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## Choosing among Bad Options: The Pakistani “Loose Nukes” Conundrum

By Thomas Donnelly

*“The prospect that a nuclear-capable state may lose control of some of its weapons to terrorists is one of the greatest dangers the United States and its allies face,” warns the Quadrennial Defense Review report. The report states that at its core, the problem is one of “internal instability.” While this sort of language might seem vague and euphemistic, Pentagon planners have a very specific place in mind: Pakistan. Our most strategically immediate proliferation problems are posed by North Korea and Iran, two states that are obviously hostile to the United States. But a more important problem may be that of Pakistan, a crucial ally in the global war on terror and the broader war for the future of the Islamic world. The situation in Pakistan makes any possible military action to deal with future problems associated with its nuclear weapons extremely difficult. It would be hard to know in advance whether American intervention in a Pakistani crisis—whether related to nuclear weapons, materials, or facilities—would make things better or make them worse.*

An unstable nuclear state poses a novel conundrum for American strategists. Through five decades of the Cold War, we thought we knew how to deter the massive nuclear force of the Soviet Union, yet the unanticipated collapse of the Soviet empire and the resulting nuclear instability suggests that the principles of deterrence may have rested on a weaker foundation than we understood at the time. The Soviets appeared to be the model of implacable, unchangeable stability, and we appeared to them to be “rational actors,” predictable and open to carrot-and-stick diplomacy, even if their assessment of carrots and sticks might have been different than ours.

Despite a high degree of rhetorical hand-wringing by both the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations and by other nations, a barely diminished belief in the efficacy of deterrence remains at the core of the proliferation and broader strategy for North Korea and Iran.

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The U.S. and the international approach in both cases is basically a recycling of Cold War containment, if only because no one can think of a better option. Even though the leaders in Pyongyang and Tehran seem the embodiment of irrational, even megalomaniacal, autocrats, we act as though we can do business with them if we are properly cautious. We pretend not to notice the odd behavior of Kim Jong Il, whose eccentricity was encapsulated by *The Economist*'s cover portrait with the caption, “Greetings, Earthlings,” or even Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmedinejad's apocalyptic pronouncements to incinerate Israel or to bring death to the “Great Satan” America. We take their hostility for granted but retain our belief in their rationality as international actors.

Only in the case of Pakistan—an important if uncertain ally—and the remnants of the former Soviet Union do the prospects for dealing with nuclear instability and unpredictability appear to have raised the adamant brows of American strategists. The primary approach with regard to

Russia has been a kind of renewed arms control that is reflected in the 1991 Nunn-Lugar Nuclear Threat Reduction Act. And only in the post-9/11 world have the dangers of “loose nukes”—exemplified by Pakistan’s backing of the Taliban in Afghanistan, its nuclear brinksmanship with India, and the used-car-salesman proliferation practices of Abdul Qadeer Khan—really begun to take root in the imagination. Indeed, we are coming very late to thinking about a military option for this very perplexing problem.

## A Nuclear Nightmare

Pakistan was born in instability when it was created in 1947 by the partition of Britain’s Indian Empire. The original conception, in the words of Stephen Cohen of the Brookings Institution, was to create Pakistan to be a “homeland for Indian Muslims and an ideological and political leader of the Islamic world.”<sup>1</sup> Simmering tensions and the underlying difficulties of creating a pan-Islamic movement led to East Pakistan’s declaration of independence, civil war, and the establishment of Bangladesh. Today, Pakistani strategists and political elites fear they may become a West Bangladesh without military power while subordinated to India. The result has been what Cohen calls a strategic “adventurism” in terms of Pakistan’s ambitions in Kashmir and Afghanistan. But his term should be applied equally to Pakistan’s nuclear program and to its relations with China, its ambiguous stance vis-à-vis the Taliban, al Qaeda, various “associated movements” internationally, and its own homegrown radicals.

Today Pakistan retains a political culture marked by deep insecurity and uncertainty about the idea of Pakistani nationhood. This is exacerbated by the army’s dominance of the state. Civil society has been unable to soothe Pakistan’s fears. Even those accustomed to Pakistan’s “normal” instability, like Stephen Cohen, cannot be sure the army will continue to balance competing demands in the face of rising Islamic populism and Baluchi separatism. The more Pakistan acts as though it were cornered, the more cornered it becomes. The more tightly the army grips the reins of power, the more likely the bridle will break. It is hard to escape the conclusion that Pakistan began as and remains a profoundly unsettled and unsettling political phenomenon, both internally and internationally.

The marriage of seemingly incorrigible instability and nuclear weapons is a frightening prospect, as

the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) report noted:

Several other [weapons of mass destruction]-armed states [beyond Iran], although not necessarily hostile to the United States, could face the possibility of internal instability and loss of control over their weapons. The lack of effective governance in many parts of the world contributes to the WMD dangers, providing opportunities for terrorist organizations to acquire or harbor WMD. The prospect that a nuclear-capable state may lose control of some of its weapons to terrorists is one of the greatest dangers the United States and its allies face.<sup>2</sup>

The report goes on to observe that collecting reliable intelligence on such programs and activities is a challenge. Nuclear weapons research efforts are easy to conceal and difficult to detect and track; the QDR study forecasts “further intelligence gaps and surprises.” Despite such difficulties, the United States must be prepared to “act in cases where a state that possesses WMD loses control of its weapons, especially nuclear devices.”<sup>3</sup> If this is an injunction to act should Islamabad lose control of its nuclear weapons—or its nuclear materials or nuclear expertise—it is asking an awful lot, not just in a military, operational sense, but in a strategic and geopolitical sense.

Consider, to begin, the extent to which Pakistan’s nuclear program has progressed. The effort began in 1972, but it truly leapt forward in 1975 with the arrival of A. Q. Khan, a German-trained metallurgist who had worked at the URENCO uranium enrichment plant in Holland and had great experience with gas centrifuges. It seems clear in retrospect that he also had extensive experience with espionage, for not only did he supervise the construction of the Kahuta weapons facility—formally, the Khan Research Laboratories—which produces highly enriched uranium and ballistic missiles, but he also enhanced Pakistan’s standing in the clandestine networks of proliferation.

Kahuta is a massive complex east of Islamabad, with dozens of buildings reportedly housing 3,000 centrifuges. It is said to produce enough material to make three to six warheads per year. While estimates vary, Pakistan’s total inventory of highly enriched uranium is something on the order of 1,000 kilograms, enough material for approximately sixty fission devices. In addition, during

the 1990s, Pakistan began construction of a research reactor at Khushab that was capable of producing plutonium and perhaps tritium—key ingredients in the production of smaller nuclear devices. Overall, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace has estimated that Pakistan’s nuclear weapons, nuclear testing, and civilian nuclear and related facilities extend to nearly two dozen sites clustered in the Punjab and centered in Islamabad. These sites may also be as far away as Karachi, where the Canadian-supplied KANUPP reactor provides power to the city.

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All in all, Pakistan maintains a relatively small amount of nuclear material, which it guards closely; under U.S. pressure, formal command and control mechanisms have been improved. Still, the possibilities of an “insider job” from those in the Pakistani nuclear establishment with radical Islamic sympathies can no longer be dismissed out of hand. For that, thank A. Q. Khan.

This is not the place to rehearse the entire story of Khan’s proliferation activities. Experts differ as to how complicit the Pakistani military may have been in the creation and running of the networks that included North Korea, Libya, and Iran, but in many ways the more disturbing interpretation would be that Khan operated without the army’s knowledge. The civilian prime ministers of the era, Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, were both extraordinarily weak, though in different ways. Although Khan’s nuclear programs were nominally under civilian control, Khan enjoyed a large degree of autonomy during times of military rule.

While Khan’s clients and potential clients were states—possibly including the Taliban’s Afghanistan<sup>4</sup>—the nature of his networks and motivations remains as opaque as Pakistan itself. Khan had an undeniable profit motive, but there was more: he was “also motivated by pan-Islamism and hostility to Western

controls on nuclear technology.”<sup>5</sup> These two traits—pan-Islamism and resentment of Western constraints on Pakistani strength—are part of what make Khan a figure of Pakistani pride.

## What Could Go Wrong: One Scenario

To examine the strategic, operational, and tactical issues embedded in the QDR’s rhetoric about securing other nations’ nuclear materials, one must simply manufacture a scenario and hope that it contains some illustrative value. I intend to discuss a situation in which the facility at Kahuta is penetrated and partially seized by a relatively small force of insurgents, in concert with some radicalized elements of the Pakistani army and nuclear bureaucracy. I will further suppose that while the larger part of this force seizes and defends part of the installation, one or more smaller detachments may have made off with materials in order to produce a “dirty bomb”—a simpler device more in keeping with the immediate capabilities of al Qaeda and its affiliates. Thus the military task for U.S. and allied Pakistani forces is to reclaim the facility, to render it safe, and to recover whatever has been pirated away. I do not intend to discuss a “phase IV,” post-combat environment, but any serious planning would have to do so. The “operation” I am about to describe will be a watershed event in Pakistani politics, in the politics of the region, and for the United States. Even so, a tactical success could still create larger strategic problems.

To repeat: this is a very arbitrary scenario, at once as realistic as any other and at the same time fantastical. Some Pentagon analyses—which seem to be driven more by operational than strategic considerations—posit a larger breakdown of the Pakistani state. I cannot judge the relative plausibility of any particular scenario, but intervening in what would amount to a civil war in Pakistan is enough to set the strongest heart aflutter. And, whatever set of circumstances one might imagine, many of the strategic, operational, and tactical issues would remain constant from scenario to scenario.

## Strategic Issues

While the periodic assassination attempts on Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf have spurred U.S. military planners to begin to work through the operational issues associated with a potential loss of control of nuclear weapons, facilities, materials, and expertise, any U.S.

action remains, as the *New York Times* reported, “an extremely difficult and highly risky venture.”<sup>6</sup> When former CIA director George Tenet and former deputy secretary of state Richard Armitage visited Islamabad prior to the invasion of Afghanistan, an important secondary issue was the safety of Pakistan’s nuclear program.

Any operational assessment—even one as brief as the one to follow—must make some strategic assumptions. Although an India-Pakistan exchange occupied many analysts’ minds in the 1990s, clearly the sort of scenario envisioned by the Pentagon now is a far more limited, if more likely, danger. The first assumption I will make is to stipulate that any U.S. military action in Pakistan must have at least the tacit agreement of the Pakistani army, if not the government in Islamabad. Any operation which requires fighting to gain access to Pakistan makes speculation so complicated as to make it an exercise in futility or, at minimum, an operation that takes so long to unfold that it would not be responsive to the situation. Also, it must be assumed that the situation that results in loss of control is not a broad-based rebellion or insurgency against the Pakistani army or against the Musharraf government. Fighting for access in the face of a popular uprising across Pakistan, or even across the Punjab, is too large an operation to contemplate. Another correlated but necessary assumption is that the Pakistani army allows U.S. forces to deploy through some airfields. Indeed, in this illustrative exercise, I will tend to assume the most benign conditions, if only to show how complex even the “simplest case” might be.

A second kind of political presupposition must be made about the international politics of the situation. Attempting to gain a UN resolution, for example, could well slow any useful military action, even if the climate were generally favorable. It is hard to imagine the Chinese being very “forward leaning”—although if the Pakistanis made an appeal to the “international community” in the moment of such a crisis, it might be hard to keep the Chinese out, and even harder the longer the operation continued. As in the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, allied participation would not be of any military value. The sole exception to this rule might be Indian assistance, but any hint of Indian cooperation would make a U.S. intervention more toxic to Pakistanis than it would be otherwise.

A third set of assumptions has to be made about the level of political and strategic preparedness on the part of the United States. This means not just traditional intelligence “indications and warning,” but a predisposition on

the part of an American president and his advisers—and the political system more broadly—to react in a timely fashion. These will be circumstances in which indecision can be fatal. It may be that the crisis in Pakistan comes at the denouement of a process that unfolds over weeks or at least days, but that is hardly a certainty. The key issue is how much predeployment notice is given to U.S. forces. In the spirit of arbitrariness, let’s say one week—enough time to allow the movement of some U.S. forces, but not, for example, large-scale ground forces.

More important than the strategic preparedness would be the attitude of the American body politic. In today’s climate, it is difficult to imagine much enthusiasm for further American “adventurism” in the Islamic world on the pretext of worries about weapons of mass destruction. Such likely public doubt may be a reaction to the Bush administration’s policies and performance since September 11, but this mood will shape the choices of future administrations as well. Even if there were a “rallying” effort in the time of crisis, it might be difficult to get a Congressional resolution authorizing the use of military force—if indeed the Congress were even in session. In sum, the domestic politics of a “preemptive” operation to secure Pakistani “loose nukes” is, at best, uncertain and might well provoke strong opposition.

Fourth, one must stipulate the regional posture of U.S. units. Will we have significant forces still in Afghanistan? Where will U.S. carriers, surface combatants, and submarines be located? What other operations will be ongoing at the time, such as in Iraq? Again, one must be somewhat arbitrary. For the sake of this argument, I will assume that U.S. forces will have access to Afghanistan for purposes of deployment and that some significant land force will still be deployed there. With the exception of small special operations units, the ability of U.S. forces to redeploy from Afghanistan will, however, be limited. It should be possible to deploy naval forces, including Marines, to the Indian Ocean littoral, within striking distance of targets in Pakistan. In other words, this will largely be a strategic deployment by units based in the United States itself.

## Operational Issues

The most immediate challenge of any military operation to secure Pakistan’s nuclear materials will simply be to get there. It is a long way from the United States to Pakistan, from Fort Bragg to Islamabad. As suggested

above, the cooperation of some substantial elements of the Pakistani army and government will be essential. Without access, for example, to multiple airfields in Pakistan, the U.S. operation would be impossible.

The core of the operation will be infantry-style land forces. Air and naval forces can and must provide support, but the operation should not be an exercise in firepower. The most essential units—the small, highly trained teams of the Delta Force or Navy SEALs—are held in constant readiness to deploy. It is reasonable to expect that some of these forces may already be in the region, engaged in the al Qaeda manhunt. But some will have to come halfway around the world. Unfortunately, the forces most likely to be on hand may be the least useful.

Still, the scope of such an operation would overwhelm the capabilities of such small units. This is not simply a “snatch” operation. Two factors argue strongly in favor of a larger force: the size and city-like complexity of the Kahuta facility, and the need to cast a wider “dragnet” to cover possible escape routes—Kahuta is located near the mountains and not far from the North-West Frontier provinces. While Pakistani forces will be able to provide an outer shell of security and will certainly demand to take nominal command at every step of the way, the United States will want to make every possible effort to ensure tactical success. A substantial number of Special Forces would be required, particularly for liaison with Pakistani tactical units, and probably a perimeter-securing number of U.S. Army Rangers or Marine infantry. Moreover, prudence demands that there be a second substantial “on-call” force should an extraction operation be required or—heaven forbid—should an escalation occur. Ideally, the flow of forces into the region should continue for several weeks; one might deploy, for example, a brigade of the 101st Airborne in Afghanistan, and a follow-on force of Marines or soldiers and their helicopters aboard a large-deck carrier.

With the possible exception of the most elite Special Operations Forces, there would be several stages of deployment after the initial strategic movement. This is not going to be a case of deploying directly to the fight. Whether staging in Afghanistan or in Pakistan proper, the force will require tactical and even operational mobility—this means vehicles and helicopters. In addition, the operation will require a small forward headquarters element, but it must be commanded by a very senior general; the military practice of a three-star joint task force headquarters is probably the wrong, one-size-fits-all approach. Political sensitivities alone demand a

four-star officer; the commander must be able to speak authoritatively and win trust among Pakistanis and officials in Washington. At the same time, it would be folly to try to direct tactical events from a distance.

Nor would we solve the operational problems once deployment to the theater had been accomplished. Getting from Islamabad to the vicinity of Kahuta would itself be a challenge; for example, there is a single access road whose front gate is closer to the city than to the facility. And there probably would be as much worry about “leakers”—small teams carrying nuclear materials into the surrounding countryside or into the megalopolis of Islamabad and from thence—about any force holed up in Kahuta. Again, much would depend upon the level of cooperation by the Pakistani army and the overall state of the country, but any situation dire enough to demand an American intervention would also complicate military operations.

## Tactical Issues

Let’s imagine that an American force actually makes it to the scene of a Kahuta crime. The deployment will have been a difficult challenge, but the situation at the site would be no cakewalk.

The Kahuta facility is a large one, as discussed above. It is a small city nestled into the ridges of a mountain, making access difficult and any operations inside the facility itself a kind of urban warfare. Since Kahuta, in addition to being a nuclear facility, also hosts the factory for Pakistan’s ballistic missiles, there would be plenty of explosive material on hand. Whether a breakaway group might be able to manufacture a radiological “dirty bomb” on the premises is an interesting question.

Even supposing that, like a George Clooney movie, the operation ends relatively successfully, a number of further questions would remain. Was all the nuclear material accounted for? How would we know? If some has gone missing, where is it, or how far might it have gone? (It is not very far, for example, from Kahuta to Kashmir.) Even if we believe we have all the nuclear material, what is to be done with it? What, exactly, is meant by “rendering safe”—the term of art for dealing with recovered nuclear materials—in this situation?

## Inventing New Options

All in all, the Pentagon is quite right to start thinking about options for dealing with “loose nukes” other than

the kind of recycled arms control reflected in the Nunn-Lugar program, International Atomic Energy Agency reform, or other international agreements. Traditional nonproliferation approaches have value, and the danger is great enough to warrant the effort, but working on a military “plan b” is more than prudent. At the same time, taking the bottom-up, tactical-and-operational approach can only be expected to achieve limited goals, making a “military option” only slightly less unappetizing while leaving the strategic and geopolitical conundrums to be solved on the spot.

As hopeless as this paper may have made it seem, perhaps the best protection against a loss of control of nuclear materials in Pakistan is for the United States to adopt a long-term policy of engagement with the army and with the people of Pakistan. As things now stand, our desire for stability and nuclear control rests entirely with General Musharraf and the Pakistani army, and that is a necessity that will continue for the foreseeable future. At the same time, the dominance of the army and the Punjabi elite has stifled any hopes for a more legitimate and responsible government in Islamabad. Fortunately, the Bush administration appears to have realized that South Asia is a strategic priority for the United States; the American commitment to Afghanistan and the budding strategic partnership with India have the potential to shape a more stable future

for the region. Pakistan has every reason to consider itself an important part of this future, and to become something other than—to quote Stephen Cohen—“a paranoid state that has enemies” with nothing more than nuclear weapons to guarantee its safety. That would be a genuinely new option.

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*AEI research assistant Melissa Wisner and AEI editor Scott R. Palmer worked with Mr. Donnelly to edit and produce this National Security Outlook.*

## Notes

1. Stephen Cohen, “The Nation and State of Pakistan,” *Washington Quarterly*, Summer 2002, 109.
2. U.S. Department of Defense (DoD), *Report of the Quadrennial Defense Review* (Arlington, VA: DoD, 2006), 32.
3. *Ibid.*, 33.
4. See David Albright and Corey Hinderstein, “Unraveling the A. Q. Khan and Future Proliferation Networks,” *Washington Quarterly*, Spring 2005, 111–128.
5. *Ibid.*, 112; see also William J. Broad, David Sanger, and Raymond Bonner, “How Pakistani’s Network Offered the Whole Kit,” *New York Times*, February 13, 2004.
6. David E. Sanger and Thom Shanker, “A Nuclear Headache: What If the Radicals Oust Musharraf?” *New York Times*, December 30, 2003.