted and supervised by Pakistan's ruling military clique, supposedly a key ally in America's war on terror. The true scandal was how the trade and the Pakistan military's role in it had been discovered by high-ranking US and European officials, many years before, but rather than interdict it they had worked hard to cover it up.

For three decades, consecutive US administrations, Republican and Democrat, as well as the governments in Britain and other European countries, had allowed Pakistan to acquire highly restricted nuclear technology. In a disastrous epoch, key state assets were then misdirected and countermanded in order to disguise how Pakistan had sold it on. Intelligence gathering in the US was blunted while federal agencies, including the Departments of State and Defense, were corralled into backing the White House agenda and forced to sidestep Congress and break federal laws. Officials who tried to stop the charade were rough-housed, smeared or purged, inflicting terrible damage on

America and Europe's ability to see sharply. The US Congress played along too, by folding beneath White House pressure during a period in which political debate that dared level hard questions was portrayed as unpatriotic or even seditious.

The question all of this begged was why anyone would want to place the survival of a military regime in Pakistan above the long-term safety of the world.

Perhaps the only truthful statement on 4 February 2004 was one made inadvertently. Richard Bouche, the US State Department spokesman, characterized the Khan affair as having been a tough call for Pakistan's dictator-president, General Pervez Musharraf. Khan was a national hero and mention of his name in Pakistan was sufficient to make citizens bristle with pride. Having furnished a nation "incapable of manufacturing sharp sewing needles," as Khan liked to put it, with a cutting-edge production line for nuclear weapons able to strike almost every city in India, Pakistan's habitual enemy, Khan had become popularly known as the "Father of the Bomb."

Few people in Pakistan knew that he had become involved in the covert program by accident. While working as a technical translator in Holland in 1972, Khan had read highly classified blueprints for a radical new technique being trialled by a consortium of British, Dutch and German scientists, a breakthrough that would enable them to create fissile material by spinning a derivative of uranium at extraordinary speeds in a centrifuge that resembled a large, upturned cigar case. A savvy Khan had immediately appreciated that the true value of this secret technology lay in a paradox. While the process was classified and revolutionary, its components were commonplace and could be imported by Islamabad "under the wire," with little chance of anyone tipping off the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the global nuclear police, based in Vienna, Austria.

In 1975 Khan returned to Islamabad with three suitcases crammed full of stolen information. The following year, Pakistan's agents began shopping in Europe and North America for the equipment the country needed, a process coordinated by Khan, who oozed charm and eased their path, having cemented friendships with leading European theoretical nuclear physicists, industrialists, engineers and metallurgists—who also happened to be familiar with clandestine bomb programs run by Western governments.

Intelligence analysts in the US and UK spotted this activity from the start. In their first reports Khan was characterized as a state employee working on a civilian project run by Pakistan's then prime minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. When Bhutto was overthrown in a coup in 1977, the CIA warned that Khan and the nuclear project would become a military prerogative under the authority of Pakistan's new dictator, General Zia ul-Haq. Khan's agents, on purchasing missions around the world, came under the orders of Pakistan's generals and its intelligence establishment, the Inter Services Intelligence agency (ISI).

However, too much knowledge about the Pakistan bomb program rapidly became a bad thing. In 1979, President Jimmy Carter, who had come to power in 1977 pledging to reduce the number of nuclear weapons on the planet, was lobbied by Zbigniew Brzezinski, his national security adviser, to change tack. The Soviets were interfering in Pakistan's neighbor Afghanistan and it looked as if they might reach into Iran too, where the shah, a prime US ally, had recently fallen. Pakistan was a necessary buffer against Communism, Carter was advised, and needed to be wooed. In return for resisting Soviet advances, Washington was willing to turn a blind eye to General Zia's nuclear aspirations.

As the Soviet presence in Afghanistan blossomed into a full-scale invasion, with the Red Army

occupying Kabul on Christmas Eve 1980, Carter was replaced by Ronald Reagan, who buried non-proliferation completely, dismantling the US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, created by John F. Kennedy, and hijacking other independent channels along which intelligence (especially on nuclear trafficking) flowed. The National Security Council and the office of the national security adviser were both downgraded, while the CIA, under director William Casey, became pre-eminent, using intelligence as a political tool to support the Reaganite agenda, rather than to inform it.

Reagan and Casey believed that Afghanistan was a scenario where the US might just win a war without fighting, fuelling instead an arm's-length insurgency, fought by the Pakistan-backed mujahideen, to bog down the Red Army, just as the Soviets had connived to bloody US troops in Vietnam a decade before. US officials converged on Islamabad carrying cash and the message that America would ignore Pakistan's growing nuclear program. However, in the US, Reagan deceitfully insisted that non-proliferation remained a primary policy.

As Pakistan's bomb program burgeoned, it became increasingly difficult to keep a lid on it. What started as pragmatism (a go-getting kind of deal-making, steeped in the optimism Reagan brought to depressed post-Carter Washington) rapidly bloomed into a complex conspiracy, with State Department officials actively obstructing other arms of government which could not help but fall over intelligence about Pakistan's nuclear trade. Evidence was destroyed, criminal files were diverted, Congress was repeatedly lied to, and in several cases, in 1986 and 1987, presidential appointees even tipped off the Pakistan government so as to prevent its agents from getting caught in US Customs Service stings that aimed to catch them buying nuclear components in America.

If those involved had been outed they would have faced enormous consequences, like the officials felled by the Iran–Contra affair which blew open at the same time, claiming national security adviser Admiral John Poindexter and the National Security Council's Colonel Oliver North after it was revealed that they had been involved in a black operation in which Congress was lied to and federal laws evaded in order to sell arms to Iran and free US hostages. But the Pakistan cover-up was maintained. The deception continued.

The obfuscation concealed from the world Pakistan's cold-testing of a nuclear bomb in 1983 and the devastating intelligence that Pakistan had hot-tested as well, in 1984, with the help of China. The Pakistan–China nuclear relationship was also buried by Reagan's officials, including Beijing's gift to Islamabad of bomb blueprints, radioactive isotopes and technical assistance without bounds. In return, US companies won deals worth hundreds of millions of dollars from Chinese nuclear power contractors.

Reagan's presidency came to an end in 1989, with Pakistan in possession of a deployable and tested nuclear device, much of the program even funded using US aid, hundreds of millions of dollars of which had been diverted by the Pakistan military. The Islamic Republic had a nuclear bomb that could be mated to a missile or dropped from American-supplied F-16 fighter jets, also given by Reagan in the mid-1980s, and its nuclear weapons program had become a shop window for the world's most unstable powers.

At first, the George H. W. Bush administration continued the deception. Pentagon officials became Pakistan's guardians, rewriting intelligence estimates to downgrade the Islamic Republic's nuclear capabilities even while Islamabad and New Delhi were within a hair's breadth of a nuclear showdown. However, when the war in Afghanistan ended, Bush cut Pakistan adrift, terminating aid in 1990, marking the last significant contact between the US and a nuclear-ready Pakistan until cruise missile

slammed into Osama bin Laden's training camps in Afghanistan in 1998. No one was looking at the Islamic Republic, even as intelligence began backing up in Europe, India and Israel to show that its military nuclear network had reacted to the aid cut-off by escalating the black-market deals in nuclear technology, eyeing markets hostile to the West.

By the time President Bill Clinton took office in 1993, and throughout his two terms, an ever more detailed picture was pieced together of Pakistan's dangerous liaisons: Iran in 1987, Iraq in 1990, North Korea in 1993, and by 1997 Libya, too. And in 1998 the septic nuclear crisis in South Asia burst open with India and Pakistan both testing their nuclear bombs and facing each other down in a knife-edge—and now fissile—confrontation.

The following year, Pakistan once again succumbed to a military coup as General Pervez Musharraf took control. By then, A. Q. Khan was firmly fixed in the collective imagination of his country as the reason for their nuclear prowess, his likeness cut out of cardboard and molded from papiermâché strapped to telegraph poles and mounted on roofs throughout Pakistan. In a country where there were few role models who strode the international stage (apart from cricketers), Khan was, as a friend observed, "one of the few extremely valuable Pakistanis." Period.

Things would get worse. By the time George W. Bush secured the presidency in 2001, a mountain of incredibly precise intelligence portrayed Pakistan as the epicenter of global instability: a host and patron for Islamist terrorism, ruled by a military clique that was raising capital and political influence by selling weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

Something had to be done and initially it looked as if President Bush might be the man to take the initiative. Shortly before 11 September 2001, CIA director George Tenet gathered a small team of senior officials, with secretary of state Colin Powell, his deputy Richard Armitage, deputy national security adviser Stephen Hadley, deputy CIA director John McLaughlin and Robert Joseph, non-proliferation director at the National Security Council, for a crisis summit.

Even the hawks appeared ready for a change of policy on Pakistan. During Paul Wolfowitz's nomination hearing as deputy secretary of defense, in February 2001, he reflected on the way in which the George H. W. Bush administration had dealt with Pakistan, at a time when he had served in the Pentagon. Wolfowitz conceded: "People thought we could somehow construct a policy on a house of cards. That the Congress wouldn't know what the Pakistanis were doing. I've always thought that policies based on withholding information from Congress are going to fail in the long run. And that there was a clear legal obligation to keep Congress informed."

However, in the days and months that followed September 11, Wolfowitz and others set about building a new house of cards. Pakistan's President Musharraf pledged to round up al-Qaeda and to assist in mopping up the Taliban, giving up their leaders and busting their sanctuaries in the inhospitable border region with Afghanistan. Musharraf became integral to American plans, lending the Pentagon airspace, passing intelligence and mounting operations in regions where no Western soldier could ever hope to go. The Bush administration weighed his value as a potential ally against the harm Pakistan's nuclear program could do, just as Carter and Reagan had done before. Despite overwhelming evidence of a building nuclear crisis, in which a state leaking nuclear technology was also concealing terrorists who were seeking it, the White House decided to do nothing.

More critically, a new narrative was emerging in Washington about WMD, steered by neoconservatives including Wolfowitz, Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld. Since 1998 they had highlighted Iraq, Iran and North Korea as the countries that the US should gun for. Now they lobbied Bush to accede to the first of these, prioritizing "unfinished business" in Iraq. The first Gulf War had failed to follow through and eliminate Saddam Hussein, a leader they portrayed as a rogue

proliferator, a state sponsor of terror and, even more bizarrely, as the secular patron of the pious al-Qaeda. For the neoconservatives, Iraq was the next logical step in the war on terror. Pakistan could not be allowed to eclipse this script.

American troops mustered in the Gulf. Colin Powell raised a vial of white powder before the United Nations Security Council, warning of the dangers of overlooking WMD that were concealed in Iraq, while the US sat on intelligence that characterized Pakistan as the most dangerous proliferator. A kind of institutional blindness came upon the White House which prevented anything other than the neoconservative agenda being seen clearly. By 1 May 2003 it was “mission accomplished” in Iraq, and investigators from the newly formed Iraq Survey Group, led by David Kay, set off looking for WMD there. However, the intelligence amassing at the IAEA showed that Pakistan was still the source of it all, as the US had known all along. The IAEA protested, as did Israel, frightened by the prospect of an Islamic bomb up for sale. But Bush continued to stand beside Musharraf, describing him as a good friend, pushing through a \$3 billion military and economic assistance package, while the White House began refashioning the Pakistan military’s proliferation into an act by a small group of renegade scientists.

In October 2003, Richard Armitage flew to Islamabad to meet Musharraf. The White House agenda was to keep the general onside. A drama was conceived that drew from Musharraf a promise to shut down Pakistan’s nuclear black market in return for winning US support for his unelected regime. It was agreed that A. Q. Khan would be arrested, along with a dozen of his fellow scientists, but Pakistan would keep hold of them, allowing the West to pose limitless questions via ISI interrogators but leaving the country’s military elite in the clear.

In January 2004, David Kay resigned, telling Congress that there had been no WMD stockpiled in Iraq, and one week later A. Q. Khan was paraded on Pakistan TV. The Islamic Republic was not a proliferator. The coalition in the war on terror was intact and Bush’s neoconservative team moved on to the next item on the agenda: war against another nuclear rebel, Iran. However, South Asian experts warned the White House that Pakistan remained the major problem and that something had to be done. Teresita Schaffer, a former US assistant secretary of state for South Asia, the pre-eminent expert on the region, warned: “Without a sustained US effort, we are likely to face a much darker future. The troubles that afflict today’s Pakistan are likely to intensify. The government is likely to continue its contradictory policies towards Islamic militancy and the army will strengthen its links with the extremists and the militant movement. The risk of nuclear leakage could recur.”

The Bush administration still did nothing, however much Schaffer was proved right. As White House calls for regime change in Iran rose to a clamor in 2006, Pakistan’s President Musharraf turned off the intelligence tap, shutting down all investigations into Khan. Then Musharraf’s contribution to the war on terror began to fall apart at the seams. Militants arrested in the post-9/11 heat were released and allowed to re-form their jihadi groups under new names. A neo-Taliban flourished in Pakistan’s tribal border areas, from where they struck fatally at Afghan, British and American forces. Most worrying, al-Qaeda began merging with Pakistan’s home-grown terrorists, spawning new camps, new graduates and new missions abroad. By 2007, Pakistan’s nuclear sales network was flourishing again. The Islamic Republic had learned to manufacture the restricted components and materials, electronic equipment and super-strong metals needed for a ready-made nuclear weapons facility which they were selling to anyone who could come up with the cash. Pakistan’s arsenal, developed at Washington’s grace and favor, was sliding out of control as terrorists gained new footholds in Islamabad.

How long would it be before the rising tide of extremism in Pakistan and the fast-flowing current of

illegal nuclear exports would find common cause and realize an apocalyptic intent? Islamabad harbored a regime that had no hard and fast rules, no unambiguous goals or laws, and no line that could not be bent or reshaped. There were plenty of ideologues and Islamic strategists with Armageddon on their minds, like Suleiman Abu Gheith, a spokesman for Osama bin Laden, who declared on a website affiliated to al-Qaeda: “We have the right to kill four million Americans—two million of them children. And to exile twice as many and wound and cripple hundreds of thousands.”

Today, as the world battles to deal with a new generation of global terrorism, the quagmire in Iraq, a showdown with Iran and a stand-off with North Korea, *Deception* reveals how all of these nuclear-tinged crises emanated from the mismanagement of one wellspring: Pakistan.

But at a time when action is called for, the world is impotent. The gravest consequence of the Pakistan deception was that in the name of political pragmatism the whole architecture of non-proliferation, the robust scaffolding that was erected in the 1950s by President Dwight D. Eisenhower to prevent nuclear secrets from getting into the wrong hands, has been brought crashing down.

And it all began with an ambitious young man who could not get a job.

THE ANGRY YOUNG MAN

The letter came from a private address: 71 Amstelle Street, Zwanenburg, a not-so-smart suburb of Amsterdam, blighted by the constant drone of aircraft hovering over the nearby Schiphol airport. By the time it arrived at the prime minister's secretariat in Pakistan, in July 1974, it had, according to the cabinet minister who saw it first, been creased and burnished by scores of inquisitive fingertips, having been forwarded via the Islamic Republic's embassy in Brussels, vetted by spies from the ISI and scrutinized by the prime minister's security staff.¹

Initially, aides thought twice about showing it to Pakistan's prime minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. The correspondent, Abdul Qadeer Khan, began by ranting about his failure to secure a job in Pakistan, a familiar refrain from those who were wealthy enough to study abroad and found nothing to do on their return. However, on closer reading this letter had a promising ring to it. Khan claimed to be a physicist who was working for a European nuclear consortium. He had managed to get close to highly classified blueprints concerning a revolutionary new process. It provided a key to unpicking a conundrum upon which Pakistan had foundered for many years: how to build a nuclear bomb.

The letter could not have arrived at a more urgent time. Two months earlier, on 18 May 1974, India had conducted an unauthorized nuclear test deep below the western deserts of Rajasthan.² It had done so by betraying the trust of its sponsors in the West and the East. New Delhi had secretly designed and armed its bomb using technologies sold it by the world's established nuclear powers (the United States, United Kingdom, France, China and the Soviet Union) on condition that this knowledge was shared only to meet India's energy needs.

Pakistan felt as if it been duped, as well as eclipsed, outwitted and shamed, by an action that seemed to prime minister Bhutto to confirm India's claim to regional supremacy. Islamabad had to reply. But the science was far beyond Pakistan's capabilities and the trade in the components required to put a nuclear program together would now be policed with extra vigilance by the four nuclear states that were signatories to the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (the US, UK, France and the USSR), which forbade the sale of nuclear weapons technology. Anticipating a nuclear arms race in South Asia, the United Nations' nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), based in Vienna, would redouble its efforts, making Pakistan's task that much harder.

Having second thoughts, Bhutto sought a diplomatic solution, sending Sahabzada Yaqub Khan, Pakistan's ambassador in Washington, to lobby for a nuclear umbrella—reassurances from the US that it would act as Pakistan's security guarantor against attack.³ But Bhutto did not hold out much hope. In the 1960s Pakistan had regarded itself as Washington's "most allied ally" as a result of a trick of geography.⁴ It had forged numerous military pacts with a US that feared Soviet expansion in the Middle East and Asia. Those deals had enabled the Islamic Republic to develop its armed forces and maintain its ongoing conflict with India. However, in recent years the US–Pakistan relationship had become strained. Washington had grown to doubt Islamabad's sincerity. A classified memo written for the director of the CIA had catalogued a list of complaints. "Over the past several years the government of Pakistan has taken a long series of actions that have been counter to US interest," it bemoaned.⁵ Islamabad had failed to honor America's request to send troops into Laos in 1962 and also had declined to "give good publicity to US military exercises" in 1963. The US also suspected

Pakistan of making “secret understandings” with the Chinese premier, Chou En-lai, in 1963 and 1964

As predicted, secretary of state Henry Kissinger was cold to Bhutto’s request. Kissinger argued that if the US gathered up Pakistan in its nuclear folds, it would have had to do the same for other countries in the region, some of whom were far less desirable allies, such as North Korea. Kissinger told Yaqub Khan that India’s bomb test was “a fait accompli and that Pakistan would have to learn to live with it.” Yaqub Khan came away empty-handed. Bhutto was embittered.

*

It had been only three years before that Pakistan had lost a disastrous war with India, the latest episode in a long-running and bloody feud between the two countries which had begun in 1947 when the Indian subcontinent was partitioned after almost a century of British colonial rule. One country sliced in two: the divvying up of everything from its territory and citizens to its armed forces and munitions supplies. Almost as soon as it came into being as a fully fledged country, Pakistan felt that it was the loser in the deal.

At partition, millions of Muslims had fled their ancestral homes in the central plains and former princely Muslim states of India as stories spread of a nation being formed that would welcome only Hindus. Families were torn apart, villages destroyed and hundreds of thousands were massacred as Hindu turned against Muslim and vice versa, former neighbors and friends killing and mutilating one another, sending hundreds of trains speeding east and west carrying a tide of people to an uncertain future in a new Islamic Republic which was to be formed of two halves: West Pakistan, the land mass west of India that is the Pakistan of today, and East Pakistan, the region east of India that is now Bangladesh. Within a year, Pakistan had lost its founding father, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, to lung cancer, and the country was thrown into political chaos as incompetent and corrupt politicians bent on retribution against India took hold. In its hurry to leave the subcontinent, Britain had left such messy and indeterminate border lines that the two new countries had begun to fight over territory even before the last colonial lieutenant had pulled out. Most contested were East Pakistan (where a sizable proportion wanted independence) and the Himalayan state of Jammu and Kashmir, whose Hindu ruler sided with India against the wishes of his Muslim subjects. India and Pakistan would fight many times over these disputed territories, the most serious conflagration being the war of December 1971, when Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi ordered an assault on East Pakistan which ended after barely two weeks with the Pakistan army forced to offer a humiliating surrender at Dacca racecourse.⁷

Pakistan was not even a quarter of a century old and it had already been wrenched in two. With India’s support East Pakistan became Bangladesh, and the Islamic Republic reached its nadir, something that it partly blamed on the US, which had refused to come to its assistance despite urgent requests. The US had imposed sanctions on Pakistan in 1965 after it had used American-supplied weapons against India in a war over the disputed territory of Kashmir.⁸ The Islamic Republic would have to rely on its own ingenuity to maintain a credible defense, concluded Bhutto, who had come to power in January 1972 as a result of the East Pakistan debacle. When the US rejected Pakistan for a second time, refusing to take on India over its nuclear test of 1974, Bhutto determined to seek out new strategic relationships beyond the US and to develop Pakistan’s own nuclear weapon in order to “save the nation.”⁹

Time and time again, Islamabad would wield Kissinger’s rejection as a justification for pressing ahead with its nuclear program. Agha Shahi, who in 1974 was Bhutto’s foreign secretary, recalled: “If negotiations had gone better and the US had come to Pakistan’s aid, you would never have heard of A

Q. Khan.” In the gloom of his careworn, modernist villa in Islamabad, in April 2006 the veteran diplomat, who had been involved in Pakistan’s secret nuclear weapons program from its inception, felt the need to “give an invaluable lesson.” It would be Shahi’s last tutorial, for the eighty-six-year-old died that August. He said: “Instead of aiding Pakistan, no sanctions were imposed on India or the countries that had sold the technology to build the bomb: the US, Canada and France.”¹⁰ They continued to help New Delhi with its supposedly peaceful nuclear plans: Canada and France supplying power reactors and reprocessing facilities, while the US continued to sell fuel for India’s power plants. Shahi said: “I suggested that Pakistan should exploit this logic and strive for a bomb with the reasonable expectation of having no sanctions imposed either.” In private, Kissinger was aware of how hollow the US position had been, telling an aide: “It is a little rough on the Pakistanis to require them to do what the Indians don’t have to do.”¹¹

Shahi recalled how Bhutto struck back: “After the Indian tests he called in the scientists and asked for their honest opinions. Could they build a bomb? ‘Yes,’ they said. ‘We are trying to develop the thing, the bomb.’ However, it was taking an age and costing a fortune.”

German physicist Otto Hahn had discovered in 1938 that by splitting atoms of plutonium or uranium in a chain reaction, known as fission, a vast amount of energy could be released in a very short space of time. If harnessed to a weapon, that energy could be used to produce a nuclear explosion so much more powerful than the largest conventional explosives that a single device could knock out an entire city. Fearing that Germany or Japan might do just this, during the Second World War America had made a massive effort to get there first, in a program led by Robert Oppenheimer at the secret Los Alamos laboratory in New Mexico. Oppenheimer’s clandestine Manhattan Project succeeded on 16 July 1945 when the US test-fired the world’s first nuclear device in the New Mexico desert. Less than three weeks later, America dropped two nuclear weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing 250,000 people. The bombings signalled the end of the war but started an arms race which was quickly joined by the Soviet Union (which tested its first device in September 1949), the UK (October 1952), France (October 1960) and China (October 1964).¹² Others pursued nuclear weapons programs too, but failed to declare them, including Israel, South Africa, Argentina and Brazil. After India joined the nuclear club in 1974, Pakistan set out to get hold of enough fissionable material to support a self-sustaining chain reaction, something known as critical mass.

However, the Islamic Republic’s nuclear program was ramshackle. The country had a nuclear reactor, known as the Karachi Nuclear Power Plant (KANUPP), supplied by Canada in a deal negotiated in 1965 by Bhutto when he was foreign minister.¹³ KANUPP had fired up on 1 August 1972 and was an ideal facility to exploit for a weapons program. It produced in its used, or irradiated, fuel rods large quantities of plutonium-239, the material that Hahn had used in his early experiments and that the US had used to fuel the Fat Man bomb it dropped on Nagasaki. However, in order to use this plutonium in a bomb Pakistan needed a reprocessing plant to extract it from the rods, something that only a declared nuclear power could supply. So far, only France had offered to do so, for \$300 million. The cost was prohibitive and complaints from the other nuclear powers had caused the deal to stall. Then the fortuitous letter arrived from an irate young Pakistani scientist who was confident he could win access to a completely different route, using uranium enriched by a groundbreaking new centrifugal process being pioneered in Europe.

Pakistan’s information minister, Kauser Niazi, was with Bhutto when he read the letter and said the contents “electrified the thinking of the Prime Minister.”¹⁴ Foreign secretary Agha Shahi, who was

also called in to see it, remembered: “Bhutto said to me, ‘There’s a man called Abdul Qadeer Khan who claims that centrifuges are being used in Europe to produce fissile material.’ I told him that all I knew about centrifuges was what I had heard from a stockbroker who I’d sat next to at a dinner party several years earlier in New York. He told me that Americans used them to separate cream in a dairy. I was skeptical but advised Bhutto, ‘Give [A. Q. Khan] a chance.’ We had nothing to lose.”

Information minister Niazi recalled that Khan was keen to offer his services as he had been rejected by other sections of the Pakistani establishment. Khan had written that “a man of his special talents was being ignored.” Having been awarded a doctorate in metallurgy (then a rare qualification for a student from Pakistan), he had applied for a job at the People’s Steel Mill in Karachi, the first such plant in the country, only to be ignored. Niazi wrote: “This patriot Pakistani also informed [Bhutto] that apart from writing innumerable research papers, he had written an internationally known book. In spite of all of this, the incompetent officials of the People’s Steel Mill were unable to make use of his services.”

Niazi took charge of Khan’s case. “We immediately put the secret services on the job.” The ISI reported back.¹⁵ Whether he had got there by determination or chance, Khan had won unique access to information on enriched uranium, the fissile material that the US had used in the Little Boy bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945. Khan was worth a punt, the ISI said. They should take a long, hard look at him.

Khan’s proposal revolved around the heaviest element on earth, almost twice as heavy as lead. Uranium had been discovered in 1789 by German chemist H. M. Klaproth and was an alternative fissile material to plutonium.¹⁶ “Uranium is more difficult but safe. Very few countries have this technology,” Khan had written to Bhutto.¹⁷ Because it was so heavy and dense, only a small amount—about the size of a bag of sugar—was needed to fuel a nuclear bomb. The problem was that although uranium was widely available, mined in Australia, Canada, Niger, Russia, South Africa and the US, in its natural state its potency was so low that it was virtually useless. To convert it into fissile material involved a complicated and experimental process. Raw uranium ore had to be crushed, mixed with water and put through a chemical process to purify it into uranium oxide, a substance better known as yellowcake because of its distinct, vivid hue and claggy texture. But for every 1,000 atoms of yellowcake, only seven would be uranium-235, the fissionable isotope needed to arm an atomic bomb, the remaining 993 being uranium-238, a heavier and superfluous element. For weapons use, the concentration of uranium-235 had to be enhanced from 0.07 percent to in excess of 93 percent, in a complex and inordinately expensive process called enrichment, which most countries were still struggling to master.

Khan told Bhutto that in the early 1950s the British, German and Dutch governments had come together to establish the URENCO consortium, which had opened three test laboratories to develop a method of enriching uranium that was cheap and simple enough to warrant a commercial plant. This would enable Europe’s nuclear power industry to become independent of the US, which was one of the few countries to have mastered enrichment, giving it a monopoly over supplies. Scientists at three URENCO labs—Capenhurst in Cheshire, Almelo in eastern Holland and Gronau in West Germany—were experimenting with something called vertical separation, using centrifugal force to split apart the atoms of uranium-235 from uranium-238. To do this they had constructed large centrifuge machines, six-foot-tall aluminum tubes resembling giant upturned cigar cases. Into them was injected a gas refined from yellowcake called uranium hexafluoride (UF₆), which was then spun by rotors fast enough to separate its isotopes. The heavier uranium-238 was thrown outwards and slid down the side of the centrifuge’s drum to the waste pipe below, while the lighter and fissionable uranium-235

concentrated at the central axis to be sucked out through an exit pipe. The machines had to spin at an incredible 70,000 rpm and, as the scientists learned to their cost, a single fingerprint on any of the components could introduce an imperfection that would throw the entire process out of kilter, shattering the centrifuge and everything around it.¹⁸

Khan's linguistic ability—he spoke English, Dutch and German—as well as his technical background—his degree and doctorate in metallurgy—had led to him being employed as a technical translator for the multinational URENCO consortium, a job that had brought him into close proximity to research for the Dutch prototype, known as the CNOR.¹⁹ Bhutto wrote in the margin of Khan's letter: "He seems to be talking sense."²⁰ The prime minister's mood lifted. He now toyed with the idea of transforming the Pakistani correspondent from Holland into a super-spy.

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the British-educated son of a key aide to Muhammad Ali Jinnah, had harbored a conviction that Pakistan had to go nuclear since October 1958. That year Bhutto had become minister for fuel, electricity and natural resources, and was surprised to learn that Pakistan, just over a decade old, already had a civil nuclear program.²¹ It had come into being in 1956 as a result of a US-sponsored program, Atoms for Peace, in which countries that already had the bomb agreed to contribute some of their nuclear knowledge to the developing world. It was the brainchild of US president Dwight D. Eisenhower, whose intent was to head off an arms race by offering nuclear energy in exchange for a commitment not to pursue the bomb.²²

Pakistan's nuclear project consisted of the grand-sounding Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission (PAEC) and was run by Dr. Nazir Ahmed, a scientist who had previously worked in the country's cotton industry. However, it took Bhutto some time to locate Ahmed, whose operation was in reality nothing more than a small office on the top floor of the main post office in downtown Karachi. By 1958, the only thing PAEC had achieved was to open a high-energy physics lab at Karachi's West Wharf, where ten scientists conducted random experiments the purpose and results of which remained obscure. It was "no more than a signboard on an office. It was only a name," Bhutto moaned.²³

He began transforming PAEC, "with granite determination," sending hundreds of Pakistani scientists to the US for training under an Atoms for Peace exchange.²⁴ He also brought into the program Dr. Ishrat Usmani, an atomic physicist who, together with Bhutto, set out to buy all that America had to offer, using US aid money to fund the purchases—a plan that would be mirrored many times over in the years to come.

By 1961, PAEC had a nuclear research center, in Lahore. Two years later it assembled a 5 MW research reactor at Nilore, near Islamabad. After India and Pakistan went to war over Kashmir in 1965, Bhutto had railed: "If India builds the bomb, we will eat grass or leaves, even go hungry, but we will get one of our own. We have no alternative ... atom bomb for atom bomb." Four years later he predicted the conflagration to come: "All wars of our age have become total wars ... it would be dangerous to plan for less and our plans should, therefore, include the nuclear deterrent."²⁵

On 20 January 1972, several weeks after Pakistan's humiliating defeat at the hands of the Indian army in Dacca, Bhutto called together his most eminent scientists. They convened in Multan, a city of shrines and saints in the southern Punjab, and sat shaded from the winter sun by a *shamiana*, a multicolored canvas awning, in the gardens of the home of Nawab Sadiq Hussain Qureshi, a wealthy landowner close to Bhutto.²⁶ Agha Shahi, who was then Pakistan's ambassador to China, recalled: "The meeting was shrouded in secrecy. Of course it was. Which country ever carried out a nuclear weapons program publicly? And yet in the future we would be accused of sneaking around by

countries that had done just the same a few decades earlier.”

One of those invited to attend was Samar Mubarakmand, a junior scientist who would go on to play a crucial role in Pakistan’s nuclear test twenty-six years later. He remembered being held rapt by the prime minister, who vowed to restore Pakistan’s pride.²⁷ Bhutto told them that fate had placed him in a position where he could make decisions that would lead the country into the nuclear arms race. “Can you give it to me?” he asked, referring to the bomb. Mubarakmand recalled the shocked silence: “We were absolutely dumbfounded.” According to most estimates Pakistan was at least twenty years behind India, and Dr. Ishrat Usmani, the PAEC chairman, remembered inserting a note of caution: “Pakistan just didn’t have the infrastructure for that kind of program. I’m not talking about the ability to get 10 kg of plutonium. I’m talking about the real infrastructure. Pakistan totally lacked a metallurgy industry. But if you’re playing political poker and have no cards, you have to go on betting.”²⁸

Bhutto scowled, Mubarakmand recalled. He looked to the junior scientists before him for a more positive response. Among them was Munir Ahmed Khan. He had spent five months training at a US lab and had just returned home after several years working for the IAEA in Vienna.²⁹ Munir Khan would soon replace Usmani at the helm of PAEC, bringing a unique perspective from within the global policing regime for Pakistan to exploit. An arch-bureaucrat, Munir Khan’s technical expertise was, however, questionable.

Bhutto repeated his question: “Can you give it to me?” Some of the younger scientists jumped to their feet, tired of the ponderousness of their older colleagues. “Yes, it would be possible,” one of them, Sultan Bashiruddin Mahmood, shouted. He would go on to dedicate his career to working on Pakistan’s nuclear weapons program with a zealotry that would eventually bring him close to Osama bin Laden and into collision with the US.³⁰ Bhutto fired back: “But how long will it take to build a bomb?” When Bashiruddin mumbled, “Maybe five years,” Bhutto thrust three fingers into the air. “Three years,” he said. “I want it in three.”

Others tried to introduce a note of caution. “It isn’t like making firecrackers, you know,” one scientist piped up. “We don’t know how long it will take. It’s all nonsense. It cannot be done that way.” But the younger and more idealistic in the gathering joined in a chorus of “Anybody can make a bomb.” One of those leading the clamor for a nuclear device was Sulfikar Ahmed Butt, who within a few years would become procurement manager in Europe for the as yet unknown A. Q. Khan.³¹ Butt shouted out: “It can be done in three years.”

Bhutto smiled. “Well, much as I admire your enthusiasm, this is a very serious political decision, which Pakistan must make, and perhaps all Third World countries must make one day, because it is coming. So can you do it?” Everybody present agreed to agree that Pakistan could do it, given sufficient resources and facilities. Mubarakmand remembered: “At that conference we really swore to make nuclear weapons. We knew it would be a great odyssey as at the time of partition from India there were hardly any scientists or engineers in our country ... At that time we lived under embargo. No one would give us literature, hardware, components, technology. For everything we had to struggle. We had to work under adverse circumstances and we took it up as a challenge. We thought, ‘OK, you cannot do it for us, we shall show you how to do it.’ ”

Bhutto brought the meeting to a close. Just hours later, he left on a whirlwind tour of Islamic countries that Pakistan intended to ally itself with, including Iran, Saudi Arabia and Libya.³² Bhutto was keen to create some distance from the “super-power *shikaris*” (big-game hunters), as he described Pakistan’s backers in the West.³³ On tour, with his hat out for cash, he landed in Tripoli where he met Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. What struck Bhutto, after all the cold political maneuvering of the

Americans, was the spontaneity of the greeting from the Libyan leader, who planted a kiss on both his cheeks as they stood on the tarmac. Gaddafi promised to give Bhutto whatever he needed to develop the bomb, before Pakistan's prime minister carried on to tour the Middle East, where yet more sponsors were procured. At the end of the trip he called on Chairman Mao in Beijing, whom he had been wooing since the early 1960s. The friendships forged on this tour would be critical in rewriting Pakistan's strategic partnerships, and from these alliances would emerge sponsors in the nuclear weapons field and also, in time, a ready market.³⁴

However, more than two years on, nothing had been achieved on the nuclear front. A team at PAEC had pursued the plutonium route and got nowhere with it, and was still arguing with the international community over terms for the purchase of a French reprocessing plant.³⁵

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In August 1974, Bhutto sent for Abdul Qadeer Khan.³⁶ The message was delivered personally to 71 Amstelle Street, Zwanenburg, by Mr. J. G. Kharas, Pakistan's ambassador to Holland. And while Khan made plans, the ISI dug into his background.³⁷

Khan had been in Europe for thirteen years and apparently missed Pakistan desperately. He was an inveterate letter writer, sending dozens of missives back home, copies of which the ISI collated. He wrote to government officials, former teachers, potential employers and the prime minister's secretariat, repeatedly offering to "gift my services to my country." He missed the convivial dinners, his extended family, the gossip and political small talk into the early hours, the endless circular debates about the "Hindu bastards" over the border who had ransacked their old homes in 1947 and how the new Islamic Republic would one day cast a shadow over India.³⁸ But, the ISI wrote in its notes, there were plenty of Pakistani patriots living around the world. Did this one have anything special to offer the nation?

The trouble with Khan was that he told too many people too many stories that were of dubious provenance. One was of how he was descended from a "General Malik" who commanded the army of Sultan Ghauri, a twelfth-century Afghan king whose army crushed the Hindu forces led by Prithvi Raj Chohan, an illustrious antecedence that was also improbable, the ISI thought.³⁹ The Khan family's supposed regal associations continued up to his own birth, on 27 April 1936, in Bhopal, then a princely Muslim state in British India. His mother was said to have been called to bring her newborn to a fortune-teller, who, as Khan had told anyone who would listen, had advised her: "The child is very lucky. He is going to do very important and useful work for his nation and will earn immense respect."⁴⁰ The ISI suspected that the reality was that as the youngest son of seven children, whose mother and father were in their forties when he arrived, Khan had been mollycoddled and had never grown up.⁴¹

His hatred of India was real enough. After partition on 15 August 1947, Muslims from the Hindu-dominated states surrounding Bhopal began pouring into the city. Khan's two eldest brothers migrated to Karachi that autumn and, after the nawab of Bhopal was forced to abdicate three years later, Khan's third brother and elder sister fled too.⁴² Khan got his chance in August 1952. "After packing a few books and some clothes in a tin trunk, I commenced my journey through Ajmer, Loni, Chittor, Barmeer and finally Mona Bao," Khan wrote.⁴³ The Indian police and railway authorities stole everything from fleeing Muslim passengers, even his pen. "If anybody protested he was kicked and hit with fists and sticks." Later in life, Khan commissioned an oil painting depicting the last train out of India to hang in Pakistan's Senate Hall.⁴⁴

At the border, Khan cut a lonely figure. He recalled: "I crossed this stretch barefoot on the burning

sand with my box on my head and shoes in my hand. When I entered Pakistan I felt like a caged bird just set free.” He was brought back down to reality when he joined his brothers and sister in a cramped apartment in Karachi. But he was determined to work his way up.

Just months after US president Eisenhower made his Atoms for Peace speech to the United Nations, Khan enrolled in a physics course at D. J. Sindh Government Science College.⁴⁵ The nearest thing he had to a hobby was a small black notebook that he kept in his pocket, in which he would inscribe his favorite poems or verses from the Koran.⁴⁶ His only other leisure activity was learning German in preparation for a planned study tour of Europe. But it came to nothing.

The ISI scrutinized Khan’s CV. He said he had obtained a science degree from Karachi University in 1960. Digging deeper, the ISI learned that in this period Khan had in reality held a succession of low-paid jobs. They culminated in a post with the inspector of weights and measures for the Karachi post office in which he was paid so little that he gained a reputation for charging *bakshish* to every minor official.

Finally, in 1961, Khan found something that interested him. He took the train to Lahore and visited a public exhibition about Eisenhower’s Atoms for Peace vision. There, he learned that metallurgy was a crucial aspect of any nuclear program. He liked the sound of the specialism. But since Pakistan had no metallurgy industry, Khan would have to renew his attempts at getting into a European university. He borrowed money from a brother in Karachi for a one-way ticket to Düsseldorf, where a distant cousin lived. Before leaving, Khan consulted a palmist, something he would continue to do throughout his life. “The initial period of your studies will be tough and hard, but ultimately you will be able to fulfil your desire,” he claimed he was told. “You will marry a foreign girl. After completing your education, you will be staying there for some time doing technical work and then you will come back to Pakistan.” Then came the resounding conclusion. “People in Pakistan will have great respect for you. Their hearts will be full of love.”⁴⁷

But Europe’s universities were not so enamored. For months Khan camped on his cousin’s floor as rejection letters arrived in the post. In December 1961 he travelled to Holland, ending up in The Hague, where he paced the streets by day and sat on the floor in his hostel, scribbling postcards home at night. One morning in January 1962, while queueing in a post office his eyes met those of a dowdy young South African girl, Hendrina Donkers. She recalled: “My future husband was enquiring about the charges for sending a postcard to Pakistan, which by chance I knew. He was very homesick and was happy to talk to somebody who knew something about Pakistan.”⁴⁸ Although both her parents were Dutch, Henny was also an outsider, her family having migrated during the Second World War to South Africa, where she was born. Henny had spent most of her childhood in Zambia and had only recently returned to Europe to study psychology. In Khan she saw “another lost soul.” The two promised to exchange letters. “To tell you the truth I never thought that this would lead to anything serious,” she remembered. But a few months later Khan wrote, inviting Henny to Düsseldorf, where he was going out of his mind. “We agreed that we wanted to get to know each other better,” she said, striking the dull tone of caution familiar to all those who came to know her.

In September 1962, Khan finally received an offer, from West Berlin Technische Universität, to attend a series of introductory lectures in metallurgy. Henny agreed to join him. It was a radical move for a twenty-year-old Protestant woman with few life experiences, and even more unorthodox for a Muslim living thousands of miles from home. And yet beyond their divergent cultures and ethnicity they had much in common: a quiet conservatism and a determination to better themselves against everyone’s expectations. “When two people of different cultures are concerned, it requires extra efforts to understand and accept each other,” Henny prosaically explained many years later. “We were

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