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Pakistan's New Long-Range Missile Development

On December 18, 2024, the U.S. Department of State announced the imposition of sanctions on Pakistan's National Development Complex (NDC), which "has worked to acquire items in furtherance of Pakistan's long range ballistic missile program." The State Department also imposed sanctions on three other Pakistani entities that supply the NDC with items and equipment for the program.

The next day, then-Principal Deputy National Security Advisor Jonathan Finer said Islamabad "has developed increasingly sophisticated missile technology, from long-range ballistic missile systems to equipment that would enable the testing of significantly larger rocket motors. If these trendlines continue, Pakistan will have the capability to strike targets well beyond South Asia, including in the United States, raising real questions about Pakistan's intentions." Former Biden Administration officials have since elaborated on Finer's claims.

Pakistan has denied seeking to develop a missile capable of targeting the United States. On December 26, 2024, the Pakistani Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that Pakistan's nuclear weapons program "is defensive in nature" and "not at all directed against the United States or any other country," and that the "modest" missile program could not "threaten the security of a superpower." Trump Administration officials have not publicly commented on Pakistan's long-range missile development.

Congress previously has expressed interest in Pakistan's missile and nuclear weapons programs. In addition to monitoring Islamabad's missile and nuclear weapons programs via hearings and congressionally mandated executive branch reports, Congress has authorized the President to impose sanctions to hinder the export and import of items related to foreign governments' nuclear and missile programs.

Background: History and Purpose of Pakistan's Missile Programs

The U.S. government has long monitored Pakistan's missile and nuclear weapons programs, and has warned of possible nuclear conflict between Pakistan and India. The 2024 U.S. Intelligence Community Annual Threat Assessment notes "the potential for heightened tension between Pakistan and India could increase the risk of nuclear escalation." The 2025 assessment does not address the topic.

Pakistan began its nuclear weapons program in 1972 and first tested nuclear weapons in 1998. Islamabad's ballistic missile program, which began during the 1980s, received assistance from the People's Republic of China (PRC, or China) and North Korea. U.S. government actions indicate that Islamabad still receives assistance from the PRC; the State Department imposed sanctions in April and September 2024 on several PRC entities for supplying items to Pakistan's ballistic missile program.

Pakistan has continued to develop missiles of increasing range and sophistication. Islamabad has flight-tested on several occasions the country's longest-range missile, the solid-fuel road-mobile Shaheen-III ballistic missile. Official Pakistani and U.S. sources say this medium-range missile has a range of 2,750 kilometers and, according to a 2015 Pakistani Inter Services Public Relations press release, is capable of delivering nuclear weapons.

Islamabad, according to official Pakistani and U.S. sources, also has flight-tested the solid-fuel medium-range Ababeel ballistic missile, which has a range of 2,200 kilometers and the ability to deliver multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles (MIRV). This missile, according to Pakistan, is capable of delivering nuclear weapons.

According to a 2023 estimate, Pakistan's nuclear arsenal consists of approximately 170 nuclear warheads deliverable by aircraft, as well as by various ballistic and cruise missiles. A May 28, 2025, Armed Forces of Pakistan statement asserts that Islamabad's "nuclear capability remains solely for defensive purposes." According to an April 2022 Defense Intelligence Agency statement to Congress, Islamabad "perceives nuclear weapons as key to its national survival, given India's nuclear arsenal and conventional force superiority."

Pakistan has maintained that the country's nuclear arsenal is solely intended to deter an Indian nuclear or conventional attack. Zamir Akram, a retired Pakistani ambassador and current adviser to Pakistan's Strategic Plans Division (SPD), wrote in a June 10, 2025, article that Pakistan's "nuclear/strategic doctrine has clearly stated that its [nuclear weapons] capabilities are designed to exclusively deter India and are not directed against any other country."

According to a 2024 estimate, India has approximately 172 nuclear weapons deliverable by aircraft, land-based ballistic missiles, and ballistic missile submarines. According to official U.S. sources, India's longest-range missile is the road-mobile solid-fuel Agni V missile, which New Delhi has flight-tested but not deployed. This missile, which is reportedly nuclear-capable, has a range exceeding 5,000 kilometers and, the Indian government stated in 2024, includes MIRV capability.

ICBM Development

Speaking from prepared remarks at a widely reported Washington, DC, event, Finer said that Pakistan's efforts to produce larger rocket engines generated concerns that Islamabad is developing a longer-range ballistic missile. States possessing "nuclear weapons and the missile capability to directly reach the U.S. homeland ... tend to be adversarial toward the United States," adding, "it's hard for us to see Pakistan's actions as anything other than an emerging threat to the United States." In a June 2025 *Foreign Affairs* article, Vipin Narang, former Department

of Defense official, and Pranay Vaddi, former National Security Council official, wrote, “U.S. intelligence agencies have concluded that the Pakistani military is developing” an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) “that could reach the continental United States.”

The December 2024 State Department announcement specified that the NDC has “worked to acquire items in furtherance of Pakistan’s long range ballistic missile program—including special vehicle chassis intended to be used as launch support equipment for ballistic missiles and missile testing equipment.” Whether Pakistan has obtained this equipment is unclear. According to press reports citing U.S. officials, the long-range missile development began several years ago; completing such a missile could take as long as a decade.

Based on its stated deterrent requirements, Pakistan’s need for a missile capability such as the one described above is unclear. Pakistan has consistently maintained that the country’s nuclear arsenal is meant to deter an Indian nuclear or conventional attack; according to Pakistani officials, the country’s nuclear arsenal is sufficient to deter such an attack. Khalid Ahmed Kidwai, a retired lieutenant general and former SPD director general, asserted in a May 26, 2023, speech that Islamabad’s nuclear arsenal has made the country “secure from external aggression.”

Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal also is able to target all of India’s nuclear weapons, Kidwai claimed in the same speech, explaining that Islamabad’s arsenal provides “full range coverage of the large Indian land mass and its outlying territories,” thereby leaving “no place for India’s strategic weapons to hide.” Discussing a May 2025 India-Pakistan military conflict, Kidwai assessed in a May 28, 2025, speech that Pakistan’s conventional and nuclear arsenals suffice to deter Indian nuclear or conventional attacks.

The Pakistani missile program described above appears to lack a role in deterring an Indian attack on Pakistan, a former Biden Administration official said in a June 13 communication with CRS. Arguing that Pakistan is developing an ICBM despite Islamabad’s “claims [that] its nuclear program is strictly focused on deterring India,” Narang and Vaddi posited that “Pakistan might be” developing the new missile “to deter the United States from either trying to eliminate its arsenal in a preventive attack or intervening on India’s behalf in a future Indian-Pakistani conflict.”

During a January 8, 2025, Islamabad event, Akram articulated potential rationales for developing a missile of increased range. A missile exceeding the Shaheen-III’s range may be necessary to reach Indian missiles deployed on bases in the Indian Ocean located “well beyond” the Shaheen-III’s range, he said, adding that India has sought to establish access to such bases. Akram also posited that Pakistan may need to develop an indigenous space launch vehicle or an anti-satellite weapon; ballistic missile programs can aid the development of such platforms.

In addition, Akram stated that Pakistan cannot “accept any kind of” limits on the country’s missile program.

U.S. Sanctions

According to the December 18, 2024, announcement, the State Department designated the NDC pursuant to Executive Order 13382, which, according to the Treasury Department, “blocks the property of specially designated [weapons of mass destruction] proliferators and members of their support networks,” thereby denying such entities “access to the U.S. financial and commercial systems.” The NDC “is responsible for” the country’s “development of ballistic missiles, including the SHAHEEN-series ballistic missiles,” the State Department announcement explains.

The State Department has previously imposed sanctions targeting Pakistan’s ballistic missile program. In April 2024, the State Department announced sanctions on entities based in Belarus and the PRC for supplying “missile-applicable items” to the NDC, including on a PRC-based entity for supplying the complex with “equipment for testing of large diameter rocket motors.” Previously, on September 12, 2024, the State Department announced sanctions on a PRC entity for assisting Pakistan with procuring equipment used to test “large diameter rocket motors.” Whether this procurement activity is related to the above-described new missile is unclear.

Options for Congress

Congress has monitored Islamabad’s missile and nuclear weapons programs via hearings and mandated executive branch reports; Congress could hold hearings on the above-described Pakistani missile program, as well as any related issues. Congress also could mandate that the executive branch issue reports covering India’s and Pakistan’s nuclear weapons and missile programs include any foreign assistance provided to those programs.

Congress previously has mandated such reports; Section 620F(c) of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended (P.L. 87-195; 22 U.S.C. §2376) required the President to submit annually to the Appropriations Committees, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and the Speaker of the House a report “on nuclear proliferation in South Asia, including efforts taken by the United States to achieve a regional agreement on nuclear nonproliferation” The State Department submitted the last of these reports in 2013; Section 1401 of P.L. 113-188, the Government Reports Elimination Act of 2014, repealed this requirement.

Congress could require or request the intelligence community to submit to Congress classified National Intelligence Estimate (NIEs) focusing on the missile programs of India, Pakistan, and perhaps other countries. The intelligence community previously provided such reports to Congress in response to a 1997 request from the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. Congress also could require the intelligence community to publish unclassified versions of such NIEs. In 1999 and 2001, the National Intelligence Council produced classified and public unclassified NIEs concerning ballistic missile proliferation; both estimates discuss India’s and Pakistan’s ballistic missile programs.

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