

F-16 critical for Pakistan's fight against terrorists: John Kerry

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Washington: Amidst stiff opposition from India and top American lawmakers against sale of F-16s to Pakistan, Secretary of State John Kerry today strongly defended the decision arguing that these fighter jets are a "critical" part of Pakistan's fight against terrorists.

"The F-16s have been a critical part of the Pakistani fight against the terrorists in the western part of that country, and have been effective in that fight. And Pakistan has lost some 50,000 people in the last years, including troops, to the terrorists that are threatening Pakistan itself," Kerry told lawmakers during a Congressional hearing.

"So it's always complicated. We try to be sensitive to the balance, obviously, with respect to India. But we think the F-16s are an important part of Pakistan's ability to do that," Kerry said when Indian-American Congressman Ami Bera joined other lawmakers to express his concern over the proposed sale of F-16 to Pakistan.

Kerry said the US has been really working hard building the relationship, and "trying to advance even the raproshma" between India and Pakistan.

"We encourage that. I think it's required courage by both leaders to engage in the dialogue that they've engaged in," he said.

"And needless to say, we don't want to do things that upset the balance. But we do believe that Pakistan is engaged legitimately in a very tough fight against identifiable terrorists in their country that threaten Pakistan," the top American diplomat argued.

"They have got about 150,000 to 180,000 troops out in the western part of their country. They've been engaged in North Waziristan in a long struggle to clear the area and move people out. They have made some progress in that. Is it enough in our judgment? No," he said.

"We think that more could be done. We're particularly concerned about the sanctuary components of Pakistan, and we're particularly concerned about some individual entities in Pakistan that have been supportive of relationships with some of the people that we consider extremely dangerous to our interests in Afghanistan elsewhere; Haqqani Network, prime example of that," Kerry said.

India has opposed the sale of F-16 to Pakistan, saying it disagrees with Washington's rationale that such arms transfers help to combat terrorism.

Congressman Elliott Engel, who is Ranking Member of the powerful House Foreign Affairs Committee said: "I'm concerned that Pakistan continues to play a double game, fighting terrorism that has a direct impact inside Pakistan, and supporting it in places like India and Afghanistan, where Pakistan believes such a policy furthers its national interests."

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