

Pakistan's Decision to Send Weapons to Ukraine Damages Relations with Russia

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Global Research, January 12, 2023
[InfoBrics](#) 11 January 2023

Region: [Asia](#), [Europe](#), [Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#)

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Although Pakistan is suffering from a severe economic crisis, food shortages, and is locked in a decades-long struggle with India over Jammu and Kashmir, the country's authorities are set to send another consignment of weapons and ammunition to help the Ukrainian army's fight against Russia.

Pakistan Ordnance Factories (POF), a state-owned defence industrial enterprise, is reportedly sending 159 containers of 155mm artillery shells, M4A2 propelling bag charges, M82 primers, and PDM fuses to Ukraine via Poland over the coming weeks. According to the Economic Times, Project Shipping - a Pakistani shipping and brokerage firm - will transport the consignment from the Karachi Port to the Gdansk Port later this month.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Pakistan established military and industrial ties with Ukraine. Since achieving independence in 1991, Ukraine up until 2020 sold weapons and military equipment worth nearly \$1.6 billion to Pakistan. These include more than 320 T-80UD tanks, along with a fully formed ecosystem for their maintenance, usage, ammunition, and spare parts.

In addition, Pakistan has become a key logistics hub in transporting humanitarian and military aid to Ukraine. It is recalled that the CEO of Pakistani logistics and engineering firm Kestral, Liaqat Ali Beg, travelled to Poland, Romania, and Slovakia in May and June 2022 to consolidate Pakistan as part of an air bridge to supply Ukraine with weapons. The UK is also using Pakistan's Noor Khan Airbase in Rawalpindi as a key base for the transportation of military equipment for the Ukrainian Army.

While Pakistan will be supplied with Western military equipment in exchange for assistance to Ukraine, Islamabad has repeatedly ignored requests from Moscow for ammunition and weapons. This is despite the fact that the South Asian country still receives 100,000 barrels

of Russian crude oil per day at discounted rates, thus signifying Islamabad's rapid shift away from Moscow in the post-Imran Khan period.

Meanwhile, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) issued arrest warrants on January 10 for former prime minister Imran Khan and other top leaders of his party in a contempt case. The former prime minister has been calling for the resignation of the ECP chief for failing to be a neutral election commissioner – an allegation that the chief rejected by asserting that he was working as per law.

Khan was overthrown in April 2022 in a US-supported soft coup. He was specifically targeted because his independent foreign policy radically shifted from Pakistan's traditional alliance with the US. Since being ousted, the former prime minister has held massive protests across Pakistan, blasting the unelected government for becoming an American "slave."

"The US has made Pakistan a slave without having to invade it. The people of Pakistan will never accept the imported government," he said while addressing a rally in Faisalabad in Pakistan's Punjab province on May 15, 2022.

Khan believes that Pakistan should have been a non-aligned country during the Cold War instead of being a US vassal. He insists that Pakistan should be an independent country today, especially given the current geopolitical climate between the US and Western Europe on one side and China and Russia on the other.

"Pakistan should not take any sides," Khan said. "Why do we have to take sides? Pakistan should have a good relationship with both China and with the United States. Similarly, I feel with Russia and the United States."

"For instance, that's the policy of India," he added. "I must say that I have always admired the way India remained non-aligned during the [first] cold war. I thought it was a sensible thing to do."

Only weeks before Khan was ousted, Washington demanded that he denounce Moscow over its war in Ukraine. For rebuking the Western pressure campaign and declaring that he refused to be a "slave," it is unsurprising that Washington quickly supported a soft coup to place Shehbaz Sharif, an American asset, in power.

It cannot be forgotten that Khan arrived in Moscow on February 24, 2022 – the day that a massive global conflict started. This put the then-prime minister under immense pressure as he was the first world leader to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin since the war in Ukraine broke. He was expected to condemn Moscow's actions.

For his steadfastness and defending his country's interests, Khan was ousted instead. Islamabad's unelected US-backed regime, before sending weapons to Ukraine, then changed the country's position and promptly criticised Moscow.

While Pakistan is sending weapons to Ukraine, the country is also suffering from multiple overlapping crises, including the Covid pandemic, terrorism, food shortages and rising energy costs. Under this context, Russia is assisting Pakistan through its mostly self-inflicted economic crisis by providing discounted oil. Kremlin decision-makers could be mulling on whether to end the discount offer since Islamabad has now ended its extremely short foray of following an independent foreign policy and is now firmly back in Washington's orbit of control vis-à-vis relations with Moscow.

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