

# **SPECIAL** REPORT

**NO. 138**

## **The Rashomon Effect: Retelling the Killing of Osama Bin Laden, 10 Years Since**

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# Introduction

**A**fter 11 September 2001, when a group of militants associated with the Al-Qaeda staged coordinated attacks on the United States (US) and killed almost 3,000, Osama bin Laden became the world’s most wanted man. In the following years, US forces tried but failed to hunt for him across Afghanistan and Pakistan. It was almost a decade later when they found him, living in a compound in the garrison town of Abbottabad, Pakistan, some 120 km north of the capital, Islamabad. In the early hours of 2 May 2011, US forces raided the compound and killed Bin Laden, and then President Barack Obama called it “a good day for America” and pronounced the world to be “safer”.<sup>1</sup> Ten years since, the question remains: How did Bin Laden evade US intelligence for many years and end up undetected—and likely protected—in a town in a country that is supposed to be an American ally?

This special report builds on the narrations told to this author by two key diplomatic officials who were in office at the time of the raid in Abbottabad that resulted in the killing of Osama bin Laden: Husain Haqqani, the Pakistan Ambassador to the United States at the time, and Cameron Munter, then American Ambassador to Pakistan.<sup>a</sup>

The aim is to ponder the “Rashomon Effect” on the 2 May 2011 raid that killed Bin Laden, through the recollections of Amb. Haqqani of what transpired in Washington, and of Amb. Munter, in Islamabad. Named after Akira Kurosawa’s 1950 movie, *Rashomon*, the ‘Rashomon Effect’ refers to a phenomenon wherein the same event is explained in different ways by different people. What are the different ways by which the raid that killed Bin Laden is interpreted?

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<sup>a</sup> The interview was conducted over the popular social media app, Clubhouse, in front of a live audience and with questions coming via Twitter. Amb. Haqqani and Amb. Munter generously gave their time for over an hour as we revisited key elements of the May raid.

# It's the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May in Islamabad

**C**ameron Munter gets a call on his mobile phone at 3:00 am on 2 May, 2011. It was the Pakistan Foreign Secretary at that time, Salman Bashir: “I didn’t wake you, did I, ambassador?” Munter said he was already awake. Bashir asked, “There is something about a helicopter crash in Abbottabad, do you know anything about it?” To which the ambassador said, “I will have to get back to you, Salman.”

Munter had arrived in Islamabad a few months before, in October 2010; he had been briefed by US intelligence that they were watching “that house in Abbottabad,” but that they were not sure if Bin Laden was indeed there. Munter was told that a raid would take place and he would thereafter have to do the “clean-up”, but he was not given other details, including the timelines.

US-Pakistan relations even at its most propitious period required a deft touch; at its worst, it is what Cameron Munter walked into: a simmering cauldron. The situation was only exacerbated by the drone strikes in Waziristan from as early as January 2010 and the arrest of Raymond Davis,<sup>2</sup> the former US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) contractor captured for killing two Pakistani gunmen in Lahore.

Sometime in April 2011, Ambassador Munter got the call from Washington informing him of the raid that would be taking place. The instructions were firm: “Do things as you are doing, don’t do anything out of the ordinary.” On the day of the raid, the US embassy in Islamabad hosted a volleyball match between its personnel and those of the Chinese embassy. Munter recalls: “The Chinese were much smaller than us, but they crushed us, maybe that’s a metaphor.” That evening, Munter hosted dinner for the 12 rectors of all significant Islamic universities in Pakistan. In Washington, President Barack Obama was hosting the Correspondents’ Dinner at the White House, where comedian Seth Meyers roasted Donald Trump and joked about Bin Laden’s location in the Hindu Kush mountains.

As soon as Munter received the call about the raid, he unceremoniously left in the middle of dinner. He proceeded to the embassy, where he would spend the rest of the night.

# Haqqani's Journey

**E**arly on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, Amb. Husain Haqqani was on his way from Washington to Islamabad, via London. Those were days, he now reminds his interviewer, when there was no wi-fi on commercial aeroplanes. The plane landed smoothly in Heathrow, where Amb. Haqqani turned on his mobile phone to find, he clearly remembers, 149 missed calls and countless text messages. One glance at the messages and he knew that he would not be getting on his onward flight to Islamabad. He called first, the airline helpdesk asking them to reroute his journey, and then President Asif Ali Zardari, who filled him in on the raid which ended early that morning.

As soon as Haqqani was back in Washington, he was presented with Islamabad's official statement, drafted by Secretary Bashir. It congratulated the American special forces on the killing of the Al-Qaeda leader, and said that even as Pakistan recognised its obligation to cooperate on efforts to eliminate Bin Laden, Washington had acted unilaterally without consulting Islamabad. Haqqani immediately worked on finalising a statement from President

Zardari, to be submitted to media outlets as an op-ed piece, reiterating Pakistan's position. Haqqani also went on air to be interviewed by CNN's Wolf Blitzer on prime time. In one interview after another, Haqqani performed his duty of amplifying Pakistan's official line: Although Bin Laden was found in Abbottabad, the world should not castigate Pakistan; and, as a corollary, Islamabad would devote the necessary resources to investigate how Bin Laden managed to conceal himself in all those years.

At that time, Husain Haqqani had been ambassador for three years, having taken his post in April 2008 towards the end of both the George W Bush administration in the US and the Pervez Musharraf military rule at home. Both countries had faced a crisis a few months earlier: Pakistan witnessed the assassination of two-time former Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto, and the US was



in the middle of the subprime mortgage crisis. Haqqani was appointed by the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) civilian-led government, which had been out of power for more than a decade. Analysts widely believed that Musharraf had not been forthright with the Bush administration—stating that Bin Laden was dead when in fact he was not. To be sure, the Bush administration had its other preoccupations, with the twin wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and an emerging global recession. The search for Bin Laden was put in the back burner.

The ghost of Bin Laden would resurface in 2009, when Barack Obama became president. Ambassador Haqqani recalls a meeting with the then CIA Director Leon Panetta, who told him that Washington was searching for Bin Laden and wanted Islamabad's cooperation, otherwise it could become a sore point in US-Pakistan relations.

According to Haqqani, Pakistan then went into “typical denial mode, and instead of trying to find out who helped Bin Laden, they went out of their way to find out who helped the Americans.” This created suspicion around American aid agencies and western NGOs operating in Pakistan. Haqqani says Pakistan missed the forest for the trees. Eventually, opposition parties blamed the incumbent People's Party and spent time finding scapegoats, including Haqqani. Current prime minister and then opposition leader, Imran Khan, called him “America's Ambassador to Pakistan based in Washington,” Haqqani recalls with obvious regret.

Haqqani recalls one conversation in October 2010 in Washington DC with the then Chief of Army Staff, Gen. Ashfaq Kayani, and Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi. Haqqani joined them for a meeting, along with Cameron Munter and the then US National Security Adviser Tom Donilon. President Obama later joined the meeting and, according to Haqqani's recollection, said: “We want to find and eliminate Bin Laden and would like to do it with Pakistan's cooperation, but frankly if we don't get effective cooperation, we will do what we have to do by ourselves.”

“After the raid and Bin Laden’s killing, Pakistan went out of their way not to find out who helped Bin Laden, but to find out who helped the Americans.”

Following the events of 2 May 2011, Islamabad was furious over what it believed was Washington’s decision to keep them in the dark about the raid. Haqqani pointed out that Obama had indeed sent them the memo about the hunt for Bin Laden, only Islamabad failed to read it diligently. Today Haqqani says investigations in Pakistan continue to raise more questions than answers, as to who exactly helped Bin Laden. Like Munter, Haqqani also believes that while no one in the Pakistani government helped Bin Laden, “someone” in Pakistan knew something.

In the same month, in an interview with Christiane Amanpour on ABC,<sup>3</sup> Haqqani was asked: “Was Pakistan incompetent or complicit?”

“I couldn’t say anything,” recalls Haqqani, “because I wasn’t privy to anything. I wasn’t in Pakistan, wasn’t in Abbottabad, not the district collector there and neither was I in intelligence, how could I possibly know if Pakistan was incompetent or complicit?” As ambassador, he says, all he could do was to tell his government what Washington thought, and thereafter wait for instructions. “Ambassadors don’t set policy, you execute it.”

# Sleepless in Islamabad

**M**eanwhile, in Islamabad on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, Amb. Munter sat at the embassy with intelligence officers. He tells this author that it was like a scene from the Hollywood movie, *Zero Dark Thirty*, which dramatised the hunt for Bin Laden. (Of course Munter thinks that the movie took too much cinematic liberties with its depiction of intelligence gathering.) Munter watches the first helicopter showing up, landing outside of the compound and securing the perimeter. The second helicopter was supposed to hover above the building but it did not go according to plan. Munter now says his mind immediately went back to the failed American raid in Iran in 1980, as he watched the scene—and he thought that the US would fail in the mission to kill Bin Laden.

The Navy Seals would then be key to the success of the kill. The first helicopter left the scene, with the Seals carrying Bin Laden's body, and the second one was blown up. Munter now says had it not been for the second Black Hawk going down, perhaps there would have been less diplomatic backlash.

Once it was confirmed that the Seals were out and had avoided an F-16 dogfight with incoming Pakistani jets, Munter quickly phones Secretary of State Hilary Clinton to ask, "What do I tell the Pakistanis"? Her helpful guidance, as he calls it, was to say nothing. And that was when Salman Bashir called Munter on his mobile phone and asked if he knew anything about the "helicopter crash." Following instructions, Munter only said that "I will have to get back to you." He did not want to say anything else, until the president made a statement. Both of them knew why the other was awake.

I now ask Munter if there was any concern that if the Black Hawks were not able to get out in time and a firefight ensued between US and Pakistani forces, that there would not be a contingency plan in terms of negotiations and release. Munter says that as a diplomat, he was not aware of the intelligence details and so he did not know if he would need to negotiate a hostage release. Munter shudders to think had both helicopters been destroyed and if the troops were to have been involved in a firefight, the US forces did not have a Plan B. Munter could only speculate in retrospect that if the operation had failed, negotiations would have likely been a military conversation, with the US Afghanistan Command dealing with Rawalpindi.

# The Days After

**M**unter had no idea what the repercussions would be of the killing of Bin Laden. He was a career foreign service officer and one of the State Department's many diplomats based overseas, but none would have had it harder on May 2, 2011, when Munter walked into the meeting room to see Gen. Ashfaq Kayani and the then Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) Director General, Lt. Gen. Ahmed Shuja Pasha. In any other civilian democracy, Munter would be quizzed by the prime minister, the president, and perhaps the foreign minister; but Rawalpindi had the clout on national security.

The first words that both Generals uttered to Munter were, "Congratulations, you got him." Perhaps there would have been fury if it was any other nation involved, but certainly not the one to which it was the weaker ally. The day after, Pakistan was making headlines, and as 'Abbottabad' set a trend on Twitter, the world was getting to know of the garrison town, and not for a good reason.

To be sure, Munter's first worry was the public reaction. He says his mind quickly raced back to 1979, to an attack on the Grand Mosque in Saudi Arabia. Many in Pakistan believed it was the CIA that hatched the conspiracy and the embassy in Islamabad was then targeted; four people were killed. Munter feared an encore, and worried too, about a possible backlash on his employees; he advised them to come in to the compound for their security.

In that meeting with Gen. Kayani and Lt. Gen. Pasha, it did not take long for Munter to be subjected to firm questioning on why Pakistan was not told of the raid. Today Munter says that as a diplomat, "You don't have a lot of money, you don't have a lot of power, you merely have your word." Munter returned the candidness and told the officers that the US did not trust Pakistan enough. "General Kayani and Lt. General Pasha were either terrific actors or were genuinely taken aback," says Munter. Among the public, ire often turned into facetiousness, as some commented that Pakistani antennas can pick up signals from Indian channels for Bollywood films, but not from two American Black Hawks that trespass the country's sovereignty.

Munter then tells me of the arsenal of intelligence that they collected from the computer hard drives recovered from the compound in Abbottabad. After an exhaustive combing by the CIA, they found nothing in those intelligence that alluded to any form of complicity from anyone in uniform or in government, or anyone within the highways of Islamabad and Rawalpindi. However, that did not stop the clarion call from many in the US—including the Republican primary challenger, Newt Gingrich—to rethink the country’s alliance with Pakistan.

Munter and Haqqani agree that there could have been some collusion at the lower levels of government, but nothing that would besmirch the integrity of the Pakistani government and confirm allegations that it was behaving like a “rogue state”. Otherwise, abject humiliation would follow for the political leadership and make Zardari’s time in office very difficult. Munter says this made it challenging for him to build bridges in the remaining days of his time in Islamabad, but also that he concurs with Haqqani, referring to the October 2010 meeting.

“Immediately after the raid, the US ambassador was asked by Pakistan officials why they were not told of the raid. Munter told them that the US did not trust Pakistan enough.”

# Diatribes to Diplomacy

In Washington, Husain Haqqani had his work cut out for him. He reached out to multiple levels of government, but most importantly, he acknowledged that President Obama had avoided speaking anything negative about Pakistan. Although Bin Laden was found in Pakistan, Obama continued to view them as an important ally in the US's 'war on terror'. Haqqani advised the Zardari PPP government that relations were not in a tailspin. Islamabad and Rawalpindi had both given their blessings on the assassination, and now it was time for Pakistan to show itself as an honest broker. "Swallow the humiliation and move on," advised Haqqani. Zardari agreed and instructed Haqqani to execute the vision. It started with an op-ed piece in the *Washington Post*,<sup>4</sup> followed by successive TV interviews. Haqqani would repeat, one: "We are allies in the war on terror;" and two, that "no one in the highest echelons of the military or government was involved. But we will find out where the security apparatus failed in Bin Laden coming in and staying undetected for so many years."

Haqqani laments that Pakistan could have at least pretended to absorb the humiliation and then move forward. "We didn't," he says. Haqqani considers that this was likely the decision of the Pakistani military leadership, which could have been expected given the graveness of the situation. Haqqani visited both houses of Congress to explain Pakistan's precarious position. The feedback he got was something he had warned Islamabad about—the coming rupture as US-Pakistan relations would hit a nadir. That even as diplomatically, the two remained allies, Haqqani was worried about the alliance itself. (He would later articulate all this in his book, *Magnificent Delusions*.) At the level of psyche, Haqqani says, something had changed for the worse.

The epiphany hit him when he spoke to then Alabama Senator Jeff Sessions later that year. Sessions told Haqqani that his constituents had begun asking him about Pakistan—something they had never done before. Sessions, a Republican, had been a proponent of aid to Pakistan from his earlier days in Congress. Sessions articulated what Haqqani had feared: that the American people will be creating their own narrative based on what they know—that the world's most wanted man was found safely ensconced in an ally country, and therefore someone is telling lies.



“In successive TV interviews, the Pakistani ambassador to the US would repeat two things: that the two countries are allies in the war on terror, and that Pakistan will find out where security failed.”

In Pakistan, Haqqani says, the mood was different: it was less about assessing the security lapses of how Bin Laden got into Abbottabad and stayed undetected until Obama told the world, but more on how weak the apparatus was, that US forces could walk in and walk out and leave a tip of a broken helicopter behind. Haqqani says Pakistan never got over this, and an opposition leader named Imran Khan turned the screws on Haqqani, questioning his loyalty to Islamabad. Khan went on a rampage to block the NATO convoys, and NATO supply lines via Pakistan were cut as drone strikes on the border increased. There was also the Salala incident,<sup>5</sup> Munter reminds Haqqani and me. The Pakistani sentiment was more important than the rationality of policy discourse, bemoans Haqqani.

For Munter, he considers the first 72 hours after the raid as most difficult for him and his counterpart in Washington. Munter wondered how they could have taken the Bin Laden assassination as a pivot for strengthening US-Pakistan relationship, especially on the war on terror, when the trust deficit was growing between Washington and Islamabad. This exacerbated the anti-American feelings for many fringe groups in Pakistan, while many others who were previously circumspect of Washington's intentions, now moved to the virulently anti-America camp. The first ten years of diplomacy in the new century, following 9/11, with the war on terror, went away in a single year. The year 2011, Munter says, was “the year from hell” in US-Pakistani relations. Both sides retreated from fostering stronger growth, he says, as each distrusted the other to act as an honest broker.

# The Continuing Dual Narrative

**H**aqqani says that because Pakistan has been an important ally to the US since the Cold War era, the perception in Islamabad was that America would do according to what is in Pakistan's best interest. This had been proven a fallacy, however, given the misunderstanding of Washington's own interest and the asymmetry of power.

Haqqani sums up the irony: the American president under whose administration the bilateral relations plummeted, was the one who knew Pakistan best. Obama went to Pakistan as a college student, learned to cook dal and keema from his Pakistani roommate, and had a fair understanding of Pakistani culture. Yet he never visited Pakistan during his two terms in office.

Haqqani invokes the Rashomon effect and speculates: "What if Pakistan had been informed?" Haqqani in fact raised the question with Mike Morrell, the Deputy Director of the CIA at that time and a friend to both Munter and himself. Haqqani then says something that would shake up the staunchest Pakistani nationalist and provoke the ire of Rawalpindi: "I am sympathetic to the American process here, because the risk of letting Pakistan know, given the uncertainty of a mole was far too great. What if he was tipped out, what if he escaped, the risks were far too great."

Munter agrees with the dual narrative in the psyche of Islamabad and Washington. From Islamabad's perspective, it was the same old story of Washington using Pakistan for its own immediate military needs; for Washington, it was Pakistan's Janus-faced duplicity in the war on terror. Munter says that while the two countries can no longer repair the past, perhaps in the future, they can get to a place of a more honest, albeit less ambitious working relationship.

Looking back, Haqqani agrees that even after a decade, there are still more questions than answers about the events leading to Bin Laden's killing. Haqqani says he had clamored for a full and thorough investigation, as it would have served US-Pakistan relations well, even if it meant naming officials who may have been involved. Both Haqqani and Munter dismiss the reportage of Seymour Hersch,<sup>6</sup> where he alleged that the US was not fully honest about having acted on its own in finding and killing Bin Laden; that in fact the US did have Pakistani cooperation, choosing not to give them any credit in the end.

Haqqani met Hersch shortly before his story came out. Hersch's story did not make it on his regular column, but instead in the *London Review of Books*, because he did not have a second source; rather he only had one, a retired American personnel. This was Hersch's last big story, says Haqqani, because his credibility was thereafter tarnished by a report based largely on speculation.

As we wind down our three-way conversation, I ask both Haqqani and Munter whether the 2nd of May 2011 expedited their retirement. After all, Haqqani soon fell out of favour with Islamabad and lost his post in Washington in 2011; he is now at the Hudson Institute in Washington. Munter, meanwhile, retired a few years later and moved to head the EastWest Institute in New York before retiring and moving to Prague, from where he spoke to me.

In response, Haqqani says, "You don't expect to be a diplomat forever." As someone who was not a career service officer, he considers it an achievement to have served the world's oldest democracy, representing a country that has only had intermittent democracy. Both Haqqani and Munter say they tried to prevent the bilateral relations from taking a nosedive.

Munter says he does regret that it was during his term when Afghanistan and Pakistan were hyphenated to become a composite 'Af-Pak' problem for Washington and its allies.<sup>b</sup> He quotes then Vice President Joe Biden who said, "You have one country with 200 million and nuclear weapons and another country with 40 million, which one do you need to get right first?"<sup>7</sup>

Looking back, Munter contemplates, "You don't expect to be a diplomat, if you don't expect to deal with a crisis. Wining and dining with people like Husain Haqqani, that's the fun part. However, at the end of every cycle, a diplomat gives himself a grade." He says he took what could have been a catastrophe, and "limited it to a disaster."

Munter regrets, too, that during his entire term in Pakistan, he was unable to find himself the best biryani. Haqqani says he shall help Munter in this quest, and tells him to stop searching in Islamabad, and instead head south to Karachi.

“From Islamabad’s perspective, it was the same story of Washington using Pakistan for its own military needs; for Washington, Pakistan was only proving that it was Janus-faced.”

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<sup>b</sup> The term 'Af-Pak' was coined by Richard Holbrooke, who Munter says was an American diplomat who was a larger-than-life figure.

# Endnotes

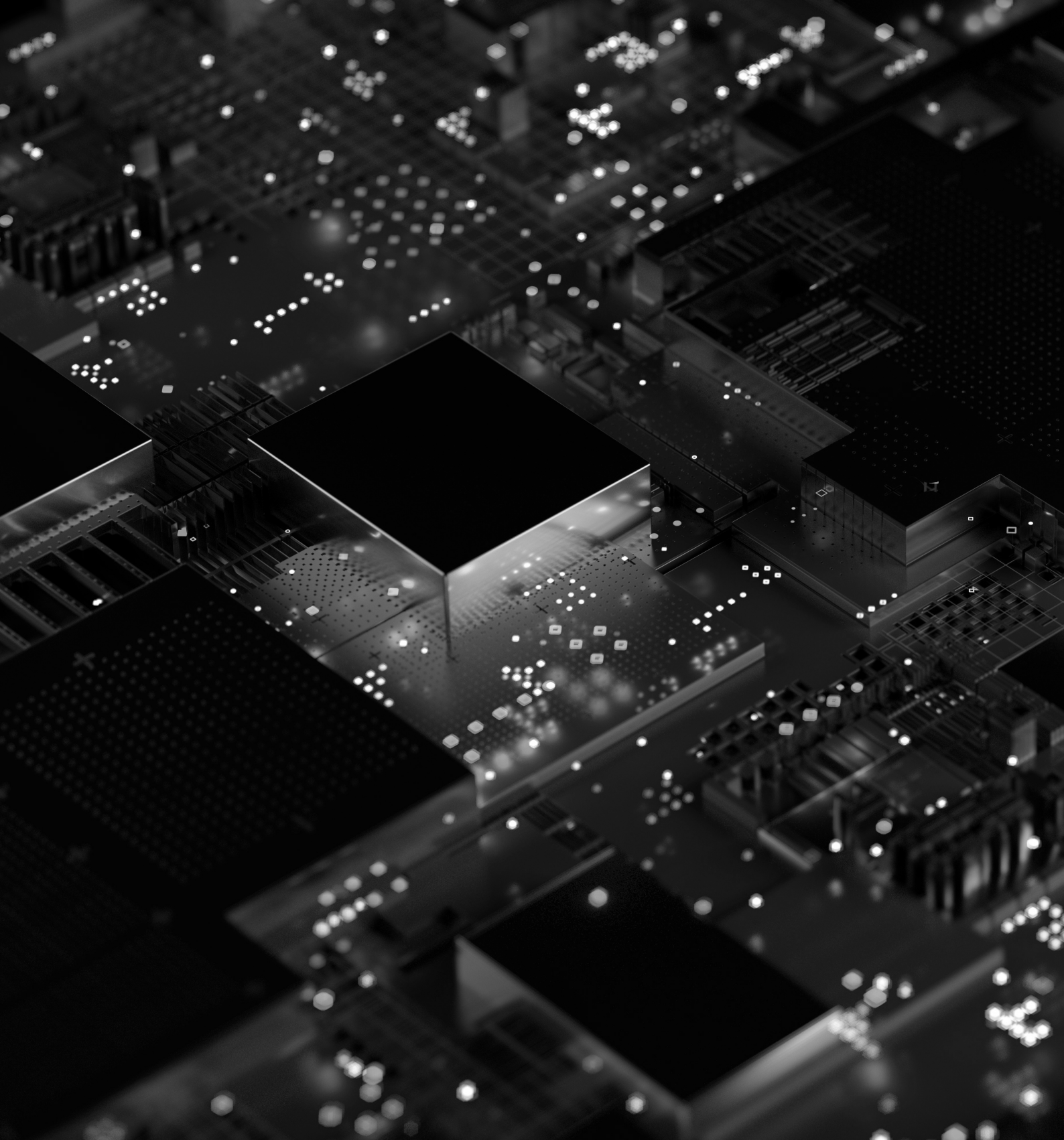
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