

COMMENT 241 - **Pakistan and Western Irrationality**

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From Washington to Brussels, the irrationality in the decision-making by the political leadership when it comes to Islamabad is not comprehensible for an observer promoting democracy, human rights, and open and free societies. Particularly, the unwillingness by Western governments to realise and reflect adequately in their foreign policies the fact that Pakistan was never a friend, certainly not an ally, is hardly understandable. The country has a long record of not just bluntly ignoring western concerns, but also actively breaking its commitments towards the US and the European Union (EU). In other words, Islamabad is undermining the interests of both Americans and Europeans. The essential support by Pakistan's military and intelligence to the Taliban in Afghanistan, enabling them to pursue their fight against the US-led NATO troops during the last two decades – and subsequently to overthrow the democratically elected government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (IRoA) is just one of numerous examples.

One of the latest happenings in the US-Pakistan relations appeared remarkably odd; yet it fits into the peculiar irrationality in dealing with Islamabad. On September 7, 2022, the [US Defence Security Cooperation Agency](#) (DSCA) 'has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of Pakistan of F-16 Case for Sustainment and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$450 million.' This is the first major security assistance to Pakistan in recent years. It also [reverses](#) the decision by the former US administration 'to stop all defence and security assistance to Pakistan alleging that Islamabad was not a

partner in its fight against terrorism’ - and that Washington ‘[has gotten nothing](#)’ in return for its large-scale aid so far.¹

It does not come by surprise that India - a country which since its existence not only had to face unprovoked wars, aggressions and other armed confrontations² but is also a persistent victim of state-sponsored cross-border terrorism by Pakistan (Wolf, 2017) - expressed its unease.

In response to [Indian security concerns](#) related to the “F-16 deal”, U.S. authorities [emphasised](#) that ‘the package does not include the sale of any new capabilities, weapons, or munitions and is aimed at the sustenance of Pakistan Air Force’s [PAF] F-16 programme’. [According to](#) U.S. State Department Spokesperson Ned Price, the proposed sale will sustain Islamabad’s capability to meet current and future counterterrorism threats ([emanating from Pakistan or from the region at large](#)) as well as retain the country’s ‘[interoperability with U.S. and partner forces](#)’ in respective operations by maintaining its F-16 fleet. In this context, [the US](#) ‘expects Pakistan to take sustained action against all terrorist groups’. Additional justifications provided for the granting of this new aid package include the arguments that it ‘[will not alter the basic military balance in the region](#)’, and that [the US has](#) ‘a responsibility and an obligation to whomever we provide military equipment to make sure that it’s maintained and sustained.’

However, this rationale by the US authorities can neither distract from the fact that their decision results in an improvement of Pakistan’s military capabilities nor avoid irritations and amazements within New Delhi and beyond. To get an idea about the dimension of the irrationality inherent to the latest US decision ‘[to refurbish](#)’ the Pakistan’s F-16 fleet, it’s insightful to put Washington’s “justification” in perspective.

¹ In 2018, then US President Donald Trump had suspended around \$2 billion in security aid to Pakistan. This not only included the country’s share of the [Coalition Support Funds](#) but also the upgrades for its F-16s, all as parts of a broader suspension in aid to Islamabad. The reasoning provided for that punitive measure by the US administration was that [Pakistan failed](#) to contain both the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network (another Islamist terror group), both of which operated from safe havens across Pakistan, attacking US/NATO coalition forces in neighbouring Afghanistan at will.

² For example, in 1965 (Ran of Kutch) or 1999 (Kargil).

There is an “traditional reluctance”³ by both the US and Europe when it comes to substantial military and defence cooperation⁴ with India; at the same time there is a boosting of the ‘PAF’s overall operational capability compared to the IAF [Indian Air Force]’. Contrary to US statements, Indian military analysts are [stating](#) that the new “F-16 deal” does have an impact on the balance of power between Islamabad and New Delhi. An improvement in the serviceability of Pakistani fighter jets is a priori perceived as an additional challenge for the IAF. Moreover, the PAF received over time not only F-16 fighter jets (including upgrades) but also radar systems to enhance aerial defensive and surveillance capabilities. In November 2019, it was [reported](#) that the PAF obtained two new state-of-the-art radar systems, namely the US-made TPS-77 MRR and the Chinese YLC-18A. Interestingly, the US and Chinese radar systems were deployed just a few months after the IAF [completed](#) (in April 2021) its first squadron of the French Dassault Rafale multirole fighter aircraft. A significant aim in the purchase of Rafale jets was to balance any Pakistani advantage in aerial combats originating from Pakistan due to its PAF F-16 fleet or its “Chinese fighter jets”⁵. The refitting of the F-16 fleet, combined with the provision of new radar systems, might properly annihilate any potential advantage obtained through the new ‘Rafale-equipped-IAF’ vis-à-vis the PAF.

Currently it appears that the US administration is once again convinced that security assistance to Pakistan serves American interests. [Ely Ratner](#), the U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defence for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs, stated that ‘[t]he decision inside the US government was made on US interests on our defence partnership with Pakistan, which is primarily focused on counter-terrorism and nuclear security’. Considering the rapidly growing US-China rivalry, especially Beijing’s ambitions to challenge Washington in the Indo-Pacific, its increasing aggressive posture towards Taiwan, its territorial claims vis-à-vis most neighbours, and the ambiguous role of China in Russia’s war on Europe, one must wonder how the F-16 deal with Pakistan is serving US interests... In fact, it rather appears that such deal is most disadvantageous to both Washington and its allies and friends. Many facts point towards such disadvantage.

³ Or at least the habit to create remarkable hurdles in defence and military collaboration.

⁴ Understood as delivering or sharing military know-how and hardware with India.

⁵ Either delivered from China or [jointly produced](#) by Beijing and Islamabad, like the JF-17 Thunder block III fighter jets.

Several US expectations towards Islamabad linked to Washington's funding of Pakistan's F-16 programme have not been met in the past, and there are no signs that they will anytime soon. Instead, past promises – even agreements – were clearly violated by Pakistani military. As mentioned above, equipped with F-16s, the country was supposed [to attack all terrorist groups](#) based on and operating from its soil. Instead, the PAF targeted predominantly anti-Pakistani elements, foremost the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and affiliated groups. Other Pakistan-based militant Islamist groups conducting terrorist activities in neighbouring countries were largely spared. To prove the (successful) use of F-16 in counterterrorism, [Pakistani sources](#) refer to the integration of this fighter jet into anti-terror campaigns (such as Operation Zarb-e-Azb), helping Islamabad to regain control over its border areas with Afghanistan. However, the resurgence and massive re-strengthening of the TTP clearly amplifies the limited usefulness of F-16s for Pakistan (and consequently for the US as well) when it comes to combatting terrorism in the area. A noteworthy aspect here is that according to Indian [reports](#), Pakistan apparently violated the end-user agreement with the US for using the F-16 *only* for counter-terrorist operations. This was also highlighted by the [DSCA](#) in its notification regarding the latest “F-16 deal”. During an aerial combat in February 2019, India claimed that the PAF deployed F-16s when bringing one IAF fighter jet down. Islamabad denied this claim – and the US Department of State refused to comment on the issue. However, India provided evidence to substantiate its accusations. Finally, one must question the US' rationale regarding the obligation to always provide military equipment to Pakistan. This argument further lost any power after the US withdrew, literally overnight, its support for the IRoA air forces.

After reflecting on the before mentioned elaboration, it becomes obvious that the US is not helping its “partner” Pakistan in counterterrorism (which would benefit the whole region). Instead, with the “F-16 deal”, Washington is enhancing Pakistan's military threat towards New Delhi. Given the questionable use of F-16s for counterterrorism goals, these fighters' main utility seems linked to the combat situation with India. This also means that by granting military assistance to Islamabad, Washington is supporting Beijing's efforts to build-up Pakistan as a military counterweight to rival India. The rapidly growing Sino-Pakistani defence

collaboration, especially the tremendous provision of modern, advanced weapon systems and equipment like the [J-10 multirole combat aircrafts](#) or the YLC-18A radar systems for the PAF, is well-reported. As such, both US and China are improving (in tandem) the capabilities of Pakistan's military – and consequently putting India's national security at risk.

The situation becomes even more abstruse if one takes the EU into the US-Pakistan equation. For Washington is not alone in its hardly comprehensible foreign policy towards Islamabad. For many years, Brussels has granted Islamabad the [Generalised Scheme of Preferences](#) (GSP+) status, which removes import duties for Pakistani products coming into the EU. It goes without saying that this is a major benefit for Pakistan export-orientated businesses. EU institutions continue, most awkwardly, to renew GSP+ status for Pakistan, even though Islamabad violates and disrespects all conditions regarding eligibility. Europe is thus supporting Pakistan's economy, contributing to the purchasing power of its military to acquire weapons and accumulate monetary assets (which can be used to strengthen terrorists conducting anti-Indian activities). This is extraordinarily unfortunate, since India is not only the largest democracy in the world but also a natural ally of the West, based on shared norms, values, and security interests.

To sum up, it is of utmost importance for Western states to understand that India is facing not only Pakistani terrorism but also Chinese aggressions, due to its role as the greatest and most crucial challenger of Beijing's hegemonic ambitions in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific. It's time for both Washington and Brussels to reflect fundamentally on their relations with Islamabad and adjust their foreign policies accordingly. we need to make Pakistan accountable and not to maintain the fruitless efforts to keep the country humoured and incentivised - that would be rational!

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