



RISING POWERS INITIATIVE

Sigur Center for Asian Studies

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How the Pakistan Military Learned to Love the Bomb

Pakistan is undergoing a period of unprecedented transition after recent elections marked the first time two civilian governments succeeded each other peacefully. The new prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, last held that position when Islamabad tested its first nuclear weapons. While civilian leaders were historically the primary drivers behind the decision to pursue nuclear weapons (something not widely known), the Pakistani military gradually came to value these weapons and eventually dominate the country's nuclear debate.

Will Pakistan's emerging civilian government again grapple with control over nuclear decisionmaking? This Policy Brief by **Christopher Clary** – Stanton Nuclear Security Fellow at the RAND Corporation and a participant in the Rising Powers Initiative's Nuclear Debates in Asia project – provides an understanding of how control over the Pakistani nuclear arsenal evolved over time and what the future might hold should the civilian government continue to consolidate its power.

The importance of nuclear weapons to Pakistan's survival and security is now canon in Pakistan military thinking. When then-President Musharraf explained his decision in September 2001 to help the United States overthrow the Taliban regime in Afghanistan he twice told his countrymen that failure to help the United States might mean harm to Pakistan's "nuclear strength," a risk he could

not take.¹ Nuclear weapons were not just a guarantor of Pakistani security, they were an end unto themselves. After the 2011 U.S. raid on a compound in Abbottabad to kill Osama bin Laden, the first announcement made by the Pakistan Army was that a similar venture would be unable to disable Pakistan's "strategic assets."² For the military, Pakistan's sovereignty and its nuclear weapons had become closely linked, almost synonymous. In his 2012 study, Feroz Hassan Khan (a retired Pakistan Army brigadier himself) concludes that nuclear weapons became "one of the few issues about which there was national consensus" in Pakistan.³ But it wasn't always the case. The Pakistani military was initially reluctant to pursue the nuclear path. They had to be convinced by a charismatic civilian: Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. He succeeded wildly in his nuclear proselytizing, though he did not live to see the fruition of that effort.

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In the beginning, civilians pushed the military to develop the infrastructure necessary to pursue nuclear weapons, and the military balked. After a decade of constitutional confusion, the military seized power in Pakistan in 1958. Ayub Khan harnessed U.S. interest in a South Asian ally to modernize Pakistan's military, but he was more hesitant to pursue nuclear energy despite U.S. appeals through the "Atoms for Peace" initiative. Ayub's diplomats pushed him. In the early 1960s, Agha Shahi, who would later serve as Pakistan's foreign minister, convinced Nazir Ahmed, then-Defense Secretary and Ayub's golfing buddy, to lobby the military dictator to pursue a deal with France to acquire a nuclear reprocessing plant, citing Indian nuclear progress as a rationale. Ahmed reported back to Shahi that Ayub said no. Ayub had asked, "Why is the foreign office so jittery, what will India do with nuclear weapons? What will they have to deliver the system?" Shahi was incredulous. Even a transport plane, Shahi fumed, could be rigged to deliver a device.⁴

A young civilian, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, oversaw the foreign ministry from 1963 to 1966. He came to the office with charisma, as well as experience as Minister for Fuel, Power, and Natural Resources. He, like Shahi, was convinced that India would go nuclear and that nuclear weapons were necessary for Pakistani security. Toward the end of his tenure as foreign minister, Bhutto oversaw another effort to push Pakistan on weapons. He arranged a meeting in 1965 between Munir Ahmad Khan, a promising Pakistani nuclear physicist then at the International Atomic Energy Agency, and

Ayub. Munir briefed Ayub on the status of the Indian program and the need for Pakistani nuclear infrastructure. Ayub demurred. Munir recalls that Ayub argued, “Pakistan was too poor to spend that much money. Moreover, if we ever need the bomb, we will buy it off the shelf.”⁵

Bhutto still pushed. The young foreign minister assembled a working group of diplomats, military officers, intelligence professionals, and scientists to draft a report. Toward the end of the process, as it became clear the group would unanimously recommend pursuit of a plutonium separation capability, the working group was shut down by the President’s House. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was dismissed as foreign minister before he could lead another charge at Ayub on the matter.⁶

When Yahya Khan replaced Ayub as military dictator, the nuclear issue was sidelined even further. Munir Ahmad Khan, looking back, recalled other efforts by Pakistani nuclear scientists to convince the military leaders, “[A]ttempts to persuade [Ayub] by [Abdus] Salam and [I. H.] Usmani and others, persuade him and his advisors, and even his successor, General Yahya Khan, failed completely. Things were assigned to committees after committees. We lost several long years and many windows of opportunity.”⁷ Yahya’s tenure was marked by a focused determination to overcome the U.S. arms embargo against Pakistan and, toward the end of his tenure, resolving the political crisis with Bengalis in East Pakistan. The 1971 Indo-Pakistan war separated East from West Pakistan, creating Bangladesh, in the process humiliating the Pakistan Army. Bhutto who had been in the wilderness came back with a firm electoral mandate at the exact time when the military’s influence on politics, even national security matters, was at its nadir. He used that mandate to push for nuclear weapons.

Even out of power, Zulfikar had written and spoken of the need for nuclear weapons. In 1969, he argued that foreign allies were inherently unreliable. Only a nuclear deterrent could protect Pakistani interests.⁸ The limited assistance by the United States and China in 1971 only underscored Bhutto’s logic. Bhutto had helped secure American assistance to build a research reactor at the Pakistan Institute for Nuclear Science and Technology (PINSTECH), which went critical in 1965, and Canadian assistance for the Karachi Nuclear Power Plant (KANUPP), which became operational in 1972 after Bhutto returned as president. He approved the Chashma Nuclear Power Plan in 1976, the same year he concluded an agreement with France to build a nuclear reprocessing plant and convinced a Pakistan metallurgist named A. Q. Khan to return to Pakistan with uranium enrichment expertise from Europe.⁹

When Bhutto was deposed by the Pakistan military in 1977, he was convinced it was part of an international plot to prevent Pakistan from acquiring nuclear weapons. After being sentenced to death, Bhutto wrote a tract to the public, hoping to inspire a popular outcry that might save him. He told his citizens, “We were on the threshold of full nuclear capability when I left the Government to come to this death cell. We know that Israel and South Africa have full nuclear capability. The Christian, Jewish, and Hindu civilizations have this capability. The communist powers also possess it. Only the Islamic civilization was without it, but that position was about to change.”¹⁰ For that reason, Bhutto believed he was deposed.

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But he was wrong. The new military government led by Gen. Zia-ul-Haq made no effort to stop the nuclear program. Perhaps the vestiges of the Army's old hesitation were still present. Stephen Cohen, writing in 1984, assessed, “The military in Pakistan does not like nuclear weapons—no soldier really likes them.”¹¹ Even so, Cohen concluded, they had convinced themselves—in part because of Bhutto's decades of arguments—that they were necessary. Between Ayub and Zia the military consensus had shifted. Zia maintained virtually every nuclear initiative started by Bhutto, and under Zia's watch Pakistan would develop a nascent nuclear weapons capability with fissile material production and a workable weapons design. When India tested in May 1998, Pakistan was easily able to follow with tests of its own on May 28 and May 30, 1998. Since 1998, the military has created a command and control system for those weapons, continued to increase Pakistani warheads and fissile material, diversified Pakistan's delivery vehicles, and begun dabbling in the capabilities necessary to produce battlefield nuclear weapons. But just because the military and the bomb are closely associated in contemporary Pakistan, it wasn't always so. Today's reality is the result of military skeptics becoming convinced by civilian believers, and now the Pakistan military has all of the zeal of a convert.

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4. Interview with Agha Shahi, Islamabad, Pakistan, June 19, 2005.
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11. Stephen Cohen, *The Pakistan Army* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 152-3.

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