

Learning From the A.Q. Khan Affair

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The world's most notorious nuclear proliferator is once again a free man. Worried about what he might reveal in court about Pakistan's complicity and eager to demonstrate its independence from Washington, the fragile government of Prime Minister Asif Ali Zardari allowed the release last month of the country's former nuclear weapons program chief, Abdul Qadeer Khan.

For more than a decade, Khan was the mastermind of a far-flung global black market network that delivered advanced nuclear weapons-related technology to Iran, Libya, North Korea, and perhaps others.

According to the Pakistani Foreign Ministry, "[T]he so-called A.Q. Khan affair is a closed chapter." The full extent of and damage from Khan's dealings, however, are still very much a mystery.

Following Khan's public confession in 2004, Pakistani authorities have shielded him from interrogation by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) or U.S. officials. The conditions for further onward proliferation still exist because Pakistan continues to use the black market to expand its own nuclear weapons capability.

Days after Khan's Feb. 6 release from house arrest, all Deputy Secretary of State Jim Steinberg could do was express "deep concern" to his Pakistani counterparts.

The release of Khan and the tepid U.S. response reinforce the perception, built up over decades of dealings with Pakistan and its rival, India, that U.S. nuclear proliferation concerns will always take a back seat to other geostrategic and economic interests. Even as the new Obama administration seeks further help from Pakistan to deal with al Qaeda and the Taliban, it must do far more to change such perceptions and avoid the mistakes of its predecessors.

Since the 1970s, successive U.S. administrations have passed up opportunities to disrupt Khan's activities and Pakistan's nuclear program. In his capacity as an engineer with the European uranium-enrichment consortium, Khan had access to advanced centrifuge designs and contacts with key suppliers. Unfortunately, Western intelligence agencies failed to act on early clues that Khan was preparing to take his knowledge back to Pakistan to aid its nascent bomb program.

By 1975, Pakistan began to purchase uranium-enrichment components from European suppliers, and four years later, it was apparent to U.S. intelligence that Pakistan was building a large-scale enrichment plant at Kahuta. The United States responded with nonproliferation sanctions, but months later, the Soviets invaded Afghanistan. Consequently, Washington's proliferation worries were swept under the rug to win Islamabad's support for the anti-communist counterinsurgency.

By the mid-1980s, it was clear that Pakistan had crossed the nuclear weapons threshold. Yet, not until 1990, after the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan, did President George H.W. Bush officially determine that Pakistan possessed a nuclear device, which triggered wide-ranging sanctions.

Meanwhile, Khan traveled widely, developing Pakistan's nuclear weapons supply network. Numerous accounts suggest that the U.S. and Dutch governments could have detained him but did not. Instead they sought to monitor his activities and avoid revealing the role of European companies in the

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Pakistani bomb effort.

Following the tit-for-tat Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests of 1998, U.S. sanctions were tightened further, and Washington pressed the South Asian rivals to exercise nuclear restraint. By this time, Khan had passed nuclear secrets to Iran, North Korea, and others. U.S. officials were worried about his contacts but failed to take decisive action.

After the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, Washington once again began to funnel billions of dollars in military aid to Islamabad, including nuclear capable F-16 fighter bombers, with the goal of maintaining cooperation in the U.S. war against al Qaeda and the Taliban.

The George W. Bush administration compounded the damage in 2005 by proposing to exempt India from key U.S. and international nuclear trade restrictions. The arrangement, which will indirectly increase India's fissile material production potential, has already spurred Pakistan to accelerate its bomb production capacity.

Now, President Barack Obama and other world leaders must pursue policies that maintain Pakistan's support for anti-terrorism efforts without sacrificing the struggle to stop the spread of the world's most dangerous weapons and slow the ongoing nuclear buildup in one of the world most dangerous regions.

To start, U.S. aid should focus on Pakistan's economic and political development, and further military assistance should be conditioned on Islamabad's support for nuclear restraint. At a minimum, U.S. officials must leverage its aid to win full Pakistani cooperation in the IAEA investigation of the Khan network and certify that Pakistan has finally ended all black market nuclear activity.

Washington must also renew regional diplomacy aimed at persuading India and Pakistan to put the brakes on their nuclear arms race. A good starting point would be to call on Pakistan, along with India, China, and other states with unsafeguarded plutonium-separation plants, to suspend plutonium production for weapons pending the conclusion of a global, verifiable fissile material production ban.

Such a course may be tough for the Obama team to implement, but failure to do so risks even more severe nuclear proliferation consequences in the years ahead.

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