Shaky Partnership

With the Afghan border situation deteriorating, the Defense Dept. strives to reassure Pakistan—and Congress

JOHN M. DOYLE/WASHINGTON

A s relations with Islamabad grow increasingly tense, the Pentagon is scrambling to mollify its unhappy partner in the war on terror, while reassuring skeptical U.S. lawmakers that Pakistan’s assistance is still worth additional funding.

To signal U.S. commitment to the newly elected Pakistani government, the Bush administration wants Congress to approve its plans to reprogram nearly $250 million in military assistance from the Foreign Military Financing program to pay for upgrades to Pakistan’s aging fleet of 46 F-16A/Bs.

The Defense Dept. also wants to invite the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) to participate in a Red Flag combat training exercise next year at Nellis AFB in Nevada, and to train PAF pilots in close air-support and counterinsurgency tactics.

U.S.-Pakistani military relations, strong during the Cold War, cooled in the 1990s when the U.S. embargoed military sales because of Pakistan’s nuclear weapons development program. Relations improved again in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent war in Afghanistan. But critics complain some Pakistani military leaders are sympathetic to the Taliban and haven’t done enough to suppress Islamic extremists in the rugged and often lawless Federally Administered Tribal Areas along the Afghan border.

The partnership was further complicated by a recent series of attacks on U.S. and NATO troops in Eastern Afghanistan, followed by U.S. missile strikes against terrorist camps in Pakistan.

Pakistan’s military was embarrassed and its people outraged by a Sept. 3 U.S. commando raid against a suspected Taliban base inside Pakistan. Reports, later denied, said Pakistani troops have since been ordered to “open fire” on any future cross-border incursions. Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, made an urgent visit to Islamabad last week to reassure officials that the U.S. will respect Pakistani sovereignty, although another missile strike Sept. 17 touched off a new wave of resentment.

While trying to soothe Pakistanis, the Bush administration took pains to persuade members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee that Pakistan’s F-16s upgraded with U.S. funds will be used to counter al Qaeda terrorism, not Indian air superiority.

USAF Maj. Gen. Burton M. Field, vice director of strategic plans and policy on the Pentagon’s Joint Staff, told committee members the upgrades will give the PAF the capability to fly close-air support at night to assist ground troops on search-and-destroy missions. But the changes will make no improvements to range, loiter time, engine or payload capacity, he said.

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In addition to the close-air support training for PAF pilots, Field told the committee, “We’re looking to bring the Pakistani Air Force over to Red Flag next summer after a series of progressive building block approaches over in their own country, getting them ready for that large-scale program,” he said. Group Capt. Ahmer Shehzad, air attaché at the Pakistani embassy in Washington, confirms the PAF has been invited to Red Flag, but says it is up to officials in Islamabad whether to accept the invitation.

India, Pakistan’s regional rival, participated in Red Flag for the first time this year (AW&ST Sept. 15, p. 59).

The history of animosity between India and Pakistan worries Rep. Gary Ackerman (D-N.Y.) and other members of the House Middle East and South Asia subcommittee. At a hearing on the F-16 financing, Ackerman expressed doubts that the improved F-16A/Bs—and 18 new Block 52 F-16C/D aircraft Islamabad plans to purchase for $1.4 billion—would be used in action against al Qaeda. The U.S. State and Defense Dept. witnesses at the hearing insisted the Pakistanis are committed to the war on terrorism.

The 120,000 Pakistani troops posted in the rugged terrain along the Afghan border are “taking serious casualties. Their commitment is not shallow,” Donald Camp, the State Dept.’s deputy assistant secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs, told the subcommittee. He also noted the PAF flew 98 sorties against the Taliban in August.

Wary that the U.S. could again embar-
go F-16 deliveries and spares, Pakistan has cultivated other sources of combat aircraft since 1990. The PAF has a contract with China for an initial 42 of a planned 250-300 Chengdu FC-1 lightweight fighters to be produced by the Pakistan Aeronautical Center (PAC) as the JF-17. The PAC and PAF are evaluating eight prototype JF-17s, equipped with Chinese KLJ-10 radars and SD-10/PL-12 medium-range air-to-air missiles.

Pakistan has also signed an agreement with France on the supply of Thales RC-400 multi-mode radars and MBDA Mica air-to-air missiles for later batches of JF-17s. In a recent domestic television interview, air force chief of staff Air Chief Marshal Tanvir Mahmood Ahmed said Pakistan is looking into installing a Western engine in the fighter as well, to replace its Russian-supplied RD-93. He also confirmed Pakistan’s plan to purchase 30-40 more-capable Chengdu J-10 multi-role fighters from China.

At the subcommittee hearing, lawmakers expressed concerns about Chinese access to sensitive avionics on the upgraded Pakistani F-16s and doubt about Islamabad’s ability to pay for the improvements.

The total cost of the mid-life update for Pakistan’s F-16A/Bs will be $891 million, and the original plan was for Pakistan to pay all but $110 million. However, it has missed two payments totaling $116 million. In July, the Bush administration sought to redirect $226 million in military funding for Pakistan counter-terrorism efforts to pay for the F-16 upgrades. House members moved to withhold the money, although $116 million was eventually released. Now the Defense and State Depts. want the remaining $110 million—plus an additional $142 million in Fiscal 2009—but some in Congress say the money could be better spent on AH-1 Cobra attack helicopters, night vision goggles and other counter-insurgency equipment, as initially planned.

Under a contract with Lockheed Martin, the U.S. government would have to pay if Pakistan defaults on its obligations for the upgrade. While the U.S. has an agreement with Pakistan to help it pay for the improvements, the contract for the mid-life upgrade program is actually between the government and Lockheed Martin, says Vice Adm. Jeffrey Wierenga, director of the Defense Security Cooperation Agency. “If we don’t have Pakistan national funds, we would use Foreign Military Financing.”

Two for One
Limited weapon-bay space in F-35 drives talks at the Pentagon on a new weapon

GRAHAM WARWICK and AMY BUTLER/WASHINGTON and EGLIN AFB, FLA.

Options to expand the limited internal weapons capacity of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter are emerging as operators begin thinking seriously about how they will use the stealthy aircraft’s combat capability.

The U.S. Air Force and Navy have begun talks to define the Joint Dual-Role Air Dominance Missile (JDRADM) intended to replace both air-to-air AIM-120 Amraam and anti-radar AGM-88 Harm beyond 2020 and allow the F-35 to defend itself against both opposing fighters and air defenses.

Operators are concerned the baseline F-35 will carry only two AIM-120s internally, in addition to air-to-ground munitions. The larger AGM-88 is an option for external carriage only, but is not on the weapons road map for JSF.

“I wake up in a cold sweat at the thought of the F-35 going in with only two air-dominance weapons,” Maj. Richard Koch, chief of USAF Air Combat Command’s advanced air dominance branch, told an IDGA air-launched weapons conference in Vienna, Va., last week.

The combination of a Chinese variant of the Sukhoi Su-27, known as the J-11B, with the PL-12 active-radar air-to-air missile is emerging as a driver in the analysis of future threats facing the F-35. The J-11B has yet to enter service, while the PL-12 has been seen on what appear to be frontline Chengdu J-10s.

A dual-role missile would provide JSF with a greater defensive capability. “When two weapons are all you have in the F-35, the ability to shoot air targets and do reactive [destruction of enemy air defenses] on the way out will give the pilot two options,” Koch says.

Separately, studies into “super-packaging” the JSF’s bays to increase the number of weapons carried have come up with a way of loading six Amraam-sized missiles internally, according to the program office. This could be an option for later F-35 capability blocks.

Talks between the Air Force and Navy to define requirements for JDRADM began two weeks ago and are at a “very preliminary stage,” says Jason Cushing, anti-radiation weapons requirements officer at the Naval Air Warfare Div.

The talks are under the auspices of the Joint Air Dominance Organization, a forum established at two-star level to produce and maintain a joint road map for air-launched weapons and airborne electronic attack.

It will take two years to perform analyses and develop requirements for approval by the Defense Dept., says Cushing. This would be followed by a two-year analysis of alternatives. The tentative in-service date for JDRADM is 2022, which means development would need to be funded beginning in 2012 or 2014, he says.

“We want to build support for the consolidation of counter-air and counter-air-defense capability in one missile,” says Koch. “We may not agree on every requirement, but if we can come up with a Top 10 list we both agree we can take that to the Defense Dept.”

Although the Air Force and Navy have split on Harm upgrades since the weapon entered service, “JSF has got us back on a common path,” Cushing says. “Our tasking is different, but the constraints are similar. We both want to squeeze as much out of the platform as we can.”

JDRADM would have the same 7-in. diameter as Amraam to allow internal carriage. Harm is a 10-in.-dia. missile. Koch says combining air-to-air and anti-radiation roles will be made easier by the decision to continue using the AIM-9X.

“That takes the short-range highly-maneuverable [air-to-air] requirement off the table.”

Though a competition has yet to begin, industry is already posturing itself. Boeing has conducted technology work under small contracts with the Air Force Research Laboratory. They separately focused on a new warhead, integrated guidance and fuzing, and propulsion system, says Michael Valentino, a senior engineer at the lab. Raytheon is mum on its plans, but is widely expected to submit a proposal. Lockheed Martin, ATK and Northrop Grumman also announced a teaming arrangement for this area.

The JSF program office (JPO), meanwhile, says it will cost at least $100 million to add a new weapon beyond the

With Graham Warwick in Washington.