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## ***New US sanctions will push Pakistan toward China***

While fresh US sanctions against Pakistan's missile program are intended to impede Islamabad's growing defense ties with Beijing, these punishments are instead likely to cause a rift with Washington and drive Pakistan further into China's embrace.



Photo Credit: The Cradle

Once a pivotal ally in the Cold War and a frontline partner during the Global War on Terror, Pakistan's relationship with the US has taken a sharp downturn. The latest blow comes as Washington imposes new sanctions on Islamabad, accusing it of developing ballistic missile capabilities that pose a potential threat to US security.

Speaking at a Washington think tank on 19 December, US Deputy National Security Advisor Jon Finer warned of Islamabad's "capacity to strike targets well beyond South Asia, even in the US," and called Pakistan a growing threat – this came the day after the State Department imposed sanctions on Pakistan's state-owned defense agency and three commercial organizations for its long-range ballistic missile program.

His comments also marked the first time that a senior US official compared Pakistan to Russia, North Korea, and China – nuclear states that “tend to be antagonistic toward the US.”

### **A new low in US–Pakistan relations**

In an executive order issued on 18 December, State Department spokesman Matthew Miller announced that the US “targeted proliferators of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery.”

Specifically, sanctions were imposed on Pakistan’s National Development Complex (NDC) – a key defense and aerospace organization – and three Karachi-based companies: Akhtar and Sons Private Limited, Affiliates International, and Rockside Enterprise. Their US-based assets, if any, are now frozen, and they are barred from conducting business within US jurisdiction.

Criticizing the move, Abdullah Khan, managing director of the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS) in Islamabad, tells *The Cradle*:

**“Direct sanctions against a government entity have further deepened the mistrust between the US and Pakistan. It will not only hamper Pakistan’s efforts to keep a delicate balance between the two powers, [that is, China and the US] but will further push Pakistan into the Chinese camp.”**

He notes that while Pakistan–US relations have historically been strained by frictions and limitations, the past two years saw significant improvement, fostering optimism for a positive trajectory despite minor differences. However, the imposition of sanctions on a state-owned institution has deepened the divide between the two countries.

### **South Asia's uneven nuclear playing field**

On 21 December, Pakistan’s Foreign Ministry called the US decision “unfortunate and biased,” with Islamabad dismissing Finer’s comments and framing the sanctions as part of a broader strategy to disrupt regional stability.

According to Pakistan, its defense capabilities are rooted in safeguarding sovereignty and maintaining peace in South Asia. The ministry warned that “The latest installment of sanctions defies the objective of peace and security by aiming to accentuate military asymmetries,” a veiled reference to its nuclear-armed rival, India.

The harsh reality lies in Islamabad's efforts to expose the double standards the US applies to Indian and Pakistani missile programs. While India has surged ahead in missile development, leaving Pakistan trailing, Washington has largely turned a blind eye to New Delhi's advancements.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, a Pakistani defense analyst explains to *The Cradle*:

**“The Multiple Independently Targetable Re-entry Vehicles (MIRV) technology in the Indian missile, Agni-V, makes it a big step forward in ballistic missile technology. It can carry multiple nuclear warheads. Its range and innovation surpass those of Pakistan's Ababeel missile. Furthermore, Indian missiles boast an extended range that enables them to target vast swathes of areas, including Europe, Africa, and parts of the United States.”**

He clarifies that India's development of a two-tiered missile defense system demonstrates a more comprehensive approach to missile defense technology compared to Pakistan. A “two-tiered missile defense system,” he says, was the latest defense technology against ballistic missiles. According to the analyst, this defense system uses high-altitude and low-altitude interception mechanisms to destroy a missile before it reaches its target.

Indian defense writer Ritu Sharma elaborates on the characteristics of the Indian missile, Agni-V, saying that it has significantly strengthened New Delhi’s deterrent posture vis-à-vis China and Pakistan.

China possesses advanced missile technology, such as the Dong Feng-41, enabling it to target any Indian city from a range of 12,000 to 15,000 kilometers. The Agni-V missile system has strategically positioned the northernmost region of China within India's direct line of sight, and its canister launch capability facilitates a more rapid deployment.

### **Concerns over Pakistan’s military ties with China**

In its immediate response to the US sanctions, Pakistan defended its ballistic missile technology – a countermeasure to India's expanding missile capabilities in South Asia. However, the US does not perceive Pakistan solely through the prism of its rivalry with India.

Instead, Washington sees Islamabad’s increasing military collaboration with Beijing as a broader concern. This evolving partnership has fueled US suspicions about Pakistan's intentions, particularly regarding its defense ties with China.

Finer's remarks illustrate the outgoing Biden administration's apprehension over the “China-assisted Pakistan ballistic missile program,” which Washington claims poses a direct threat to US homeland security.

But Dr Abdul Rauf Iqbal, a senior research scholar at the Institute for Strategic Studies, Research and Analysis (ISSRA) at Islamabad's National Defence University (NDU), tells *The Cradle* that Pakistan's military focus is on its own borders – and not over the Atlantic Ocean:

**“Pakistan’s defense strategy is threat-specific, primarily focused on countering India's challenges. The Indian rapid military modernization has made it absolutely necessary**

**for Pakistan to acquire advanced, long-range capabilities, but it should not be misconstrued as a threat to the US.”**

Iqbal expresses surprise at the very notion that Pakistan’s arsenal might target the US. “While such a misconception could be seen as a backhanded compliment to Pakistan’s growing capabilities, it is deeply concerning if taken at face value,” he adds.

Dr Ghulam Ali, Deputy Director of the Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS), offers another perspective, telling *The Cradle* that both China and Pakistan have already rejected the Biden administration's allegations.

**“China and Pakistan cooperated in strategic weapon developments from the late 1970s to the early 1990s to a limited extent. To my understanding, once China started joining non-proliferation regimes, its cooperation with Pakistan increasingly came within the parameters set by international norms because China gradually wanted to project itself as a responsible rising power that adheres to and respects international covenants regarding proliferation.”**

For Ali, the notion of Pakistan being clubbed with China, Russia, and North Korea likely stems from the broader US–China competition.

This is not the first instance of the US targeting China and Pakistan for alleged missile-related collaborations. In October 2023, Washington imposed sanctions on three Chinese companies and one Pakistani firm, accusing them of supplying missile technology. Similarly, last September, the State Department sanctioned a Chinese research institute and several firms, alleging their involvement in Pakistan’s Shaheen-3 and Ababeel long-range systems.

### **Why does the US perceive a former non-NATO ally as a threat?**

Dr Iqbal believes that the US action against Pakistan is a form of coercion to prevent Pakistan from strengthening its strategic partnership with China. The incoming Trump administration, he says, might use these restrictions as a bargaining tool to extract concessions from Islamabad.

According to Iqbal, Pakistan’s defense inventory is increasingly leaning toward China, reflecting the depth of their long-term bilateral relations and the trust accumulated along the way. If anything, in Islamabad today, many may interpret the recent US sanctions as a by-product of India's increasing influence in Washington, with the aim of undermining Pakistan's strategic trajectory and regional partnerships.

As Pakistan contends with the fallout from these sanctions, it faces a pivotal decision: to yield to external pressure and curtail its ballistic missile program, or to uphold its strategic priorities and stand its ground.

Meanwhile, public discourse on social media has shifted toward alternative strategies, with many advocating for Islamabad to prioritize the stalled Iran–Pakistan Gas Pipeline project, even if it means defying US-imposed restrictions on dealing with Iran.

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