

US refuses to finance F-16 fighter jets for Pakistan

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The United States has reversed an earlier decision to finance a large portion of Pakistan's planned purchase of eight F-16 multi-role fighter jets.

The State Department claimed that the decision to cancel the funding approved in February is the outcome of the US Congress' refusal to allow the use of the Foreign Military Financing program to finance the deal. But Washington's move is clearly a sign of fraying relations between the two countries.

"Given congressional objections, we have told the Pakistanis that they should put forward national funds for that purpose," State Department spokesman John Kirby said announcing the decision to the public on May 2. The \$700 million price tag for the jets, of which Islamabad was to pay only \$270 million, means that the deal is dead in the water.

Pakistan reacted immediately but cautiously to the announcement. The adviser to Pakistan's prime minister on foreign affairs, Sartaj Aziz, said the government is looking for "an alternative source of financing" to continue with the purchase, but added that "otherwise obviously we will have to look for planes from somewhere else." Reports have indicated that the other supplier countries would be China and Russia.

Reuters noted in its May 2 report that the congressional objections reflected "deep unhappiness among both Democrats and Republicans" over "Islamabad's policy of supporting" sections of the Taliban and the Haqqani network that are carrying out increasingly bold attacks on the US puppet government in Afghanistan. According to Reuters, the possibility of the fighter jets being used against India was also raised as an argument against funding the deal.

While the State Department downplayed the significance of Islamabad's reaction by calling these "obviously sovereign decisions that Pakistan has to make," and saying its relationship with Islamabad is "an important one," a growing rupture in relations is evident.

Anonymous Western diplomats told the London-based *Financial Times* that the US "demand" for "more action" against the Afghan Taliban and other Islamist groups

operating from Pakistan and the country's development of tactical nuclear weapons for use against India have been the two main causes of increasing tensions between the two countries during the past year.

A third factor in tensions between the two countries which the FT doesn't make any reference to is Pakistan's growing economic and military ties to China, which reached a significant milestone when Beijing approved the \$46 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project. Since its launch in April 2015, Pakistan's military and the intelligence apparatus have dedicated considerable resources to its defence. If it ever succeeds, the CPEC's network of infrastructure connecting the Arabian Sea port Gwadar to the Chinese mainland would provide China the means to potentially bypass the US' Indian Ocean chokepoint strategy to blockade Chinese supply routes in case of a war or war crisis.

It is increasingly clear that US efforts to strategically reconfigure in the aftermath of the withdrawal of the majority of occupational forces from Afghanistan, in which Pakistan was supposed to play a pivotal role, are in disarray. While no prospect is publicly known for bringing the Taliban to the table to negotiate a deal with the US puppet regime in Kabul, the past several months have seen the drastic escalation of tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan as Taliban attacks on Kabul have become more frequent and deadlier.

Following the collapse of the jet fighter deal, the bitter sentiments felt in Islamabad were expressed by a former Pakistan Air Force general speaking to the FT. "First the Americans gave us F-16s in the 1980s when Pakistan was a close ally and suspended their sale in 1990 only to resume the sale after the 9/11 attacks," he said. "Even if this immediate matter is resolved, no one in Islamabad will trust the Americans. I fear the feeling in Pakistan's policy circles is increasingly to go to the Russians and the Chinese for other planes that come with a more reliable supply assurance," he added.

The banner of "combatting terrorism"—used by Pakistan to

justify the massive bill it pays for jet fighters and to continually fund the reactionary military alliance with the US—is fraudulent. In fact, the CIA operation along with Pakistani and Saudi Arabian intelligence in the 1980s, which nurtured the mujahedeen fighters in order to overthrow the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul, gave rise to Al Qaeda and the Taliban.

After forcing Islamabad to sever its historic associations to support the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan in 2001, the US demanded Pakistan deploy its military to suppress anti-occupation Islamist militant groups that sprang up in the historically autonomous and predominantly Pashtun tribal belt along the border with Afghanistan. The US arrogated to itself the right to carry out an indiscriminate and illegal drone war on both sides of the border, killing thousands of civilians including women and children.

The period since 2001 has seen the rise of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), affiliated to the Taliban in Afghanistan but an organizationally distinct umbrella group of militants who demand the imposition of Islamic Sharia law in Pakistan.

Islamabad is currently carrying out a massive offensive against the TTP in the North Waziristan tribal agency and adjoining areas. The military operation launched in 2014 was the venal Pakistani ruling elite's response to the long-standing demand of Washington for a major military offensive to root out opposition to its occupation of Afghanistan in the tribal region.

The developing crisis in Afghanistan is only one major factor in tensions in relations between the US and Pakistan. It is not clear to which extent India's unrestrained opposition to the F-16 sale played a role in Washington's decision. In February a "disappointed" India said in a statement it "disagree[d] with their rationale that such arms transfers help to combat terrorism."

A number of congressmen have raised concerns of heightening tensions between India and Pakistan and that Pakistan will use the fighter jets against India in a conflict. In an April hearing of the Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Republican Matt Salmon hypocritically questioned the deal, which he claimed would disrupt the "balance of power between India and Pakistan."

Such comments are emerging from Washington with increasing frequency while the US has taken significant steps to incorporate India into its preparations for war against China.

Washington's defence cooperation with New Delhi includes supporting India's plans to build a blue-water navy, providing access to advanced weapons systems and joint defence production initiatives. A civilian nuclear deal

Washington offered to India has also freed up its nuclear resources to concentrate on its indigenous nuclear weapons program. At the same time Washington has ignored repeated warnings from Pakistan that its strategic partnership with India is overturning the "balance of power" between the two-nuclear armed neighbours.

While under the incumbent government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, New Delhi's reactionary alliance with US imperialism has deepened, while the Modi government has adopted an increasingly bellicose policy towards Islamabad. This is in line with the Indian bourgeoisie's ambitions to assert regional power status in the Indian Ocean region.

On the occasion of the Modi government's first year in office, Bruce Riedel, a specialist on South Asia for the Brookings Institution and former high-level CIA strategist, said "the bipolar alliance system in South Asia has hardened." He claimed in May 2015, "While the alliance system remains completely informal, the United States and India are closer to each other, and China and Pakistan have come much closer."

The "hardening" has continued. Pakistan is reportedly assessing Chinese made J-10 and J-20 fighter jets to renovate its current fleet. "Western defence officials" told IHS Jane's Defence Weekly that "Moscow has informed Islamabad about its willingness to sell a batch of advanced Sukhoi Su-35 fighters."

The increasingly complicated geo-political situation in the region is a product of the predatory intervention of US imperialism. The historical India-Pakistan rivalry is increasingly intersecting with the US' anti-China pivot and adding an incendiary charge to an increasingly dangerous flashpoint in the region.



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