

House Chairman Warns of Consequences After Pakistani Scientist's Release

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Pakistan's release of alleged nuclear proliferator Abdul Qadeer Khan could affect U.S. aid to the country, according to a key House lawmaker.

The Obama administration also reacted with alarm to Khan's Feb. 6 release, while the Pakistani government sought to downplay the action. Khan, who had been under house arrest for five years, is regarded by many Pakistanis as a national hero for ushering the country into the nuclear age.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said she is "very much concerned" about a Pakistani court's decision to free Khan, who admitted but later recanted selling nuclear technology to Iran, Libya and North Korea.

Foreign Affairs Chairman Howard L. Berman, D-Calif., said, "I am deeply concerned that, by releasing him, the Pakistani government may in effect be giving him license to resume, perhaps directly, his past actions to aid, abet and profit from the spread of nuclear weapons."

There could be consequences for Pakistan, a central U.S. ally in global counterterrorism efforts, Berman said.

"Congress will take this into account as we review and create legislation on U.S.-Pakistan relations and the circumstances under which U.S. assistance is provided to Islamabad," Berman said in a statement.

The Pakistani ambassador to the United States, Husain Haqqani, tried to assuage U.S. fears.

"The release of A.Q. Khan . . . doesn't mean he goes from house arrest to take over the Pakistani nuclear program again. So therefore, we shouldn't make connections that are not relevant," Haqqani said Feb. 6 at a roundtable sponsored by George Washington University's Homeland Security Policy Institute. "Pakistan's nuclear materials are not toys laying around that somebody in the neighborhood is going to pick up and run away with. There are safeguards in place."

The Pakistani government's security measures had effectively addressed U.S. concerns about Khan's network and future proliferation, Haqqani said. He tried to put a positive spin on the situation, saying it could be seen as evidence of the fragile democracy's growing stability.

"For a country that is trying to be ruled by law instead of the law of its rulers, in that sense this may actually be a positive thing that the decision of Mr. Khan's fate has been taken by a court, and not by the executive branch of the government," Haqqani said.

'A Serious Proliferation Risk'

Berman wasn't convinced.

"U.S. officials have been prevented from interviewing Khan to try to determine the extent of the damage he has done to world stability," Berman said. "It is unclear whether the illicit smuggling network he created was fully dismantled even after he was placed under nominal 'house' arrest." State Department spokesman Gordon Duguid agreed, calling Khan's release "unfortunate."

"We believe A.Q. Khan remains a serious proliferation risk," Duguid said in a news briefing Friday.

Haqqani called the Khan matter “a closed chapter” and instead emphasized what he said is growing cooperation between U.S. and Pakistani intelligence services. He said fighting terrorism is now a priority throughout the Pakistani government, although he acknowledged that local perceptions of extremism can differ from the official government line.

Haqqani described a current brand of Pakistani anti-Americanism as believing “there are these Americans who are high-handed with us at airports, whose forces simply bomb us from the air, whose Congress always delays money for relief for our people when they don’t do that for their own corporations.”

To improve relations, Haqqani urged passage of a measure Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. introduced in the last Congress, when he was the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The measure would triple non-military aid to Pakistan. Clinton and current Foreign Relations Chairman John Kerry, D-Mass., support such legislation, which also would condition military aid to the country on cooperation in terrorism investigations and securing the border with Afghanistan.

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