



Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)

Title:	ANALYSIS OF PAKISTAN AIR FORCE
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The Pakistan Air Force (PAF) has been a major support to the Pakistan Army and an analysis of its functioning gives a deep insight into the strategic philosophy of the country as well as its strategic partnerships. Historically, the PAF has viewed India as its main threat and joined the American camp in 1952 against communist Soviet Union. As India's declaration of non-alignment came about, Pakistan became of significant importance to USA that was thus keen on supplying it with advanced equipment. With this, Pakistan's demands for military aid started inflating at an unexpected rate under the false assumption that all those countries fighting communism would receive unlimited funds from the US. As a result, in 1954 the US set up a Military Advisory Aid Group in Pakistan to monitor the military aid received by the country; about a fraction of its exaggerated demands were met.

Over the years, PAF was equipped with American aircraft and exposed to United States Air Force (USAF) training leading up to the second India-Pakistan War initiated by Pakistan in 1965. In the meantime the Indian Air Force (IAF) was still trying to expand and recover after the 1962 India-China War. Despite this, India was victorious in the war



showing that superior skill (of the Indian armed forces) could overcome the advantage of technologically superior equipment (enjoyed by Pakistan). However, the air war appears to have been a stalemate with neither side achieving air superiority. The war further led to an arms embargo by USA imposed against India and Pakistan, causing the latter to develop strategic relations with other countries who could possibly provide them military aid. The arms embargo proved costly to Pakistan as it was deeply dependent on American military supplies. India, on the other hand, was not affected as IAF had multiple sources for the same. Despite Pakistan being a member of USA-led alliances of CENTO and SEATO, the US treated both India and Pakistan at par when it came to the embargo as its main mission was to fight communism and not indulge in the India-Pakistan conflict. It is in this context that the Pakistan-China nexus took root as Pakistan had to lean towards another country for its supplies.

In 1971, India and Pakistan fought their third war, but this time around the PAF was wanting in numbers and the IAF was much better prepared in terms of training and quality of aircraft. Thus, Pakistan lost the war to the IAF's numerical and technological superiority, crumbling its belief of being a highly trained force comparable to India. With the liberation of Bangladesh – the former eastern part of the country – as an independent nation, the defeat of Pakistan in the war was complete.

The organisation of the PAF is similar to that of IAF. It operates from ten main air bases, with the Air Headquarters in Islamabad. PAF also has a number of satellite air bases activated for operations during war and exercises. Further, it has a force of about 19 fighter squadrons with approximately 408 aircraft. Its most advanced aircraft is the F-16, supplied by the US in 1983 to counter the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan. This was an opportunity for Pakistan to overcome the arms embargo. However, by 1987, Pakistan was known to have made the nuclear bomb with Chinese assistance. The end of Soviet invasion and the Pressler Amendment clearly indicated the reduced US interest in Pakistan. The amendment prohibited military aid to countries that acquired nuclear weapons as a result of which USA blocked the sale of 28 F-16s for which Pakistan had already paid (the original number was 36). Pakistan thus had to make do with inferior technology Chinese fighter aircraft. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks in 2001, Pakistan once again came to be seen as a frontline state

in the US' global war against terrorism, thereby enabling US supplies of 18 new F-16s and upgrades to all existing F-16s in 2005. The upgraded F-16s were enhanced with day and night precision strike capability.

The JF-17 is a multi-role fighter aircraft jointly developed under a joint venture project between China and Pakistan. It seems that the Chinese have developed the JF-17 mainly for the export market for third world countries looking to replace their old fleets with a low cost product. This made the equipment acquired by PAF nearly obsolete as quality was compromised and it was in no way comparable to Western products. Further, the enhanced detection capability of AEW/AWACS enabled PAF to change their air defence philosophy, enabling PAF to have more aircraft available for counter air strikes.

In conclusion, it can well be seen that the PAF may be numerically smaller than its Indian counterpart, but it is a well-trained force. Having said this, PAF cannot achieve superiority against IAF owing to its small size. Thus, IAF must maintain its technological and numerical superiority against the PAF to dominate the skies in the region. What is also of concern for India is the growing nexus between Pakistan and China. China remains one of PAF's major arms suppliers but has not been able to provide weapons of the desired quality. Further, it is estimated that by 2020, PAF will consist of almost 75% Chinese fighter aircraft of the JF-17 class. On one hand, this may not be such a bad thing given the relatively poor quality of Chinese supplies to PAF, but on the other hand, India must be aware and equipped to handle this all weather friendship which seems to be slowly transforming into a strategic partnership.
