

The new warplanes are welcome, but

Farhatullah Babar

Air power has played a decisive role in modern conflicts, as was demonstrated dramatically during the two Gulf wars. In the Subcontinent the aerial role of air power has been demonstrated more than once. India was able to rescue the remaining Kashmir from marauding tribesmen because its air force was able to airlift troops to Srinagar well in time. The role of the air force was indispensable in the 1965 war and also in the defence of the strategic nuclear assets at Kahuta. If the tables were turned on Pakistan during Kargil the major reason was Indian air power.

A strategic lesson from Kargil has been that obsession with limited tactical advantage can turn into a strategic disaster. A tactical lesson from Kargil is that our air power has progressively declined in relation to India's over the decades. The acquisition by India of advanced SU-30 aircraft from Russia and "Phalcon" radars from Israel has robbed the PAF of its edge, if any. A critical capability of any air force in modern warfare is the ability to fire missiles beyond visual range. India's SU-30s are equipped with this deadly capability. In the current inventory of the PAF only the existing depleting fleet of F-16s is capable of technological modification to carry such missiles. The latest versions of the F-16s now being offered to Pakistan are already

equipped to carry missiles beyond visual range and do not have to be modified.

It means that the F-16s will serve to fill the gap until a steady stream of the new F-17s being built in Pakistan with Chinese assistance comes on line. The supply of F-16s to Pakistan should therefore be welcomed as giving a breather to the PAF. The rulers in Islamabad may flaunt the F-16s as an endorsement of the present political dispensation by Washington.

The F-16s are nuclear-capable and were denied to Pakistan despite payments having been made for it because of Pakistan's nuclear programme. So, in a way, they may also be branded as a tacit acknowledgement of Pakistan's nuclear status. But beyond such self-congratulations it would be a folly to claim that the F-16s are aimed at addressing the imbalance of power in the region. Simultaneously, India was offered the more advanced F-18s, together with technology transfer and licensed local production, amid declarations by the State Department that it supported India's ambition to become a regional power.

India has also been promised an anti-ballistic missile system and dual-use technology to help it become a regional power. The Subcontinental package has raised the technological threshold in the region and is sure to spur the arms race, rather than address the imbalance of power. In the eighties the PAF decision to give Pakistan the F-

16s gave the country a distinct technological edge. The decision on the F-16s now does not give Pakistan any edge but spurs an American-sponsored arms race. It will increase Islamabad's dependence on the US on the one hand and further impoverish the people of the region on the other.

As *The New York Times* commented editorially on the decision, "the worst thing for these two nuclear powers, which have fought three wars against each other since 1947, is to encourage them to engage in a new, American-fuelled arms race."

Questions will also be asked about the quid pro quo. Two days before Condoleezza Rice's visit last month Islamabad stunned everyone with the unpublicised but formal revelation that Iran had received centrifuge machines from the Pakistani nuclear black market. After her departure came the stunning announcement that Islamabad will send centrifuge parts to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) for investigations into Iran's nuclear activities, in a reversal of the government's declared policy.

No sooner had Islamabad made this revelation than Vice President Dick Cheney demanded stronger action against Iran and Washington reiterated in unequivocal terms its support to General Musharraf. The US secretary of state has claimed that the F-16s will help Musharraf expedite democracy. "Poofish talk," says Robert Hathaway of the Woodrow Wilson International

Centre for Scholars.

If democracy restoration really were the object, Washington would not have made a ringing endorsement of Musharraf's dictatorship soon after the Rice visit. General Musharraf would not have had the audacity to offend public intelligence by publicly declaring that "the army is not involved in politics." And Ambassador Crocker in Islamabad would not have found it

"very hard to consider the present set-up in Pakistan as a dictatorship," even as America supported calls for democracy and re-elections in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan.

If the F-16s are a tool to keep Pakistan engaged, the question is: engaged for what? To stop the spread of weapons of mass destruction? To carry forward the peace process with India? To further the war on terror? But in all these areas Pakistan has little leverage to pursue any other course. What, then, is the reason for the F-16s being sent to the Subcontinent?

One appears to be the Bush administration's special relationship with the aircraft manufacturers Lockheed Martin, based in Texas, the home of President Bush. Vice President Cheney's wife was reportedly on its board of directors for seven years from 1994. Two former executives of Lockheed served in the first Bush cabinet. In the 1990s the President's father, Bush Sr., bailed out Lockheed Martin from financial trouble by allowing the sale of 150 aircraft to Tai-

wan. In 2004 when the company's finances again hit the rocks and it announced that it was sacking over 5,000 employees, the sale of hundreds of F-16s to the Subcontinent seems perfectly designed to lift Lockheed's sinking financial fortunes.

The PAF gets a breather. And Lockheed Martin overcomes its financial woes. Five thousand American jobs are saved. General Musharraf's political dispensation receives endorsement. The myth that "the army is not involved in politics" is certified. The lie that the present set-up is not dictatorship is endorsed as truth. The goal of democracy in Pakistan recedes. India's strategic relationship with the US deepens. But that is not all.

Belligerent nationalism also gets a shot in the arm. F-16 replicas will adorn crossings on main roads. The arms race is refuelled. India and Pakistan are a step closer to war if the history of the induction of American arms in the region is any guide. The middlemen in defence purchase deals rejoice. And the over one billion people of the region, particularly Pakistanis, are left more deprived.

As *The New York Times* commented: "Decades of swollen military budgets have virtually bankrupted Pakistan, leaving its government unable to afford adequate spending on education and job-creating economic modernisation. Instead, its leaders have fed the Pakistani people on a diet of belligerent nationalism."

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