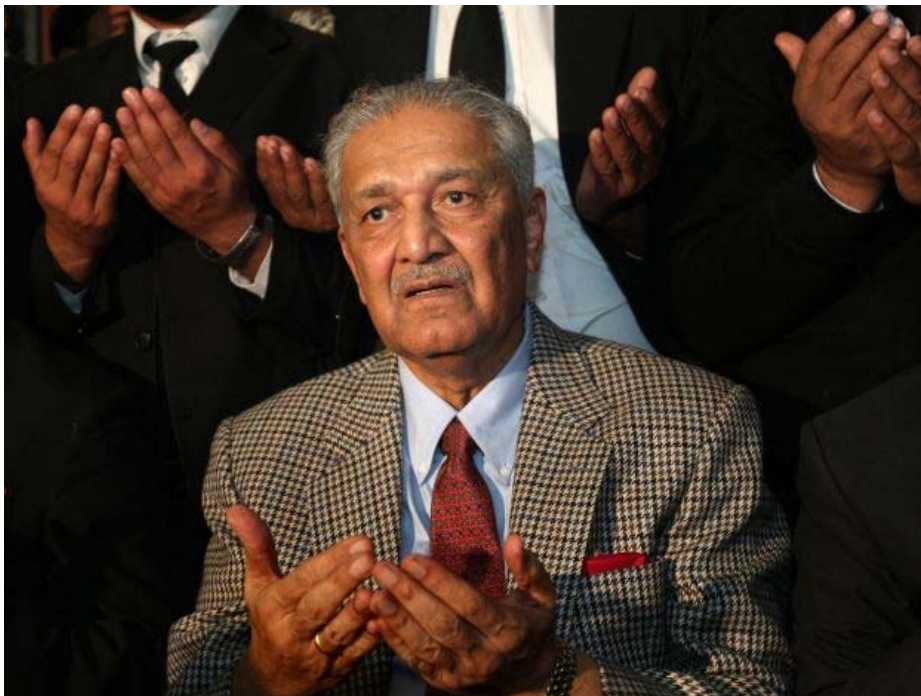




Should Pakistan Get a Nuke Deal?

Only if it finally abandons its support for terrorism.

BY C. CHRISTINE FAIR | MARCH 23, 2010



On March 24, the United States and Pakistan will convene their newly launched strategic dialogue. Past engagement between the two countries has been neither strategic nor a dialogue. This time, Pakistan's delegation is likely to request a civilian nuclear agreement akin to the U.S.-India civilian nuclear deal that was initiated in 2005. Given Pakistan's history of proliferation, such a proposal would meet with howls of disapproval on Capitol Hill and in New Delhi, not to mention healthy skepticism among some in Barack Obama's administration. But Washington should not reject a deal outright: It could be a real opportunity to put the United States's troubled relationship with Pakistan on steadier footing.

To stabilize Afghanistan, the United States needs Pakistan. It is both the primary transit route to supply the Afghan war and the home to Islamist militants who are savaging Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan itself. Worse,

these militant groups are linked to international terrorism -- as numerous terrorist plots and attacks across North America, Europe, and Australia attest.

Islamabad's pitch will likely be that Washington needs it more than the other way around. But the truth is that Pakistan needs the United States more than ever as it confronts a serious blowback of Islamist militants who are ravaging the country. Pakistan's military has limited counterinsurgency capabilities or assets due to its longstanding focus on conventional war with India. Pakistan needs U.S. help to improve its inadequate police forces and help rebuild the country's civilian institutions and rehabilitate the areas and populations devastated by army operations. Although Pakistanis point to their "all-weather friend" China, it is U.S. -- not Chinese -- assistance that will help Pakistan maintain conventional parity with its chief nemesis, India. The platforms that China is willing to sell are unlikely to be an effective counterweight to India's evolving capabilities.

Moreover, because Pakistan fears U.S. intentions regarding its nuclear arsenal, only the United States can address Pakistan's neuralgic insecurity by acknowledging the country as an accepted -- rather than merely tolerated -- nuclear power. The United States has formally conceded India as a de jure nuclear power and has long supported Israel's program actively and passively. Pakistan is the third country that went nuclear outside the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and it wants the same explicit acceptance as the other two.

Any civilian nuclear deal for Pakistan would have to be conditions-based. It would not be equivalent to India's deal, which recognizes India's nonproliferation commitments and enables India to compete strategically with China globally. A civilian nuclear deal with Pakistan has a different logic: to reset bilateral relations that are bedeviled with layers of mistrust on both sides.

Pakistan disconcerts the world due to its nuclear proliferation record and because it supports myriad Islamist militants menacing the international community. This deal should therefore be conditioned upon access to nuclear scientist A.Q. Khan and direct information about his nuclear black markets, as well as verifiable evidence that Pakistan is reversing its support for militant groups and taking active steps to dismantle the architecture for terrorism.

At the same time, the deal should address Pakistan's chief concerns. Pakistan fears that the United States -- perhaps in consort with India and Israel -- seeks to dismantle its nuclear program. Such a deal would formally recognize Pakistan's nuclear status and reward it for the considerable progress it has made to enhance its arsenal's security since 2002.

Although the United States has professed a need for a "strategic relationship" with Pakistan and has offered lucrative financial allurements and conventional arms since the 1950s, a genuinely strategic relationship has been beguiled by the reality that both states have divergent strategic aims. Washington wants Islamabad to give up what it sees as the only tools in its arsenal to secure its interests at home and abroad: jihadi terrorism under the

security of its nuclear umbrella.

But the United States is going to have to offer something in exchange: recognition and strategic support. Such a deal could create the conditions of trust whereby other initiatives, such as a limited security guarantee -- negotiated with India's explicit input -- would be welcomed.

Pakistan maintains that its dangerous policies are motivated by fears of India. A phased U.S. approach will either diminish this deep-seated insecurity *or* call Pakistan's bluff about the rationale for its behavior, motivating the United States to rethink its handling of Pakistan. Either outcome would be an enormous improvement over the stagnant status quo.

Washington must transform its relations with Islamabad (and Rawalpindi, where Pakistan's military is headquartered) with the same energy and creativity as it did with New Delhi because Washington needs both South Asian states as much as they need Washington. Such a conditions-based deal will take years to come to fruition even if dubious U.S. entities and inveterate U.S. foes in Pakistan don't stand in the way. Putting it on the table now would only be a first step in a strategic gamble that may or may not pay off down the road.

The only other future option is far more unpalatable and difficult: trying desperately to keep containing the myriad and complex threats Pakistan poses to the world. And we already know how well that strategy works.

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C. Christine Fair is assistant professor at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service.

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