

US imposes sanctions on Pakistani nuclear firm

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In an unexpected move, the Bush administration has imposed two-year sanctions on Khan Research Laboratories (KRL), a Pakistani company, accusing it of importing missiles from the state-owned Changgwang Sinyong Corp of North Korea (CSCNK). Similar sanctions were imposed on the North Korean company last August, which have now been extended to March 2005.

The sanctions, which were announced publicly on March 31, prohibit US government and non-government institutions from engaging in any trade or technological exchange with KRL. These are the first new restrictions since Washington imposed economic measures on both Pakistan and India following nuclear tests by the two countries in 1998.

US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher told a press conference on April 1 that the penalties had been imposed on the KRL for “a material contribution to the efforts of a foreign country, person or entity” to obtain or develop so-called weapons of mass destruction or missiles. When questioned, however, he refused to elaborate on the allegations against KRL.

Last October Washington claimed that North Korea had admitted during bilateral talks to have started a uranium enrichment program in breach of international agreements. The allegation led to a rapid escalation of tensions between the US and North Korea as Pyongyang withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Agreement, expelled international inspectors and restarted its nuclear facilities frozen under a 1994 deal with the US.

At the time, US officials alleged that Pakistan assisted North Korea to develop the uranium enrichment program in exchange for missiles and missile technology. The US has provided no evidence, other than the claim, recently leaked to the media, that

an American spy satellite spotted a Pakistani military transport making an unannounced trip to North Korea last year. Pakistani spokesmen have repeatedly denied the US allegations.

KRL is Pakistan’s main nuclear company. It is state-owned and named after its former head, Abdul Qadeer Khan, who played a key role in developing the country’s nuclear weapons. Khan is now working as a government adviser. The company has previously been subject to US sanctions—in 1993, over allegations of missile procurement from China and, in 1998, after Pakistan’s nuclear test.

Although the 1998 bans on KRL expired in April 2000, Pakistan remained under a US economic embargo. Washington lifted most of the restrictions after Pakistan’s military strongman Pervez Musharraf threw his support behind the Bush administration’s “global war on terrorism”; in particular the invasion of Afghanistan, following the September 11, 2001 attacks on the US.

Musharraf denied any collaboration with North Korea when US Secretary of State Colin Powell broached the issue earlier this year. But he did offer the White House assurances that Pakistan would “not have further contacts” with North Korea. The Pakistani military regime, which is heavily dependent on the US politically and economically, is desperate to avoid any rift.

The latest restrictions on KRL are largely cosmetic, as the company has no trade or contact with the US. The decision to reimpose the sanctions, months after the allegations of military cooperation between Pakistan and North Korea is, no doubt, designed to signal Washington’s displeasure at recent political developments in Pakistan.

Musharraf’s abandonment of the Taliban regime and

support for the US war on Afghanistan, including the provision of military bases, generated widespread opposition which has been exploited by various Islamic fundamentalist groups in Pakistan. Last October Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal (MMA)—a coalition of six Islamicist parties—won 53 seats in the national parliament and control over the regional administrations in North West Frontier Province and Balochistan.

In the lead-up to the US-led invasion of Iraq, there were large antiwar demonstrations in Pakistani cities, some of which were organised by the MMA. At the end of March, 300,000 people took part in a rally against the Iraq war in the city of Peshawar in North West Province. While the MMA have played a prominent role, the protests reflect broad public hostility to the brutal attack on Iraq as well as to the US intervention on the Indian subcontinent and Musharraf's antidemocratic rule.

MMA leader Fazlur Rehman told the rally on March 30 that “the message to the world” was that “Islamabad’s policy on the Iraq issue does not reflect the feelings of 140 million Muslims” in the country. Another MMA speaker, Maulana Sami-ul-Haq, called on the government to expel Federal Bureau of Intelligence (FBI) agents who are engaged in hunting down alleged Al Qaeda members and to shut the country’s bases to the US military.

The protests compelled Musharraf to distance himself somewhat from Washington. Prime Minister Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali, who relies on the MMA for his parliamentary majority, was compelled to postpone a planned trip to Washington in mid-March. Last month Foreign Minister Khurshid Mehmood Kasuri declared that Islamabad “deplored the attack on Iraq”, at the same time criticising Hussein for “failing to disarm”.

Washington has no doubt taken notice of these political developments, particularly the failure of Pakistan to back a UN Security Council resolution legitimising the US war on Iraq. Recent press reports have also noted Washington’s concern at the reemergence of armed Islamic extremist groups, that were banned by Musharraf but have taken on new names. These include militia such Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Tayyaba that have been responsible for attacks on Indian security forces in Indian-held Jammu and Kashmir.

Last weekend US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad bluntly warned Pakistan that anything that undermined the stability of Afghanistan was “a challenge to American interests”. He was speaking in Kabul after discussions in Islamabad with Pakistani officials over recent clashes between American troops and opposition militia near the Afghan-Pakistan border. He made clear that Musharraf had to do more to crack down on Afghan groups operating from Pakistani territory that are hostile to the US and its puppet administration in Kabul.

When the sanctions against KRL were announced MMA official Qasi Hussein Ahmed declared that this was proof that the US intended “to take action against Pakistan after Iraq”. There is no evidence, at this stage, that the Bush administration intends to make “regime change” in Islamabad the next item on its military agenda. However, like Khalilzad’s comments, the sanctions are a sharp reminder to Musharraf that matters could abruptly change if he fails to heed the warnings and implement all of the US demands.



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