Pakistan's Arm Diplomacy

Mains: *GS-II – International relations | India and its neighborhood- relations.*

Why in News?

Recently, Pakistan has reportedly finalised a deal to supply Pakistani arms worth $4.6 billion – the largest such deal ever by Islamabad – to the Benghazi-based Libyan National Army (LNA).

What are Pakistan's significant defence export agreements?

- **Historic Arms Deal with Libya** – The deal includes 16 JF-17 fighter jets(built in Pakistan with Chinese assistance, a Russian engine & some Turkish missiles) and 12 Super Mushak trainers over 30 months.
- Some reports indicate that the deal is being *funded by the United Arab Emirates (UAE),* which has long supported Haftar.
- **Negotiations with Sudan** – Pakistan is negotiating a $1.5–4 billion worth of defence equipment deal with Sudan's Armed Forces (SAF).
- Package may include Karakorum-8 aircraft, drones, advanced air defence systems, and JF-17 fighter jets.
- There are hints that *Saudi Arabia* may finance this transfer through loan waivers.
- **Diplomatic Boosts** – Recent developments has enabled Pakistan to accelerate its defence exports, such as
    - Claimed successes in May 2025 India-Pakistan conflict,
    - Trump's White House welcome for Gen. Asim Munir,
    - Signing of the Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement with Saudi Arabia,
    - UAE President's visit to Islamabad.
- **Expanding Export Footprint** – Pakistan claims to have supplied JF-17s to *Azerbaijan, Myanmar, Nigeria & Bangladesh*.
- If Pakistan's claimed and potential deals are cumulated, they reach $13 billion.

What factors could limit or weaken Pakistan's arms push?

- **Production Capacity** – Pakistan's capacity to produce the JF-17 is limited to about 25 units/year, shared between domestic requirements and exports.
- **Industrial Dependence** – Lacking an industrial base of its own, it largely assembles these fighters from foreign-sourced components (China, Russia, Turkey), creating dependencies.
- **Financing Fragility** – The transactions are often made to recipients dependent on third-party financing, a pinch point.

- That is, the buyers (Libya, Sudan) rely on third-party Gulf financing (UAE, Saudi Arabia).
- **Legal & Geopolitical issues** – Both Libya and Sudan are currently under United Nations arms embargoes, and the two megadeals are buffeted by the Saudi-UAE rivalry, making balancing alliances tricky.
- The possibility of supplying Pakistani arms to RSF (supported by the UAE), meaning both Sudanese factions could be using its weapons.
- **Quality & Reputation** – The hype about the combat-proven JF-17s success against India may eventually wear out, revealing shoddy, incompetent products, and result in a reversal.
- **U.S. Factor** – Munir's close ties with Trump could be *both helpful and risky* - Trump may support his deals but oppose him channeling Chinese weapons into a region Washington sees as its own.

How has the approach to Gulf security changed, and what benefits has Pakistan gained?

- **Past & Current approach** – Washington often relied on Pakistan to manage Gulf security, effectively subcontracting the role.
- The current episode seemed different, with the Gulf monarchies using the same subcontractor to fortify their respective regional proxies, rather than depending on U.S. direction.
- **Gains for Rawalpindi** – Pakistan's military headquarters (GHQ Rawalpindi) benefits by gets hard cash, earns brownie points from the cash-rich Gulf monarchies and expands its outreach to regional hotspots for future security aggregation.
- **Changed Role** – Unlike in the past, Pakistanis are only supplying hardware and training, without putting boots on the ground.

What issues should India be concerned about regarding Pakistan?

- **Pakistan's Expanding Role** – Pakistan is emerging as a net security provider to the Gulf and beyond should concern New Delhi.
- This challenges India, which has deeper economic ties with the Gulf but less defence leverage.
- **Strategic challenge** – Pakistan's success in forging a regional security and defence role would be a force multiplier, enabling it to reclaim parity with India in that region & position itself as a military-industrial hub.
- **Image Makeover** – The Gulf's security dependence on Pakistan helps Islamabad shed its reputation for terrorism, dodgy financial practices and drug running, earning it recognitions from Beijing and Washington.
- All these developments may embolden Rawalpindi to revive terrorism in India, notwithstanding New Delhi's threat of retaliation, while spinning false narratives of military success.
- **Defence Economics** – Pakistan's economy and manufacturing are far smaller than India's *(one-tenth and one-thirteenth).*
- Yet, through joint ventures with China and Türkiye, its annual defence production has reached $7 billion, compared to India's $18 billion.

- Its sales pitch has been sophisticated and multi-pronged – leveraging Islamic solidarity, military-to-military links, and aggressive pricing.
- **Integrated Approach** – Unlike India, Pakistan's defence exports and military establishment do not work in silos.
- **Examples** – Gen. Munir personally visited Benghazi to finalize the Libya deal, PAF chief led talks with Saudi Arabia and Sudan, Islamabad supplied $400 million of ammunition to Ukraine.
- Despite moral/legal concerns, Rawalpindi pursues these deals single-mindedly.
- **Strategic Tilt** – Pakistan's gains may not be India's loss in material terms, but these, nevertheless, tilt the geopolitics in its favour.

What steps must India pursue?

- **India's Current Position** – Defence exports have grown to $2.8 billion (2024–25), Pakistan shows that rapid surges are possible with greater endeavour and passion.
- **Not replicate Pakistan** – As a more responsible and self-respecting country adhering to international law, India cannot replicate Pakistani tactics.
- Yet, India can leverage its indigenous defence industry more effectively for exports.
- **Strategic Priorities** – India should prioritise defence exports for their financial and political spin-offs, focusing particularly on its friends in the neighbourhood and the Global South.
- As the *world's third-largest crude importer*, India can leverage its buying power to persuade its oil suppliers to redress the huge trade imbalance by procuring Indian weapon systems.
- **Financing Tools** – India has sizable aid programmes and credit lines with several countries, which could be utilised to lubricate such arms deals.
- **Institutional Reform** – India could create a dedicated defence export promotion organisation embedded with the stakeholders concerned, such as the public/private defence producers, IT & AI experts, ministries, and funding institutions.
- Such an organisation should aggressively market its defence products at various international exhibitions & bilateral events.
- Should be empowered to negotiate and conclude deals autonomously with minimum bureaucratic controls.
- **Closing the Gap** – India is currently the *world's second-largest arms importer* and *ranks low* among the *top 25 defence exporters*.
- This gap needs to be bridged to tilt the defence trade balance in India's favour.

Reference

The Hindu | Pakistan's arms sales drive calls for India's attention

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