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May 19, 2026

The Peru F-16 Sale: The Relationship Between Partner Politics, Extra-Hemispheric Adversaries, and US Defense Access

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Figure 1. F-16 fighter in Peru
(Image source: Defensa.com)

Strategic Event

On April 18, 2026, interim Peruvian President José María Balcázar temporarily suspended signing a \$3.42 billion agreement for the purchase of 24 new F-16 C and D block 70 fighters, associated equipment, and support. The Peruvian government authorized the official purchase decision in January 2026, following a formal two-year evaluation process ratifying the need for the capabilities and finding the US offer met Peruvian needs better than other contender's products, including the Swedish JAS-39 Grippen and the French Dassault Rafale F4. The agreement included a \$1.5 billion direct initial purchase of 12 new production aircraft from Lockheed Martin (for delivery in 2029) and the direct purchase of an additional 12 new production aircraft to be delivered later. It also included a \$500 million foreign military sales support package for armaments, maintenance, and training—as well as the possibility of providing Peru with a KC-135 tanker through the US Excess Defense Article program—that would extend the range or endurance of the aircraft, an important new strategic capability.



Figure 2. A strongly worded post on X by US ambassador to Peru Bernie Navarro after Peru's leftist interim president delayed signing the F-16 deal

(Image source: La Republica Peru)

In the present struggle, following strong words by US ambassador to Peru Bernie Navarro, the Peruvian Defense Minister Carlos Díaz and Foreign Minister Hugo Claudio de Zela Martínez resigned in protest over Balcázar's improper action, and members of the Peruvian congress sought a vote to censure Balcázar. In the end, the Peruvian government signed the deal and made the \$462 million initial payment.



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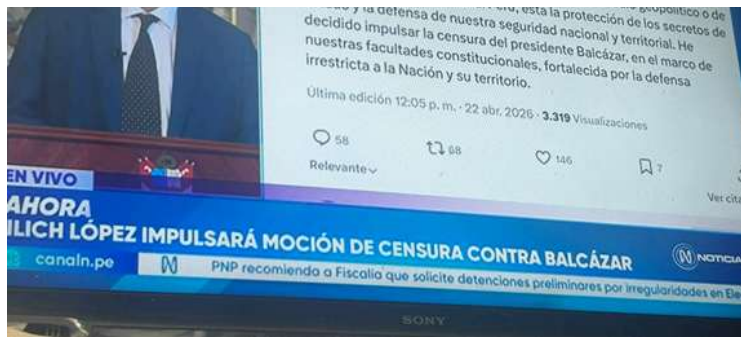


Figure 3. Peruvian congress members introduced a censure motion against President José María Balcázar after he tried to postpone finalizing the F-16 deal
(Image source: Gobierno Peru)

Expert Analysis

Although Peru is in the middle of a presidential election, with a second round scheduled to occur on June 7, the reason given by Balcázar (that the decision should be taken by the “next President”) is less reasonable than it seems, since the Peruvian government had already made the formal decision, following its established process, to go with the US offer. The deeper reason is that in the April 12 first round of Peru’s elections, Cuba-friendly leftist Roberto Sánchez finished second (though the result has been contested and a recount is ongoing), potentially positioning him to defeat rightist candidate Keiko Fujimori in the June 7 runoff and become Peru’s next president. Balcázar, the leftist interim president, may have hoped that by delaying the signing of the contract and making the initial \$462 million payment he would leave open the option for Sánchez to enter a major acquisition deal with China or Russia, rather than incurring a major commitment to the United States through the fighter deal, including the long-term relationships involving training, munitions, maintenance, spare parts, and supporting systems that would accompany the fighter purchase. Indeed, similar maneuvering has occurred in the past when elements friendly to the Russians within the Peruvian armed forces reportedly scuttled a 2016 Peruvian acquisition of US Stryker armored vehicles for Peru’s wheeled combat vehicle modernization.



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Figure 4. Public event with US and Peruvian security experts discussing cancellation

(Image source: Author)

Strategic Implications

For now, the favorable outcome of the dispute continues Peru's positive path as a strong US defense partner, including its January 2026 designation by the United States as a major non-NATO ally.

In the context of the focus of the 2025 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* in resisting the influence of extra-hemispheric actors, the recent events in Peru also highlight the roles of political dynamics within US partner countries in combating that influence and maintaining US military partnerships and access. Latin America faces a series of strategically important elections in the coming months, including the June 7, 2026, second round of Peru's presidential elections; the high-stakes May 31, 2026, elections in Colombia between left and right candidates with different visions of the country's future; and the October 4, 2026, elections in Brazil. The economic pressures and discourses surrounding global events (such as the ongoing conflict in Iran and the US engagement with, and support for, these governments) will strongly shape the dynamics of the three elections. The Donald J. Trump administration and the Department of War particularly face a critical period in which the collective attention to, constructive discourse toward, and support for key Latin American partners may play decisive roles in the posture of key governments toward the United States and its extra-hemispheric adversaries in the years to come in the region that most directly impacts US security and prosperity.

Keywords: Peru, F-16, Lockheed Martin, Latin America, defense, arms sales, Balcázar, Navarro, Sanchez

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