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U.S. Tells Pakistan It Will Have To Fund F-16s Itself

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The United States has told Pakistan it will have to finance the purchase of American F-16 fighter jets itself after members of the U.S. Congress objected to using government funds to pay for them.

The U.S. government said in February it had approved the sale to Pakistan of up to eight F-16 fighter jets built by Lockheed Martin Corp as well as radar and other equipment in a deal valued at \$699 million.

However, Republican Senator Bob Corker said he would use his power as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to bar use of any U.S. funds for the deal to send a message to Pakistan that it needed to do more in the war against militants.

Corker’s stance reflected deep unhappiness among both Democrats and Republicans in Congress about what they see as Islamabad’s policy of supporting elements of the Taliban and the Haqqani network blamed for attacks in Afghanistan.

Members of Congress also raised the possibility of the fighter jets being used against Pakistan’s neighbor India, with whom it has fought three wars. India objected to the deal.

Pakistan’s military says the F-16s it already owns have been integral in fighting the Pakistani Taliban and its allies in the country’s tribal areas, particularly due to the aircraft’s precision strike and night-flying capability.

U.S. State Department spokesman John Kirby said congressional opposition meant funds from the U.S. government's Foreign Military Financing allocation could not be used to buy the aircraft.

"Given congressional objections, we have told the Pakistanis that they should put forward national funds for that purpose," he told a regular news briefing.

Kirby said he believed that effective engagement with Pakistan, including supporting its counter-terrorism effort, was "critical" to promoting democracy and stability.

Sartaj Aziz, Pakistan's foreign policy chief, told reporters in Islamabad that while the U.S. had barred use of the funds for F-16s, the allocation of roughly \$240 million could be used "for other purchases".

"We will examine this with the suppliers to see if there is an alternative source of financing," he said.

"So if any arrangements can be made, we will buy them, otherwise obviously we will have to look for planes from somewhere else."

Lockheed Martin said in March it was using its own funds to pay suppliers and stave off closure of its F-16 fighter jet production line as it waited to finalize orders from Pakistan and other countries.