



# The F-16 Debacle

Briefing Paper  
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#### ABOUT COMMANDELEVEN

CommandEleven is a research organization focused on Pakistan’s national security aspects and enhancing global understanding and collaboration opportunities for the nation.

Founded in 2015, CommandEleven provides situational awareness to facilitate a better understanding of the key dynamics that effect Pakistan from a national security perspective, especially in relation to terrorism, insurgencies and extremism.

CommandEleven seeks to inform and guide public policy and decision makers in government, business and military through a rigorous program of publications, conferences, digital medias, policy briefings and recommendations.

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## PREFACE

No matter how close the collaboration between the Pentagon and General Headquarters, strained relations emerge when the conversation moves to Capitol Hill. While some of the faces and names may have changed, the result is the same - a tense relationship that is always open to modification by other parties, whether part of the US government or not.

The recent announcement reversing agreed terms of the sale of eight F-16s to Pakistan effectively puts relations between both countries at a loggerhead again at an extremely crucial time for Pakistan. Pakistan has been a frontline state in the global War on Terror, suffering great losses with sacrifice of over 80,000 innocent Pakistanis in terrorist attacks, economically, and socially. As part of Pakistan's alliance with the ISAF forces, Pakistan provided logistic support, the usage of Pakistani air bases for the highly questionable drone program, and a great deal of real-time intelligence sharing. In return, Pakistan would receive a payment from the Coalition Support Fund (CSF) for all the military machinery, hardware, munitions that are used, which would also be delayed due to "concerns" from certain quarters of the US government about Pakistan's seriousness in the war on terror. The questions arose due to Musharraf's refusal to target the Afghan Taliban or Haqqani Group on the insistence of the US government. This turned into accusations of duplicity by the Indians, who claimed the CSF funds were being used to strengthen Pakistan against India, not fighting the war on terror. Within the context of all these things happening, American think tanks have been quick to point out that victory in the war on terror is only possible with Pakistan's cooperation.

Pakistan itself is embroiled deeply against insurgencies and terrorist groups within its own borders. Over the past 2 years roughly, Pakistan's armed forces have been fighting individual insurgent groups, collectives of insurgents, terrorist group offshoots and sleeper cells, the cleanup of its commercial hub in Karachi of miscreants and militants, and the on-going insurgency in Baluchistan. Impressively, Pakistan is the only country in the CASA and MENA, who has successfully fought and defeated the insurgents and militants militarily. We are still waiting to see what the political response will be. The military operation's successes have been celebrated in both Western and Middle Eastern capitals, further demonstrating Pakistan's own seriousness to end the terrorism and extremism problem within their country.

Stepping outside the military collaborations between the US and Pakistan, Pakistan's strategic importance for other nations in the region continues to be paramount. As the energy gateway for India and China, Pakistan is the only route for Iran and Afghanistan to channel their resources efficiently. Pakistan is the shortest route to the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea for China, further enhanced with the Gwadar Port and shortened with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which India has sworn to derail. For Afghanistan, Pakistan is the only route for their landlocked nation for trade and commerce.

The Western media has taken great liberties in attempting to paint Pakistan as both duplicitous and aggressive in its dealings with Western powers, because of its inaction against the Haqqani Group, the expansion of the nuclear arsenal with small munitions,

and the success of the JF-17 Thunder program, Pakistan has done nothing more than secure its own interests, while extending a cordial hand of partnership to its allies. While some will see this as duplicitous, Pakistanis still recall how quickly the US left the region once the Soviets were defeated, leaving Pakistan to pick up the fallout alone.

## F-16s AND PAKISTAN

The Lockheed Martin F-16 is a superior aircraft that has been an essential part of the Pakistan Air Force's aerial arsenal. The F-16 has seen duties during short conflicts with India, providing massive first strike capabilities against terrorist hideouts and factories, and overhead cover for troop movement into conflict zones. The utility of the F-16 to Pakistan is well-known and accepted. However, this isn't the first time an F-16 sale has been blocked due to a Congressional hearing. In 1995, a block sale of 28 F-16s was cancelled due to the conditions set in the Pressler Amendment.<sup>1</sup> While many will say that the non-military components of the deal were provided to Pakistan, the F-16s are part of our national security paradigm and can't be sacrificed so easily. The current F-16 sale has been put on hold, and effectively killed, with the US stepping back from its past commitment to pay \$340 million from its own Foreign Military Fund, demanding instead that Pakistan pay the full amount of the sale from its own national exchequer. Pakistan had initially agreed to pay \$270 million.

While all of Pakistan's military and defense analysts accept that the F-16 is an integral part of our national security, due to past problems with acquisition of fighter planes, spare parts for the same planes and enhanced technology, the Americans have left a great deal to be desired. Pakistan has long looked for an equivalent replacement for the F-16s, which lead to the cooperation with China on the JF-17 Thunder. The JF-17 Thunder has an aerodynamic shape similar to the US Navy's F/A-18, powered by a high fuel efficient Russian RD-93 after burning turbofan. According to experts, the flight performance is far superior to other second-generation fighters, with its climb rate, maneuverability and acceleration making up for the low top speed of Mach 1.6. In terms of payload, the JF-17 can carry up to four SD-10 radar-guided missiles. For the Pakistan Air Force, the standard configuration is two SD-10s, 3 1,000-litre external fuel tanks, in addition to the 800-litre tank in the belly of the fighter. The JF-17 Thunder has impressed all audiences with its technology, functionality and maneuverability at the international air shows, simultaneously securing export and sale contracts for the fighter plane to friendly nations.

If Pakistan chooses to step outside its own production fighter planes, the Russian Su-35, Dassault Rafale, and even the MIG-29 can be considered as viable options. With the new defense contracts with Russia, the potential of inducting Russian war planes is potentially high, which plays badly for the United States in the geopolitical power struggle.

As many recall, late last year, Russia agreed to sell a block of Mi-35M attack helicopters to Pakistan,<sup>2</sup> which immediately drew a similar deal from US defense contractors for the AH-

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<sup>1</sup> "The U.S-Pakistan F-16 Fiasco," C. Christine Fair, Foreign Policy, Feb 3, 2011, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/02/03/the-u-s-pakistan-f-16-fiasco/>

<sup>2</sup> "Pakistan's tool of war: Why the Mi-35 Hind-E is an excellent choice," Ali Osman, DAWN, Sep 29, 2015. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1209539>

1Z Bell attack helicopters.<sup>3</sup> The potential completion of that deal may also be stalled due to the terms agreed by the US Department of Defense, and the new position of the US. The Mi-35M, commonly known as the "Flying Tank," greatly increases Pakistan's battlefield capabilities. The Mi-35M is considered to be the replacement for the aging AH-1 Cobras and provides a significant upgrade both in combat functionality, with the addition of troop movement. India raised issue with the sale because it would alter the balance of power in the region, forgetting their own 22 Apache helicopters and the 15 Chinooks deal<sup>4</sup> with the US just a few months prior.

## THE LANDSCAPE IN PAKISTAN

When we discuss the potential impacts of the delayed, or canceled, sale of F-16s to Pakistan, we have to take into consideration all the on-going counter-terrorism (CT) and counter insurgency (COIN) operations ongoing in Pakistan. With military and paramilitary forces engaged in FATA, Baluchistan, Karachi, southern Punjab, Peshawar and other cities and villages around Pakistan, the security stratagem is more fluid than expected. Additionally, with the successes of Operation Zarb-e-Azb, many of the terrorist groups have been neutralized, leaving their followers and fighters looking for a new group to join. The F-16 has regularly been used to neutralize terrorist bomb making factories, hideouts and other infrastructure, as well as providing air cover for troop movements.

Sadly, the problem becomes Daesh, or the Islamic State.

With the emergence of Daesh in Afghanistan, and the collaboration with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e-Islami, Daesh is picking up considerable support and favor among the anti-Taliban groups. Many of the splinter groups affiliated with the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have already pledged their allegiance to Daesh, with potentially the TTP following suit itself. For Pakistan, the concern is very real. Daesh has already attempted to establish a foothold in Pakistan, swaying many of the Jama'at-ud-Da'wah fighters in Baluchistan to their side. They have also gained the allegiance of Maulana Abdul Aziz, the fire-brand preacher of the Red Mosque, who has invited ISIS to Pakistan to avenge the 2007 Army operation. To counter any potential threat or provide true air support to the ISAF forces in Afghanistan, the F-16 is a crucial piece of military hardware. Readers can listen to our Director General, Khalid Muhammad, talking about Daesh's designs for Pakistan and Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, on the Pakistan side of the border, the tribal areas that border Afghanistan, have been significantly cleared of terrorist and militant groups and training camps. As the Pakistan Army continues its fight on the border, the law and order situation in Karachi has worsened due to political maneuvering, causing an uptick in incidents between the Sindh Rangers and political workers. The Baluchistan insurgency has faced significant defeats

<sup>3</sup> "US agrees to sell AH-1Z attack helicopter to Pakistan," DAWN, Aug 27, 2015.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/945781/us-agrees-to-sell-ah-1z-attack-helicopters-to-pakistan/>

<sup>4</sup> "Indian cabinet approves military chopper deal," AFP, DAWN, Sep 23, 2015.

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1208731>

<sup>5</sup> "ISIS and Their Designs on the Af-Pak Region," Video Interview with Khalid Muhammad, Director General. <https://www.commandeleven.com/interview/isis-and-their-designs-on-the-afpak-region/>

and surrenders of many of their most senior commanders and fighters, as the Army and paramilitary forces deepened their resolve to end this conflict. The arrest of Kulbhusan Jadhav, a serving Indian Navy officer, working for RAW inside Baluchistan, has led to the collapse of a massive network of over 50 Indian operatives and 700 Pakistani elements, not to mention the forward operating station in Iran being cannibalized to protect other operations. In southern Punjab, the jihadi and militant groups have been heavily targeted, with many arrests and encounters occurring.

It seems clear, to even the most doubting observer, that General Raheel Sharif's promise to eliminate terrorism and extremism from Pakistan before his term as Chief of Army Staff is in full operation.

## POST ISAF WITHDRAWAL

With the current situation in Afghanistan, the troop withdrawal will not be an easy exercise. On one side, the Afghanistan government wants stability before the military force is withdrawn, fearing a situation worse than Iraq. Keeping in mind that the US, counting on Pakistan's long relationship with the Afghan Taliban, asked Pakistan to sit at the negotiating table and be the moderator. China, also heavily entrenched in Afghanistan with commercial contracts, needs Pakistan's influence to bring the Taliban to the table allowing a major mining contract to move forward. For the Russians, they fear the migration of terrorists from Afghanistan, so they have put their weight on Pakistan to assure that their borders are secured. The only country that has a problem with Pakistan moderating is India, who saw their friendly relations decrease with the election of Ashraf Ghani's government. India has since been able to corner Ghani into abandoning his pro-Pakistan position in favor of more aid and gifts from India.

India has long wanted a strategic depth within Afghanistan, long supporting the Northern Alliance against the Taliban. With Karzai's government, they were able to establish many core ties that allow them to influence different functions of the state and security apparatus. That investment was continued with Abdullah Abdullah was elected Chief Executive and Abdul Rashid Dostum appointed as Vice President. India cannot achieve peace in the region because it doesn't have the relationships with the key players involved in assuring that peace.

The Politics

And this is where everything gets interesting...

Let's start with the obvious basics. The US is in an election cycle with a hard-hitting, slow-thinking Republican and an old-school Capitol Hill Democrat. The US Congress is held by the Republicans, so we can be sure that some decisions will be made with the Trump logic in mind. But, like we said, that's the obvious part of the equation. Even John Kirby, the US State Department spokesman, has worked very hard to distance The White House from the decision of Congress, stating:

"As a matter of longstanding principle, the Department of State opposes conditions to the release of appropriated foreign assistance funds. We believe that such conditions limit the President and the Secretary's ability to conduct foreign policy in the best interest of the

United States... Given congressional objections, we have told the Pakistanis that they should put forward national funds for that purpose."

He also said that the relationship with Pakistan is far too critical and vital "particularly in that part of the world" so that the Obama administration has "absolutely no intention of losing focus on or diminishing in any way." He underscored "effective management with Pakistan... is critical."

We can also assume that this reversal could be an attempt to pressure Pakistan into releasing Dr. Shakil Afridi from prosecution, ala Raymond Davis. Granted, Davis was an "embassy employee," which is why he was released on diplomatic grounds... at least that is what the Government of Punjab and Pakistan continue to tell everyone.

We saw that the US quickly stated that they would work with Pakistan to find a solution and didn't want to see any disturbance or slowdown in relations with the country. So, we can be sure that there are officials working behind the scenes to garner support for the deal in Congress. Either way, it seems that the US Congress is preparing to attempt to lecture Pakistan, not understanding the geopolitical implications.

We also see the disconnect between The White House and Capitol Hill on the aims and expectations of the military assistance program to Pakistan. Pakistan has been seen as duplicitous in its dealings and unwilling to go after the Haqqani Network in Afghanistan, as we said previously, which is greatly affecting the Congressional understanding on the importance of this military aid package to Pakistan. What seems difficult to digest is the insistence of the United States for Pakistan to facilitate a reconciliation agreement with the Taliban, which includes all Taliban factions without exception, including the Haqqani Network. A meeting was held in Quetta with representatives from the Taliban's Qatar office on the same day this announcement was made by the US State Department.

There is another scenario that is circulating in certain diplomatic circles, where Pakistan is being removed for all aid and grant consideration because of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's family being included in the Panama Leaks scandal. We are unaware of how much truth there is to this scenario, but we do believe there is some possibility recalling that a similar directive was issued to foreign missions in the wake of the massive flooding in Pakistan during President Zardari's government. The communique stated simply that all missions were to undertake relief efforts independently of the federal or provincial governments. The bottom line - no relief money is to be given to the Government of Pakistan over concerns of corruption.

Based on Sartaj Aziz's, Advisor to the Prime Minister on National Security, statements yesterday in Islamabad, Pakistan is ready to look elsewhere for the military hardware they require, if the US backs out of their deal and would not be browbeaten into submission. He also pointed out that Washington needs Pakistan to stabilize Afghanistan and achieve regional peace more than Pakistan needs American F-16s.

In simple terms, Pakistan will not sacrifice its national or strategic interests to appease the United States or any other country, which was evidenced when Pakistan refused to join the Saudi coalition against Yemen.



We should also not be quick to discount the Indian influence in this 180-degree turn. US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter was just in India negotiating the final stages of the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), further enhancing an already close military relationship between both countries. Under the new agreement, both countries would provide logistic support to fighter planes, warships and personnel. There is also the potential of sharing military bases, as and when needed. Secretary Carter also pointed out that there are two proposals being made to India for the manufacture of F-16s and F-18s domestically.

However, an unnamed Indian defense ministry official said India will build safeguards to stop providing logistic support, if the US military worked against India's, or any of its allies, interests. Both the United States and India hold the position that they are attempting to counter any aggressive moves from China in the South China Sea or the Indian Ocean. We all recall the explosive fervor that emerged when a Chinese nuclear submarine was discovered off the coast of India.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In summary, it is very difficult to understand the decision of the US Congress to block this sale to Pakistan. If the intent was to satisfy the Indian lobby in Washington, then they have only pushed Pakistan to look for other options, a dangerous option for both countries. If the intent was to force Pakistan to hand over Shakil Afridi, that won't happen either - Pakistan won't be browbeaten. If the intent of Congress was to send Pakistan a message regarding future policy measures, Pakistan responded with a message that the US Congress wasn't expecting - we'll go elsewhere.

No matter what the US was expecting to achieve with this showdown, they will find that Pakistan is no longer the country that can be browbeaten to get a rollback on the nuclear program, get the release of Dr. Shakil Afridi or any other options that may be under consideration.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

As Director General of **CommandEleven**, Khalid Muhammad takes over 26 years of international experience to guide and drive his team to deliver accurate, reliable and actionable analysis for private organizations, institutions, government policy and media outlets. He provides tactical and comprehensive analysis into terrorist and extremist groups operating in the Indian sub-continent and Middle East, including recruitment, financing, operations and warfare strategies. His experience and vision guide the growth and expansion of **CommandEleven** into new opportunities.

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