

News

After the F-16s?

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Not if, but how many and of what type. That essentially was the question making the rounds in Islamabad's ruling strategic circles on the eve of the planned arrival of US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

Ms Rice's first visit to Pakistan since her assumption of her present position has been preceded by widespread speculation that Washington has finally come around to agreeing to sell the F-16 fighter planes to both Islamabad and Delhi.

This decision, if indeed the reports are true, may be justified by the US as an attempt to walk the fine line in managing relations between South Asia's two nuclear-armed neighbours. But such a choice clearly has its limitations insofar as Pakistan's interests go.

Islamabad's senior policymakers find themselves deeply anguished over Washington's decision to sell the Patriot missile defence system to India. And this is indeed one area where there are as yet no signs of the same offer to Pakistan to balance the two countries.

If indeed there's a resolution to the long-drawn F-16s episode almost fifteen years after supplies were suspended in 1990 by the US, on allegations that Pakistan was producing nuclear weapons, many Pakistanis are set to be left clearly disappointed. The issue at hand is not just of one piece of military equipment or another.

More fundamentally, the vital question is indeed the quality of Washington's long-term commitment to Pakistan's essential security interests. The emerging partnership between the US and India, should not necessarily be a matter of concern to Pakistan, but only insofar as this relationship does not work to undermine Islamabad's long-term security interests.

It's clear the Patriot deal would undermine Pakistan's security profile and force Islamabad to agitate for as many countermeasures as possible, including

times — essentially that the US is here to stay in a long-term partnership — history has to offer another lesson for Pakistani leaders.

Two former military leaders, field Marshal Ayub Khan and General Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq, both oversaw periods of an intense high in relations with the US. But their departure from the scene within a few years brought Pakistan to stand not too far from pariah status.

The long-term future towards relations with Washington, in part, would

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the production of more missiles, or indeed turning to other sources to diversify the sources of supply of its military equipment.

For Pakistan's policymakers, the writing on the wall is indeed very, very clear. At a time when the US commitment to Pakistan's security shows signs of extending not necessarily much beyond the pursuit of "Al Qaeda," irrespective of the words of reassurance from Washington, there's a pressing case to take stock of the long-term outlook. While many may well reassure themselves with the message heard umpteen

have to be defined by Pakistan's internal outlook. The many inadequacies within the country of today, ranging from its democratic gaps to its profile as a breeding ground for militant causes, would essentially fill some of the space in an eventual charge-sheet on the day Washington turns itself against Pakistan. This is an eventual reality, which has to be accepted, especially as US commitments today do not necessarily offer much hope for the long term, beyond just words of praise, and Ms Rice is certain to use many.

Pakistan's long-term future as a sta-

ble and progressive state will have to be defined by its civilian character, not a military one. The Pakistani military and its leaders may have positioned themselves to influence the scene for the long term, with carefully crafted mechanisms such as the creation of a National Security Council. The essential truth is that the bottom line of stability lies with the country's democratic institutions. For Washington, short-term expediency demands that such matters should not be agitated for now. Who wants to rock the boat at a time of ongoing trouble in Iraq and a sense of discomfort in Afghanistan? To add to the list of Washington-led involvements, a future US-Iran tangle as the consequence of the ongoing build-up, could well also be a factor playing favourably for Pakistan in the short term.

But neither such strategic developments nor words of applause from Washington can work to counter adverse challenges of the future. A footnote to this argument must come by way of the widespread sense of satisfaction in Islamabad's ruling circles in recent weeks, following reports that former prime minister Benazir Bhutto did not get an audience with anyone in the US government's senior-most level during a visit to Washington. This, indeed, hardly makes much of a reassurance. If the history of the world serves a lesson or two, the day may well come when Washington will be in the market looking for new leaders to sponsor in Pakistan.

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