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Issue Brief

Fresh Tensions in Pakistan-US Relations: The F-16 Conundrum

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The relations between Pakistan and the USA have gone through several troublesome phases. The matter of the purchase of eight F-16 fighter jets from the US government has become the most recent roadblock in Pak-US bilateral ties. On basis of certain serious reservations regarding Pakistan's supposed stance on the war on terror, the US establishment has stopped the deal from going through with subsidy that had been promised to Pakistan earlier. The overriding assumption is that Pakistan can use these fighter jets against India at any point in time. These apprehensions rhyme with those of the Indian lobby in the United States. There are some in the US Congress who believe that the provision of these jets to Pakistan could upset the military balance of South Asia. In this backdrop, there are many questions that arise regarding the future of the Pak-US relations. Will this lead to further deterioration of relations between the two countries? Will Pakistan make arrangements to procure the jets from an alternative source? Or will this remain an impasse between the two?

Earlier this year, eight F-16 fighter jets were to be sold to Pakistan through the FMF (Foreign Military Fund) programme. Pakistan was required to pay about \$270 million out of the total \$700 million while the rest was to be loaned by the US government to aid the anti-terrorist operations in the country.¹ The deal, however, did not go through. The US authorities called for Pakistan to provide a Letter of Acceptance with respect to the pre-conditions of the sale which obligated Pakistan to arrange for the entire payment from its national funds. These pre-conditions set forth by the American establishment are:

- Pakistan should take effective action against the Haqqani network.
- Pakistan should release Dr. Shakeel Afridi (US facilitator in the Abbottabad operation to kill Osama bin Laden).
- Pakistan should roll back its nuclear programme.

Pakistan has consistently argued that it has already taken effective action against the Haqqani network and there have been discussions to the question of the arrest of Shakeel Afridi. But, Pakistan has made clear that it would not, under any circumstances, accept any pre-condition that limits, curbs or caps its nuclear programme.

¹ Franz-Stefan Gady, 'US Won't Subsidize Pakistan's Purchase of F-16 Fighter Jets', The Diplomat, May 4 2016. <http://thediplomat.com/2016/05/us-wont-subsidize-pakistans-purchase-of-f-16-fighter-jets/>

As of yet, this Letter of Acceptance has not been provided by the authorities in time and this may have resulted in the expiry of the deal. Pakistan's Ambassador to US Jalil Abbas Jilani has, however, reassured that "dead-end has not been reached as yet". These circumstances have put the Pak-US relations on a rather dicey course.

Ever since the beginning of the alliance between these two countries, the US representatives have urged Pakistan to 'do more' which meant to obtain actual results in its anti-terrorism efforts. The US government claims that the policy of Pakistani establishment in Afghanistan and Pakistan against terrorists has been like a double-edged sword. They are of the opinion that Pakistan's military and intelligence agencies have supported the 'Haqqani' network while assuring the US government of their absolute cooperation against all terrorist groups.² Pakistan has categorically denounced all terrorist groups in Afghanistan and is currently destroying their safe havens from its own tribal areas in operation 'Zarb-e-Azb'. Pakistan's efforts have not been acknowledged on this front by the US authorities who have been convinced that Pakistan intends to use these fighter jets in question against the regional countries. This deal could have been monumental in the operations against terrorism in Pakistan but it seems uncertain at the moment. This has deepened the mistrust between these old allies.

By pushing this matter into the limelight, the Indian lobby in the US seems to have achieved its goal. A great deal of Indian influence can be clearly seen on the stance of the US Congress. This entire episode is a true testament to the skilled diplomacy being used by Indian officials against Pakistan in the US. As the Capitol Hill grows wary of the intentions of the Pakistani establishment, India remains a strong ally to the USA. Thus a wedge has been driven between the Pak-US alliance due to the profound Indian influence on the US decision making process. On the other hand, the decision taken by the US Congress also seems to lack careful consideration. Has the Congress decided to teach Pakistan a lesson? Is it wise to take such harsh decisions? It is most certainly not as in these delicate matters of security and strategy it is extremely unwise to alienate old friends.

Contradictory statements are being given by politicians in Pakistan after this development. Some have called USA a callous state, some have pointed fingers at Indian influence and others have claimed that Pakistan can easily buy the F-16 jets elsewhere.³ There is also a degree of disconnect between the

² The Editorial Board, "Time to Put the Squeeze on Pakistan", The New York Times, May 12, 2016.
http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/12/opinion/time-to-put-the-squeeze-on-pakistan.html?_r=0

³ Ankit Panda, "US Approves Sale of 8 F-16 Block 52 Fighters to Pakistan", The Diplomat, February 15, 2016.
<http://thediplomat.com/2016/02/us-approves-sale-of-8-f-16-block-52-fighters-to-pakistan/>

statements issued by the ministers and advisors in Pakistan. On one hand, Foreign Affairs Advisor Sartaj Aziz says that the Pak-US relations are on the downside and, on the other hand, Minister of Defence Khwaja Asif has assured that the overall ties between the two countries are quite strong. However, the US decision to withhold funding in this deal says otherwise. Over 50,000 Pakistani security personnel have sacrificed their lives in the War on Terror along with massive economic and infrastructural damage borne by Pakistan. Despite all these sacrifices by both the military personnel and civilians, the trust deficit between Washington and Islamabad is growing. A carefully thought out strategy to sabotage the image of Pakistan is the reason behind these misunderstandings that are being projected on the international level.

The US intelligence believes, along with the Afghan government, that Pakistan has played a double role in the operations in Afghanistan. Pakistan refutes this claim of the two governments as falsehood spread by the Indian lobbyists in the US. It is highly unfortunate for Pakistan that it lacks such an effective lobby which can convey its viewpoint and clarify its position. Now the Congress refuses to help a close ally. Pakistan has also issued statements claiming that it can fulfil its military requirements through other sources. So Pakistan's stance on this issue is to maintain its sovereignty as an independent nation. As for the famous Pak-US alliance, it is navigating through turbulent waters.

Since the 80s and 90s, the F-16 jets have been a symbol of the close ties between Pakistan and USA.⁴ Their pictures drawn on buses and their appearance in every patriotic song video are due to the symbolic alliance between Pakistan and USA. Thus it is understandable how the experts and analysts are calling this a serious matter which will cause regional ripples. Although the Pak-US relations are a marriage of convenience but the Congress must realize that a few number of these fighter jets is not a heavy price to pay for the ceaseless efforts by Pakistani forces to curb terrorism.

By cancelling this deal, the US could have driven Pakistan towards alternative sources such as Russia or China. China has been an all-weather friend and Russia seems inclined to develop good relations with Pakistan. These two countries can be substitute markets for arms supplies to Pakistan. Negotiations are underway for procurement of the MI-35 helicopters from Russia while Pakistan also has a state of the art fleet of the JF-17 fighter aircrafts which have been developed through a joint Pak-China venture

⁴ Naveed Ahmed, "The Drop-Scene of US-Pakistan Relations", The Express Tribune, May 6, 2016. <http://tribune.com.pk/story/1097840/the-drop-scene-of-us-pakistan-relations/>

between Pakistan Air Force and China. Pakistan can fulfil its requirements through other means without having to succumb to the US pressure.⁵

In this world of interdependence, Pakistan's importance for the US cannot be undermined. There are many in the US who believe that Pakistan cannot be abandoned as it is an important strategic ally of the US in this region. It is just as Daniel Markey writes in his book, "No Exit from Pakistan", "This is not a friendly game, but out of it both sides can still benefit".⁶ At this point, one pauses to wonder as to why the USA would risk endangering this old alliance for money. The reasons are many. This old alliance has been asymmetrical ever since it was forged. The tilt has been in favour of the bigger nation. This was something that could have been modified through an integrated foreign policy and diplomatic expertise of Pakistan. The US officials have categorically stated on numerous occasions that Pakistan is the key to a peaceful Afghanistan. But the US governments have always fallen short of acknowledging Pakistan's sincere efforts in the fight against terrorism. Thus, Pak-US relations have come under a dark cloud. There may be a difficult road ahead but the relationship must be fixed through steady efforts at the diplomatic level from both sides. There is a need for objectivity when it comes to the matter of balancing relations between countries. The US policy towards Pakistan can be more beneficial for both parties if it is free from the Indian manipulation. Free of external influences, both Pakistan and US must focus on reinvigorating this essential partnership for the sake of regional peace and prosperity.

⁵ Mateen Haider, "Pakistan will get jets from elsewhere if F-16 funding not arranged, Aziz cautions US", Dawn, May 3, 2016. <http://www.dawn.com/news/1256000>

⁶ Daniel S. Markey, *No Exit from Pakistan: America's Tortured Relationship with Islamabad*, Cambridge University Press, 2013.