

## **Pakistan, US to hold strategic dialogue on Monday amid F-16 row**

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**Islamabad:** Pakistan and the US will hold a ministerial-level strategic dialogue on key areas, including economy, security and counterterrorism, amid strong opposition by India as well as the US lawmakers on the proposed F-16 deal to Islamabad.

Advisor on foreign affairs Sartaj Aziz will lead the Pakistani delegation while secretary of state John Kerry will lead the US side for the 6th round of the strategic dialogue to be held in Washington, Radio Pakistan reported on Sunday.

The six segments of the strategic dialogue include cooperation in economy and finance; energy; education, science and technology; law enforcement and counterterrorism; security, strategic stability and non-proliferation and defence.

It will be the third annual meeting since the present government has come to power.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's visit to the United States in October last year had given the necessary impetus to the dialogue mechanism, the report said.

The dialogue process began in 2010, but interrupted in 2011 when the US forces killed al-Qaida chief Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad in a midnight raid.

The process resumed in 2014 when Aziz and Kerry met in Washington in January.

The key meeting will take place soon after the US announced to sell eight F-16 fighter jets worth \$700 million to Pakistan, despite objection from India and mounting opposition from influential American lawmakers.

Kerry has strongly defended the Obama administration's decision, arguing that these fighter jets are a "critical" part of Pakistan's fight against terrorists.

Planning minister Ahsan Iqbal, who is in Washington as part of the Pakistani delegation, has said the dialogue will provide an opportunity to operationalize key future making initiatives between the two countries.

He was speaking at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies.

The foreign office had earlier said that the upcoming meeting will "afford an important opportunity to take stock of the entire gamut of Pakistan's bilateral relations with the US".

- PTI