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Self-Serving Leaks from the A.Q. Khan Circle

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Reading the Pakistani A.Q. Khan's latest "leaks," one would think that China depended on Khan in the early 1980s to solve its problems in making weapon-grade uranium for its growing nuclear weapons arsenal. Using recently stolen European gas centrifuge technology, Khan reportedly claims he helped China modernize its production of bomb-grade uranium.¹

But the facts appear quite different. China relied on its two gaseous diffusion plants to make its weapon-grade uranium, and its gas centrifuge program never took off.

The most recent source of Khan's recent claims is a fascinating November 13, 2009 *Washington Post* [article](#) about China's nuclear cooperation with Pakistan in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The *Post* drew upon several of Khan's written statements from late 2003 and early 2004 when he was desperately trying to defend himself in Pakistan against a growing list of charges that he proliferated sensitive centrifuge and nuclear weapons technology. Since the exposure of his transnational trafficking network, Khan has periodically revealed details about the secret world of Pakistani nuclear weapons and illicit nuclear trade. However, many of his assertions are self-serving and highly dubious. On balance, Khan's statements should be viewed as non-credible without first rigorously verifying them. He has proven that he is unable to honestly relate the facts fully as he knows them and has many reasons to deceive, obfuscate or suppress the truth.

In the early 1980s Pakistan was frantically trying to acquire its first nuclear weapon, and Khan's gas centrifuge program was Pakistan's only short-term way to produce nuclear explosive material domestically. But that program, despite receiving extensive, albeit illicit, foreign assistance, was struggling mightily to meet its deadlines. As has been well documented over the last two decades, during this period, China provided critical nuclear assistance to Pakistan's nuclear weapons effort. The *Washington Post* provides new details about this assistance. Without this aid, Pakistan would have likely suffered several

¹ R. Jeffrey Smith, "Pakistani Nuclear Scientist Said to Affirm Post Article's Accuracy," *The Washington Post*, November 19, 2009.

more years of delay in obtaining nuclear weapons. Yet the benefits to China were mostly strategic, not nuclear.

Khan's case has typically been strongest when he tries to rebut the patently ludicrous claims of the Pakistani government that Khan single-handedly ran a proliferation ring over two decades without the knowledge of any Pakistani officials and without their authorization for at least portions of his proliferation actions. Whether others are also guilty in the Pakistani government and military establishments is a question that has long deserved careful study. The *Washington Post* is doing a service by starting to delve into this difficult issue, although Khan's cooperation with China is not what has gotten him into trouble domestically and internationally. Khan may be using this story as a dress rehearsal for seeking to absolve his guilt in later proliferation activities, a claim that would be false. Regardless of the culpability of members of the Pakistani establishment, multiple investigations in Pakistan and abroad have placed Khan at the center of a multi-decade trafficking operation outfitting the nuclear programs of Libya, Iran, and North Korea. Moreover, Khan's Nuremberg-type defense is hardly convincing to the international community, and merely reinforces the belief that there are others who are guilty and justice has not yet been served with regard to Khan or others in Pakistan.

A New Media Offensive

Through members of his immediate family and former journalist and family confidant Simon Henderson, Khan is trying again to create a distorted picture of what he did. He faces an uphill battle and appears to be seeking sympathetic media to air his story. Although pardoned by Pakistan's then President Pervez Musharraf in early 2004, Khan failed to convince his own government of his innocence and admitted to selling nuclear secrets to Iran, Libya, and North Korea. Based on the extensive information collected by the United States and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the U.S. government [sanctioned](#) him along with many of his accomplices for their proliferation activities.

At the core of the newest Khan campaign is a set of documents, including Khan's 11-page March 2004 "confession" to the Pakistani government, his handwritten December 10, 2003 letter to his wife, and his 5-page version of his government's nuclear cooperation with China.² In this letter, for example, Khan wrote his wife to orchestrate a tough stance if the Pakistani government went after him, telling her that proof of his claims was safely stashed away but could be given to the press and the public. Khan wrote the letter and his "confession" when he was under intense pressure from his own government about a range of incriminating evidence that the United States, the IAEA, and other governments had collected on his proliferation activities in Iran and Libya.

The *Washington Post* obtained these documents from Simon Henderson. Henderson had already published several cryptic assertions about Khan's letter to his wife in a January

² R. Jeffrey Smith and Joby Warrick, "A Nuclear Power's Act of Proliferation," *The Washington Post*, November 13, 2009.

2009 [report](#) in the British *Sunday Times*. Many of the quotes in Henderson's piece reflected only part of the truth.

Needless to say, Khan's writings must be approached with a great deal of skepticism, given his well-known denials of any wrong-doing and frequent selective use of the truth. Henderson is well aware of Khan's proclivities. During his journalistic career at the *Financial Times*, he uncovered several of Khan's shady deals. In the mid-1980s, he was the first to report that China gave Pakistan 50 kilograms of weapon-grade uranium, an important part of the recent *Washington Post* article. But Henderson's objectivity about Khan was called into question in the early 1990s, when he started to soft-pedal Khan's tales. According to Henderson, he sought Khan's cooperation on a biography that Henderson hoped to write,³ and frank assessments of Khan's statements would unlikely result in that support. This led Henderson to submit an uncritical interview with Khan in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* in September 1993. Henderson must have known that this interview contained many falsehoods, such as Khan denying that Pakistan had a nuclear weapons program. In response to a question that the rest of the world sees Kahuta as being an enrichment plant for nuclear weapons, Khan responded that this was "just propaganda."

Henderson appears to be over-selling Khan's claims again. He told the *Washington Post* that he provided the documents because he believes an accurate understanding of Pakistan's nuclear history is relevant for U.S. policy making.⁴ But one-sided accounts are rarely good for policy making, and they distort the public record. The best course of action is for Henderson to simply publish the entire set of documents and allow for their scrutiny by informed and objective analysts. If he did, readers would see that Khan continues his long tradition of subterfuge, attempting to shift blame to others or feigning ignorance of what his network did in Libya or Iran. Given Khan's loquaciousness, he would inevitably provide important new details. This is supported by the *Washington Post* article, which has many new details about Pakistan's cooperation with China. However, sorting out the truth from Khan's lies is no easy feat.

Doubtful Allegations

That China and Khan's centrifuge program shared enrichment equipment, materials, and technology is well known, as is China's supply to Pakistan of 50 kilograms of weapon-grade uranium and a nuclear weapon design in the early 1980s. The *Post*, however, published new information about this cooperation using Khan's statements on the Pakistani government's nuclear cooperation with China.

The major problems in the *Washington Post*'s (and reportedly Khan's) account center on Khan's claim about the importance of the centrifuge plant he built for China and his claim that Pakistan did not use the weapon-grade uranium it acquired from China in its first nuclear weapon.

³ Simon Henderson, "We can do it ourselves." (A.Q. Khan as Pakistan's leading nuclear scientist) (includes interview) *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, September 1993.

⁴ "A Nuclear Power's Act of Proliferation," op. cit.

Chinese Centrifuge Plant

Khan claims that China needed his help because of its lagging enrichment program to produce weapon-grade uranium. According to Khan, he briefed three top Chinese nuclear weapons officials on how the European-designed centrifuges could swiftly aid China's uranium enrichment program.⁵ However, such aid was unnecessary.

Khan provides few details about his assistance to the Chinese centrifuge program. The *Post* article does not state the size of the Chinese facility or the type of centrifuges provided to this facility. It quotes from a Khan-written document that Pakistani experts were dispatched to Hanzhong in central China, where they helped "put up a centrifuge plant." Khan wrote in the 2003 letter to his wife that "we sent 135 C-130 plane loads of machines, inverters, valves, flow meters, pressure gauges." If the aid were prior to 1985, as implied in the article, the machines were likely P1 centrifuges,⁶ which Khan's experts derived from stolen Dutch centrifuge technology. These centrifuges never operated well, however.

It is very difficult to estimate the size of the facility from the information in the article, but the facility is unlikely to have been very large, even by Pakistani standards. The "plant" may well have been little more than a small pilot, research and development facility—an expected step for any country after receiving a new type of centrifuge. Pakistan's centrifuge manufacturing complex was too small to have made a plant with ten thousand or more P1 centrifuges, although such a plant would still be a relatively small plant by Chinese standards.⁷ Even providing several thousand centrifuges to such a plant might have threatened Khan's ability to build his own centrifuge plant in the early 1980s.

By the early 1980s, China had constructed two relatively large gaseous diffusion plants.⁸ In addition, during the early 1980s, China achieved an enormous breakthrough in the enrichment performance at these plants, reducing further the importance of any centrifuge assistance. It was these two plants that produced roughly 20 tonnes of weapon-grade uranium.⁹ Any contribution from gas centrifuges is believed to be small.

The Chinese centrifuge program was still in the development stage in the early 1990s. According to a U.S. centrifuge expert eyewitness who visited a Chinese pilot centrifuge

⁵ "A Nuclear Power's Act of Proliferation," op. cit.

⁶ Khan could have also provided designs of the German-origin P2 centrifuge to China. Since Khan did not start making these machines in large quantities until the late 1980s and 1990s, it is doubtful that he provided them in large quantities to China.

⁷ Ten thousand P1 centrifuges would result in an enrichment plant that was less than about 10 percent of the total estimated annual enrichment capacity of the two Chinese gaseous diffusion enrichment plants in the late 1970s and early 1980s. See Albright and Corey Hinderstein, "Chinese Military Plutonium and Highly Enriched Uranium Inventories," ISIS, June 30, 2005, paper prepared under contract with a U.S. national laboratory and available at http://isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/chinese_military_inventories.pdf.

⁸ "Chinese Military Plutonium and Highly Enriched Uranium Inventories," op. cit.

⁹ "Chinese Military Plutonium and Highly Enriched Uranium Inventories," op. cit.

plant in 1990 (not at Hanzhong), the Chinese appeared to be still developing centrifuges and had not yet built a large-scale centrifuge plant.

The Chinese centrifuge program never matured into a commercial, large-scale program. By the early 1990s, the Chinese government decided to buy two large-scale centrifuge plants from Russia to supply low enriched uranium for its nuclear power reactors rather than build a centrifuge plant itself. Its own centrifuge program was cut back substantially after this decision. In the late 1990s, the U.S. expert revisited the Chinese pilot plant and it was no longer working on centrifuges but instead it was dedicated to laser enrichment.

Interestingly, the first two Russian centrifuge plants were built near Hanzhong, where Khan says he sent his centrifuges. Assuming Khan is telling the truth about sending centrifuges to Hanzhong, did China install the Russian centrifuges near an early facility of China's domestic centrifuge effort? A positive answer might at least confirm Khan's statement that China indeed did build a centrifuge plant there.

Weapon-grade Uranium

Khan claims that the weapon-grade uranium obtained from China was put in storage for three years because KRL was able on its own to produce the nuclear explosive material for Pakistan's first nuclear weapons. Khan even claims that Pakistan offered to return the weapon-grade material, but China refused the return of this "gift."¹⁰

This statement is not credible without independent confirmation. At the time, Pakistan's uranium enrichment program was barely able to manufacture enough highly enriched uranium for one bomb. That Pakistan, as Khan claims, had no need for the Chinese weapon-grade uranium due to an abundance of its own at the time is highly unlikely. Given Khan's defensiveness about his legacy, it is not surprising that he would assert this. His reputation relies fundamentally on his claim that he was responsible for making the weapon-grade uranium for Pakistan's first nuclear weapons. If it were established that Pakistan's first two nuclear weapons were fueled by China's gift, Khan's reputation would suffer and questions about the success of his centrifuge program would arise. Surprisingly, the *Washington Post* offered no substantiation of this claim in the article, other than a general statement earlier in the article that it "corroborated much of the content through interviews in Pakistan and other countries." Given the documented poor performance of the P1 centrifuges in Iran, which originated from Khan and his network, it is possible that the P1 centrifuges worked poorly in Pakistan too and Khan could not provide enough weapon-grade uranium until later. This version is more plausible than Khan's.

Conclusion

As this case shows again, Khan is notorious for shading the truth with the media regarding his own activities and his network's role in the proliferation of nuclear

¹⁰ "A Nuclear Power's Act of Proliferation," op. cit.

technology. Khan also frequently exaggerates the capabilities of Pakistan's historical nuclear weapons program and the extent to which the government held an official policy favoring nuclear proliferation. We all need to exercise extreme care in sorting through Khan's extravagant assertions.

The Khan circle's latest media campaign likely centers on his effort to embarrass and paint the Pakistani government as complicit in all of his proliferation activities, and it should be seen as part of his greater effort to shame the government into lifting his freedom of movement restrictions. He may be seeking to take advantage of weakened political leadership in Pakistan by creating a new storyline that it was the government, and not Khan, that directed all of his proliferation activities. Whatever information Khan and his surrogates have to offer, it should be taken into welcome consideration but also confirmed and verified, because, based on Khan's previous testimonies, much of it will likely be untrue or incomplete.