

Shopping For Bombs: Nuclear Proliferation, Global Insecurity, and the Rise and Fall of the A.Q. Khan Network

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Reviewed by Dr Ron Huisken

Deciding what should or could be done about ‘the bomb’ has weighed on the conscience and taxed the ingenuity of innumerable political leaders, diplomats, scientists and academics for over 60 years. In the mid-1960s, under the Johnson administration, the US again took a hard look at how the nuclear scene had unfolded since 1945 and considered whether it needed to try and shape its future course. By that time, five states had tested a bomb (the most recent being China in 1964), both Israel and India (at least) were assessed to be hell-bent on getting one and the Cuban missile crisis had made starkly apparent to the superpowers just how fragile their security was. The Johnson administration came down in favour of making the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons a top priority, a stance that helped result in the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT) in 1968. It was, of course, a bit late in the day.

The NPT had to accommodate some pretty serious contradictions and tensions. There were five nuclear-weapon states, all of whom insisted that the bomb was of irreplaceable value and all of whom were permanent members of the UN Security Council, constituting an enduring signal that international rank and the bomb were inseparable. The non-nuclear weapon states insisted both on the strongest possible commitment to eventual nuclear disarmament, and on their ‘inalienable’ right to the full panoply of nuclear technologies that had a peaceful application, including the production of enriched uranium and plutonium to fuel power-generating reactors but which also constitute the core of the bomb. By this time, too, nuclear energy was big business, adding further to the complexity of the scene. The earliest targets of non-proliferation, Japan and Germany, have long had large nuclear industries and possess substantial stockpiles of plutonium in particular.

In short, the non-proliferation regime centred on the NPT was a dynamic bargain riven with internal tensions. Eventually, however, just about everyone signed up. Quite a few states delayed for many years to keep their options open and a handful made it plain that they had no intention of doing so – Israel, India, Pakistan and South Africa. All now have the bomb except South Africa which, singularly, got it and then gave it up before eventually joining the NPT. In each case, the road to the bomb was a tortuous, clandestine affair characterized by larger than life, James Bond-like episodes as the nuclear gate-keepers sought to penetrate and frustrate their programs. The story of Pakistan’s road to the bomb is no exception but it acquired a special dimension: the man recognized and revered as the ‘father’ of Pakistan’s nuclear weapon capability, A.Q. Khan, started a second and allegedly private career as a facilitator of bomb programs in

other countries – using the same contacts and deception techniques employed in the Pakistani program but often resorting to surplus equipment and Pakistani know-how to sweeten the initial deal.

Western intelligence was broadly aware for many years that some form of network existed among states on the edge of the international

community for the acquisition and exchange of sensitive materials and technology, especially related to nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. US suspicions that North Korea might be cheating on the 1994 nuclear freeze first arose when they got indications around 1996-97 that Pakistan had placed a significant order for North Korean missiles and related technologies. As neither country had significant financial resources, the US wondered what Pakistan might have offered in return. A.Q. Khan admitted in 2004 that it was uranium enrichment technology.

Similarly, Donald Rumsfeld returned to the US political arena in 1998, chairing a Congressionally-mandated enquiry contesting the official intelligence view that new ballistic missile threats to the US would take about 15 years to emerge. The Rumsfeld commission contended that because new players would set lower standards of performance and reliability, and because the states of concern were exchanging technologies among themselves, it could be 5 years or less. A few weeks later, North Korea tested a three-stage missile, transforming the politics of missile defence debate in the US in favour of early deployment. Despite this awareness, when Libya’s Colonel Gaddafi defected from the ranks of the states of concern late in 2003, triggering the sequence of events that exposed Khan’s network, its extent, redundancy and reliability was still an unpleasant surprise.

Shopping for Bombs, the story of the A.Q. Khan network, has all the qualities of a thriller: money, ideology, intrigue, secrecy and the highest of stakes. It will undoubtedly become the subject of a movie in due course, perhaps even without the addition of women. Gordon Corera has written a superb account of a saga that delivered a body-blow to the ‘non-proliferation regime’ and which may yet prove to be the catalyst for a major overhaul of this regime. Equally, the issues that the Khan network left behind, above all the apparent Iranian drive for the bomb and a more diversified North Korean program, could, in the charged atmosphere since 9/11, change the course of history in other ways. In light, accessible prose and with an excellent feel for the political and strategic context, Gordon Corera has written a genuine page-turner, but one that informs deeply as well as entertains. ♦

Gordon Corera, *Shopping For Bombs: Nuclear Proliferation, Global Insecurity, and the Rise and Fall of the A.Q. Khan Network*, Scribe, Melbourne, 2006, Softback, 304pp., RRP \$430.00

