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How Al Qaeda seeks to buy Chinese arms

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KABUL, AFGHANISTAN - Islamic warriors, Chinese weapons, Pakistani spies, and American money. It was the formula that defeated the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1989.

Pakistani intelligence agents received millions of dollars from America's Central Intelligence Agency to buy Chinese guns. Pakistan then gave these weapons to Afghan guerrillas and to a foreign legion of holy warriors from all over the Islamic world, who defeated the Soviet Army in 1989.

Now, Afghanistan's top military and intelligence officials say this same Pakistani-Chinese weapons channel is being used for a very different purpose: to destabilize the new Afghan government of President Hamid Karzai, and to challenge the US military in the deserts and airspace of Afghanistan.

"China is a strategic friend of Pakistan, and they are capable of bringing such kind of weapons to Pakistan anytime so they can be used against our government," says Engineer Ali, chief of Afghanistan's intelligence agency, KHAD. "China does not want to create problems for us," he adds, "but the Pakistanis can deceive China. They can tell China that the weapons will be used for its own domestic purposes, but then use them for international terrorism."

An Afghan intelligence report, cited by the Monitor on Aug. 9, says that Al Qaeda has regrouped in Pakistan and is attempting to purchase Chinese anti-aircraft weapons. These Afghan charges are straining the already fragile relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, two key members of America's antiterrorism coalition.

At a press conference this week in Islamabad, Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf flatly denied that Pakistan was supporting Al Qaeda, and said instead that Al Qaeda had regrouped within Afghanistan "because of the weakness of the central transitional government in Kabul."

In response, Afghan Defense Minister Muhammad Fahim on Wednesday fumed that General Musharraf's charges were "false and baseless," and said that Al Qaeda had regrouped within the Pashtun tribal areas that both Afghanistan and Pakistan claim.

Afghan intelligence officials admit that they only have reports that Al Qaeda is attempting to buy Chinese anti-aircraft weapons. The sale, they say, has not taken place. And China vigorously denies Afghan claims that it's indirectly arming Al Qaeda. American and Afghan strategists agree it would be counterproductive for China to have any sort of arms-supplying relationship with Islamic radicals. China has its own longstanding Islamist militant tensions in the western province of Xinjiang, which borders Afghanistan.

But senior Afghan military sources – including those who fought during the anti-Soviet jihad – say that Pakistan's close military relationship with China continues to facilitate the flow of weapons into the region, and that could turn the tide of the war inside Afghanistan. In addition, they say, rogue agents within Pakistan's powerful Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency may be funneling these weapons to Islamists without the knowledge or approval of either China or Pakistan's own president.

ISI rogue elements helping Taliban?

"The people in the ISI today are the same people who created the Al Qaeda and the Taliban," says Gen. Mohammad Aslam Masoud, chairman of the National Defense and Security Commission in the Afghan president's office. "They will definitely try to buy missiles from China. I don't know if China is that stupid to give these weapons to them, but Pakistan can buy the missiles for themselves and give them to the terrorists."

Past history and ongoing military alliances show that China and Pakistan have not avoided supplying weapons to Islamic radicals. From 1979 to the Soviet defeat in 1989, Pakistan smuggled Chinese and other weapons

into Afghanistan, and gave them to seven Afghan Islamist parties and to thousands of fighters from across the Islamic world. The bulk of the weapons were Kalashnikov rifles purchased from China, Egypt, and a host of Eastern-bloc countries. But the most important weapons in turning the tide of the war were Chinese- and American-made shoulder-fired rockets, which allowed Afghan guerrillas to shoot down Soviet helicopters and low-flying jets.

General Masoud, himself a former guerrilla commander, says that Chinese weapons were crucial. "In the first days we got a few Kalashnikov rifles, but later they gave us surface-to-air missiles and rockets to shoot down the helicopters and planes," says Masoud. "After we got those weapons, the Soviet's air superiority was hurt, and step by step they lost territory to us."

China denies supplying any weapons to Al Qaeda, although it does admit to a long-term strategic relationship with Pakistan to counter the Soviet presence in Central Asia. But over the past 20 years, Pakistan has developed its own foreign-policy goals, and created close relationships with a number of hardline Islamist parties, including the Taliban. Pakistan's ISI maintained close contact with the Taliban leadership until Pakistan severed relations after Sept. 11.

In their final days, the Taliban themselves boasted that they had a strategic pact with China. Last October, the powerful Taliban commander Maulvi Jalaluddin Haqqani told reporters that China was "extending support and cooperation to the Taliban, but the shape of the cooperation cannot be disclosed." At the time, US officials discounted the statements as bluster.

"China has never had any contact with the Al Qaeda terrorist network, and certainly not military relations," said a foreign ministry spokesman in Beijing last week.

Ikram Sehgal, a Pakistani defense analyst based in Karachi, says, "The quantum of arms cooperation between China and Pakistan is a closely guarded secret. Pakistan depends heavily on China for aircraft and missile technology but is not totally dependent on it."

What is clear is that the vast majority of the weapons captured by US and allied forces since the fall of the Taliban last November have been Chinese made, say Afghan military chiefs. US military officials here say they have no statistics on the country of origin of weapons. "I don't know that we have evidence of continued flow of weapons into Afghanistan," says Lt. Col. Roger King, US military spokesman at Bagram air base. "We find weapons that have been placed in storage facilities. And we have found some equipment that was in relatively good condition, and didn't appear to be old, which could point to some efforts to resupply."

A view from the border

From his fortress on the edge of Spin Boldak, a town on the southeastern border with Pakistan, Major Mohammad Daud of the Afghan Border Security Force says he is absolutely certain that the Taliban and Al Qaeda are resupplying in Pakistan.

As a former guerrilla commander himself, Major Daud has long experience in dealing with the ISI and receiving weapons from the agency. And from what he and his men have seen, in patrols along the Afghan border, the Taliban are getting better and better armed.

"Our vehicles are the ones the Taliban left behind, our guns are their old guns that jam all the time," he laments. "Just the other day, our spies found out about a Taliban patrol coming into the country, so we laid an ambush. But when they arrived, they had better cars, better guns, and we had no choice. We had to let them go."

On a stroll through some bunkers, he picks through anti-aircraft weapons left behind by the Taliban. "Whatever we have now is Chinese. Rockets, missiles, they're all Chinese," says Daud. He picks up a Chinese shoulder-fired anti-aircraft rocket launcher. The most expensive and crucial part of the weapon, the optical sight, has been removed by the Taliban.

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