

PAKISTAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM: Reagan-era Tensions over Early Pakistani Nuclear Program

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New Documents Spotlight Reagan-era Tensions over Early Pakistani Nuclear Program

Perceptions that General Zia Had “Lied” About Pakistani Nuclear Activities Raised Conflicts with U.S. Afghanistan Priority

General Vernon Walters: Zia May Be “The Most Superb and Patriotic Liar I Have Ever Met”

Reagan Administration Supported Sale of F-16s with Advanced Radar Technology on Nonproliferation Grounds Despite CIA Warnings that Pakistan Would Share it with China

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Washington, D.C., April 27, 2012 — Tensions between the United States and Pakistan rose through the 1980s over intelligence reports that suggested to U.S. officials that Pakistani leader Zia ul-Haq had repeatedly lied to them about his country’s nuclear program, according to recently declassified records obtained by the National Security Archive. Zia’s

apparent mendacity posed an immediate challenge to U.S. nonproliferation goals, but also threatened the even higher priority of providing aid to Islamabad and to the Mujahedin resistance fighting Soviet forces in Afghanistan.

Concerned by the Pakistani nuclear program, in July 1982, the Reagan administration sent former CIA deputy director General Vernon Walters to meet secretly with Pakistani dictator General Zia. U.S. intelligence had detected an upswing of clandestine Pakistani efforts to procure nuclear weapons-related technology and unwanted publicity could jeopardize U.S. government economic and military aid to Pakistan, a key partner in the secret war against Soviet forces in Afghanistan.

According to documents published today for the first time by the National Security Archive and the Nuclear Proliferation International History Project, Walters told Zia that Washington had “incontrovertible intelligence” that Pakistani representatives had “transferred designs and specifications for nuclear weapons components to purchasing agents in several countries for the purpose of having these nuclear weapons components fabricated for Pakistan.”

Confronted with the evidence, Zia acknowledged that the information “must be true,” but then denied everything, leading Walters to conclude that either Zia “did not know the facts” or was the “most superb and patriotic liar I have ever met.” While Zia restated earlier promises not to develop a nuclear weapon and made pledges to avoid specific nuclear “firebreaks,” officials from Secretary of State George Shultz on down would conclude time and time again, that Zia was breaking his word.

In 1986, Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA) director Kenneth Adelman wrote in a memorandum to the White House that Zia “has lied to us again,” and warned that failure to act would lead the General to conclude that he can “lie to us with impunity.” While the Reagan administration was concerned about nuclear proliferation, it gave a greater priority to securing aid to Pakistan so it could support the Afghan anti-Soviet insurgency. The White House and the State Department leadership hoped that building a strong bilateral relationship would dissuade Pakistan from building nuclear weapons.

Top levels of the U.S. government let relations with a friendly government supersede nonproliferation goals as long as there was no public controversy that could “embarrass” the President the documents show. Indeed, Reagan administration officials feared that if the Pakistanis had told them the “truth” about the purpose and scope of their nuclear activities, it would have made it impossible for the administration to certify to Congress that Pakistan was not developing nuclear weapons. On that certification rode the continued flow of aid to assist the Afghanistan resistance. For the sake of that aid, senior Reagan administration officials gave Pakistan much slack by obscuring its nuclear activities, but that they wrote about lying and “breaking ... assurances” suggests that lack of trust and confidence was an important element in the U.S.-Pakistan relationship, as it is today.

Among the disclosures in today’s publication:

* By the early summer of 1981, State Department intelligence estimated that the Pakistanis were “probably capable of producing a workable device at this time,” although the Kahuta enrichment plant was unlikely to produce enough fissile material for a test until 1983.

* A few months later, U.S. officials began to worry that India might take preventive action

against the Pakistani nuclear program, especially because Pakistan was slated to acquire F-16 fighter-bombers from the U.S. That prospective sale troubled Indian leaders because a nuclear Pakistan with advanced fighter bombers would be a more formidable adversary.

* During the spring of 1982 U.S. diplomats and intelligence collectors found that Pakistani agents were trying to acquire “fabricated shapes” (metal hemispheres for producing nuclear explosive devices) and other sensitive technology for a nuclear program. Suggesting that Pakistan was starting to cross the line by building a nuclear weapon, these discoveries contributed to the decision to send former CIA deputy director Vernon Walters to meet secretly with General Zia in July and October 1982.

* During Walters’ October 1982 visit, Zia told him of his meeting with Saudi Arabia’s King Fahd who had told him that agents from an unspecified country had attempted to sell him a nuclear device for \$250 million. Zia advised Fahd not to “touch the offer with a barge pole.”

* A controversial element in the F-16 sale was whether the U.S. would comply with Pakistani requests that it include the same radar system as the most advanced U.S. model. While top CIA officials warned that the Pakistanis were likely to share the technology with China, Secretary of State George Shultz and other officials believed, ironically, that denying Pakistani requests would make that country less responsive to U.S. nonproliferation goals.

* With Pakistan’s efforts to acquire sensitive technology continuing, in December 1982 Secretary of State Shultz warned President Reagan of the “overwhelming evidence that Zia has been breaking his assurances.” He also expressed concern that Pakistan would make sensitive nuclear technology available to “unstable Arab countries.”

* In June 1986 ACDA director Kenneth Adelman wrote that Zia has “lied to us again” about violations of agreements not to produce highly-enriched uranium above a five-percent level. If Washington did not apply real pressure it would reinforce Zia’s belief “that he can lie to us with impunity.”

* In the spring of 1987, senior State Department officials wrote that Pakistani nuclear development activities were proceeding apace and that General Zia was approaching a “threshold which he cannot cross without blatantly violating his pledge not to embarrass the President.”

This is the third in a series of Electronic Briefing Books on U.S. policy toward the Pakistani nuclear program. The first was on the Carter administration’s <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nukevault/ebb333/index.htm> policy; the second was on the efforts to work with allies to prevent the export of sensitive technology <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nukevault/ebb352/index.htm> to Pakistan. The National Security Archive has filed numerous declassification requests to U.S. government agencies on important developments during the 1970s, 80s, and early 1990s, and as significant material becomes declassified the Archive and the NPIHP will update this series of EBBs.

Check out today’s posting at the National Security Archive website - <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nukevault/ebb377/>

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