

# THREE TO TANGLE: ON U.S. REFITTING PAKISTAN F-16S

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Pakistan

India is understandably upset with the [U.S.'s decision to refurbish the F-16 fighter fleet of Pakistan](#). The fleet has been the backbone of the Pakistan Air Force since the early 1980s, upgraded, and replenished periodically. As the partnership between the two countries grew over the years, including and particularly in the defence sector, India continuously raised its concerns on this account with U.S. interlocutors. Successive U.S. administrations have maintained that the defence partnership with Pakistan, which is a major non-NATO ally, is a critical component of its global war on terror — a point contested by India. In 2016, the U.S. Congress stalled the Obama administration's move to give more F-16 fighters to Pakistan. New Delhi's apprehensions came true in February 2019, a day after the Balakot air strike by the Indian Air Force, when Pakistan deployed its F-16s to target Indian military bases close to the Line of Control. The Indian Army recovered debris of the Advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air Missile fired by the F-16s. On September 7, the U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency notified a possible Foreign Military Sales worth \$450 million for engine, electronic warfare and other hardware and software upgrades and spares for Pakistan's F-16s. Though it said that the proposed sale does not include any new capabilities, weapons, or munitions, the move clearly marks a thaw in the U.S.'s attitude towards Pakistan.

The External Affairs Ministry has chosen to maintain its silence on [the issue](#), unlike its public expression of summoning the U.S. Ambassador in 2016. The U.S. move strains its relationship with India which has been making great strides, though it is not without obstacles. New Delhi and Washington have been skilfully managing their differences over Afghanistan, the crisis in Ukraine, and the lingering threat of U.S. sanctions under its Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act. Washington's new warmth with Islamabad also comes amid a flurry of India-U.S. diplomatic and military engagements. India and the U.S. have committed to deepening defence and security cooperation, but the indulgence of Pakistan dampens that spirit. The Trump administration had tried to hold Pakistan accountable for duplicity in its approach towards terrorist groups operating from its territory, which amounts to running with the hare and hunting with the hounds. To stay in Afghanistan, the U.S. needed Pakistan; now to stay away from Afghanistan it needs Pakistan even more. While the U.S. may have its reasons to keep Pakistan humoured and incentivised, India's concerns are immediate and real. Terrorism against India has been Pakistan's state policy for decades. Far from seeking accountability, the U.S. is rewarding Pakistan, and more on the same lines may be in the offing. India and the U.S. need to work to ensure that the spectacular gains made in bilateral ties are preserved and nourished.

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