

Missile-related technology sold to Beijing by Belarus

U.S. spy satellite photographed transporter in China

By Bill Gertz
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Belarus is assisting China's development of a new mobile intercontinental ballistic missile by providing key launcher-related technology and equipment, The Washington Times has learned.

The transfer of a Belarussian MAZ chassis, photographed by a U.S. spy satellite at Chinese missile plant last year, directly supports a new Chinese ICBM that will give Beijing a "major strike capability" against the western United States as well as U.S. allies and American forces in the Pacific within three years, according to a U.S. military intelligence report.

The move, confirmed by a Belarussian diplomat here, could also trigger economic sanctions against both countries under U.S. anti-proliferation laws.

According to the report by the Air Force National Air Intelligence Center, the presence of the six-axle chassis at the Beijing Nanyuan missile plant "suggests some relationship between this vehicle and the DF-31 program."

The DF-31 is China's newest and most advanced mobile ICBM, which the Air Force estimates will be deployed in the next three years. With a range of up to 5,000 miles, the new multiple-warhead missile could reach the western United States, as well as targets across Asia and the Pacific region, the report said.

The intelligence report, labeled "secret," says the chassis was made at the Minsk Automotive Factory in Belarus, known by its Russian acronym as a MAZ.

"The mobility of the MAZ is significantly better than that of heavy Chinese vehicles," according to the report. "For that reason, the Chinese will probably reverse-engineer the MAZ vehicle to better understand its superior characteristics."

The report said the MAZ is the same design as the chassis used in Soviet intermediate-range SS-20 nuclear missiles, which were dismantled under the 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty.

"Improved mobility is needed for the DF-31 TEL [transporter-

The administration has been reluctant to impose proliferation-related sanctions on China.

erector launcher]," the report says, noting that the current DF-31 is limited to travel on surfaced roads. "Improved chassis features will in turn improve off-road capabilities, increasing the number of potential deployment locations."

Disclosure of the Belarussian-Chinese cooperation comes as Congress continues debate on whether to renew most-favored-nation trade status for Beijing.

Valentin Rybakov, a diplomat at the Belarussian Embassy, confirmed this week that a MAZ chassis made in Minsk, Belarus, was sold to "a few countries, including China."

"This is actually a conversion project," Mr. Rybakov said.

The chassis was designed as a missile launcher but is now sold primarily as an "off-road truck" used in hauling jet fuel at airfields or coal from mines, Mr. Rybakov said.

It could not be learned whether the administration has approached either the Minsk or Beijing governments about the transfer.

An 1990 amendment to the Arms Export Control Act requires the U.S. government to impose sanctions for missile equipment or technology transfers involving systems covered by the 29-nation Missile Technology Control Regime, which limits exports of missiles that travel greater than 186 miles or carry warheads heavier than 1,100 pounds.

Belarus and China are not MTCR members, but the equipment in question is covered under the regime's Category 2.

"If the MAZ helps in the acquisition, design, development and production of a Category 1 system, it would trigger sanctions under the law," Mr. Spier said in an interview.

The DF-31 would fall under the

MTCR's Category 1, he said.

An administration arms official said that he was unfamiliar with the report of the MAZ vehicle in China, but that the question of sanctions under U.S. law would depend on the type of vehicle sent.

In past cases, Belarussian MAZ exports triggered U.S. diplomatic protests but fell short of requiring sanctions.

The SS-20 chassis falls under Category 2 of the MTCR, which lists "launch support equipment," the official said.

All SS-20 launchers were supposed to have been dismantled under the INF treaty, but a second arms control official said the treaty does not prohibit exports of new SS-20 chassis without launcher equipment.

Sven Kraemer, an NSC arms specialist during the Reagan administration, said exporting SS-20 MAZ vehicles would violate the spirit of the INF treaty, if not the letter.

The SS-20 was a large, triple-warhead missile that if deployed with a single warhead would have had intercontinental range, according to experts. Thus the technology of the chassis would be useful in developing an ICBM.

According to the Air Force report, the Chinese are not expected to convert the MAZ vehicle, which was photographed in China in May 1996, to an actual DF-31 launcher, but probably will copy key features to improve the mobility and performance of their existing mobile launchers.

Among those features: all-wheel independent suspension, higher ground clearance, driver-controlled central tire inflation and deflation systems; and large-diameter, wide-profile, variable-inflation tires.

Tire pressure controls are used in launch preparation.

Since 1994, the administration has been reluctant to impose proliferation-related sanctions on China. Last month, however, it punished two Chinese firms with sanctions for selling chemical weapons materials.

Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, Belarus' Communist leaders have turned away from democracy toward dictatorship.