



## MORE F-16 FIGHTER AIRCRAFT FOR PAKISTAN AIR FORCE

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In 1983 USA supplied Pakistan 40 F-16 aircraft to counter the Soviets who had invaded Afghanistan in 1979. Since then Pakistan has been trying to procure more F-16 with varying degrees of success and Pakistan now has 76 F-16 in its inventory. In March 2016, the US Senate cleared the sale of eight new Block 52 F-16 (6 F-16C and 2 F-16D) to Pakistan in a \$699 million deal under the Foreign Military Financing (FMF) programme<sup>1</sup>. The delivery of eight more F-16C/D will increase their holdings to 84<sup>2</sup>. This article discusses the political aspects of the F-16 for Pakistan.

The US government plans to finance most of the deal - \$ 499 million - from US aid and Pakistan has to pay only \$200 million<sup>3</sup>. The deal was not without its hiccups, in the Senate, with the final vote being 71 for and 24 against the motion. The powerful Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations committee, Bob Corker (Republican), was against the deal. His principal opposition was to the deal being funded by

American tax payer's money for a country known for its "duplicity" in USA's fight against terrorists in Afghanistan<sup>4</sup>. Senator Bob Corker said he will try to stop the funding from American aid. If that happens, an impoverished Pakistan will have to arrange for funds on its own. The US government has tried to justify the sale by saying that it will enhance Pakistan's capability to carry out counter terrorism operations and calling Pakistan a "strategic partner"<sup>5</sup>. What has not been explained is as to how a duplicitous Pakistan can be a strategic partner. Senator Rand Paul (Republican) has also opposed the sale raising concerns on Pakistan's support for terrorism and he said, "Pakistan is at best a frenemy. Part friend – and a lot of enemy"<sup>6</sup>. India has formally protested against the American decision to sell F-16 to Pakistan and expressed its "disappointment" on this matter. In a rare move the US ambassador was summoned to the MEA (Ministry of External Affairs) and told that India was displeased with the American decision<sup>7</sup>.

The first batch of F-16 in the 1980s were all the initial version of F-16A/B air superiority fighters – F-16A is the single seat fighter and F-16B is the dual seat trainer version. In 1988 Pakistan ordered another 71 F-16 out of which 28 were built but the deal ran into rough weather due to concerns on Pakistan's nuclear proliferation activities. By 1987, it was known that Pakistan had made the atom bomb with Chinese assistance<sup>8</sup>. Another factor which affected the sale of F-16 to Pakistan was the defeat of the Soviets and their exit from Afghanistan in 1989. The departure of the Soviets ended the importance of Pakistan to USA as a frontline state.

The 28 F-16 built for Pakistan were not delivered due to the Pressler amendment which prohibited military aid to countries having nuclear weapons. There were also reports in 1990 that Pakistan had modified some of its F-16 in Sargodha for nuclear weapon delivery<sup>9</sup>. Consequently, in 1990 USA blocked the sale of 28 F-16 for which Pakistan had made the payment. This was a setback to PAF modernisation plans in the 1990s and PAF had to make do with inferior technology Chinese fighter aircraft. After the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in USA, Pakistan's stock again went up in the eyes of the Americans as a frontline state in the global war against terrorism. Due to this reason the US government cleared the sale of 18 new F-16C/D Block 52 to Pakistan in 2005. Originally Pakistan wanted to purchase 36 aircraft but reduced the

order to 18 due to financial constraints. In addition, USA also agreed to upgrade Pakistan's existing F-16 with mid-life update (MLU). The MLU work was carried out in Turkey and 41 F-16 were upgraded in a contract signed by Pakistan with Turkish Aerospace Industries (TAI) in 2009. Pakistan procured another 13 F-16 (12 F-16A and 1 F-16B) from Jordan in 2014. Pakistan has plans to order MLU kits for all their older F-16A/B models and bring them at par with the new block-52 airframes.

The US government feels that sale of more F-16 to Pakistan will perhaps persuade Pakistan to assist USA in peace negotiations with the Taliban in Afghanistan. The US is also concerned about Pakistan's rising nuclear weapons programme and deployment of tactical nuclear weapons (TNW). The USA probably hopes that supply of F-16 will provide them the leverage to make Pakistan scale down on nuclear weapons<sup>10</sup>.

The F-16 deal also highlights the fact that despite strong US-India relations there is considerable divergence on Pakistan. The US understands that a small number of eight F-16s will not upset the strategic balance in Pakistan's favour in the India-Pakistan context. At the same time, perhaps, US feels that it's better to keep Pakistan in its fold lest it stray further into China's arms. The US also has to be wary of Pakistan leaning towards Russia with reports of Pakistan showing interest in Russian SU-35 fighter aircraft<sup>11</sup>.

India has taken the right step by conveying its strong displeasure to the US on this sale since it strengthens Pakistan's capabilities against India. Pakistan is known to have modified some of its F-16 for carrying nuclear bombs and these new advanced F-16 will add to Pakistan's nuclear delivery platforms. India's protest seems to be taking effect and this deal has now been put on hold by the US Senate because many senior members of Congress questioned the rationale of selling F-16 to Pakistan which the Obama administration says are required by Pakistan to counter terrorism. During the Congressional hearing, on April 27, 2016, of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, some members said that the F-16 could be used against India and the US government needs to review its decision<sup>12</sup>.

***(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])***

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Varghese K. George, "U.S. Senate allows F-16 sale to Pakistan, with riders." *The Hindu*, March 11, 2016, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/us-senate-allows-f16-sale-to-pakistan-with-riders/article8340539.ece>, accessed on March 20, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> *The Military Balance 2015*, p. 278-279, shows the total number of F-16s in PAF as 76. Adding another 8, cleared for sale in 2016, will make the total 84.

<sup>3</sup> Varghese K. George, "U.S. seeks Congressional nod for financing F-16 sale to Pakistan," *The Hindu*, February 17, 2016, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/us-seeks-congressional-nod-for-financing-f16-sale-to-pakistan/article8245564.ece>, accessed on March 20, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Joe Gould, "Pakistan F-16 Sale Survives US Senate Dogfight," *Defense News*, <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/2016/03/1>

[0/pakistan-f-16-sale-survives-us-senate-dogfight/81602882/](http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/2016/03/10/pakistan-f-16-sale-survives-us-senate-dogfight/81602882/), March 10, 2016, accessed on March 24, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> US DOD, Defense Security Cooperation Agency News Release, "The Government of Pakistan - F-16 Block 52 Aircraft," February 12, 2016, [http://www.dsca.mil/sites/default/files/mas/pakistan\\_15-80.pdf](http://www.dsca.mil/sites/default/files/mas/pakistan_15-80.pdf), accessed on March 24, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> N 1.

<sup>7</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "Press Statement on the US Decision to Notify the Sale of F16 Aircraft to Pakistan," February 13, 2016, <http://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/26614/Press+Statement+on+the+US+Decision+to+Notify+the+Sale+of+F16+Aircraft+to+Pakistan>, accessed on March 24, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Bhumitra Chakma, *Pakistan's Nuclear Weapons*, (UK: Routledge, 2009, p. 30).

<sup>9</sup> Bhumitra Chakma, *Pakistan's Nuclear Weapons*, (UK: Routledge, 2009, p. 42).

<sup>10</sup> Rohan Joshi, *Falconisation: The Long History Of Pakistan and US F-16s*, in *The Diplomat*, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/02/falconistan-the-long-history-of-pakistan-and-us-f-16s/>, February 19, 2016, accessed on April 2, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Dawn newspaper Pakistan, "Pak-Russia talks on delivery of SU-35, Mi-35 underway: Russian Deputy FM", September 10, 2015, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1206088>, accessed on April 2, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> PTI report from Washington in Indian Express, "Pakistan may use F-16 fighter jets against India, say US lawmakers," April 28, 2016, <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/pakistan-may-use-f-16-fighter-jets-against-india-say-us-lawmakers-2773701/>, accessed on April 28, 2016.

