

# US's F-16 game plan

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## NOTES FROM DELHI

By M.J. Akbar

WHAT does the military-industrial complex do when it runs out of enemies? No problem, darling. It still has friends. And with friends like India and Pakistan, who needs enemies?

Military hardware is surely the most astonishingly brilliant con ever devised. You spend millions on creating a fabulous death machine, offer it to one side in the name of security/superiority, and then make it a must-buy for the other in the name of parity. Talk of a win-win situation. By the time you've created an F-16 it's a no-brainer.

The only concern about the F-16s that the United States is finally delivering to Pakistan (they were sold heaven knows how many years ago) is whether all these years of disuse have converted them into F-15s. However, Pakistan's defence establishment will ensure that what it receives is in mint-shape. India's parallel purchasing force must have already measured out what is needed for strategic compensation.

Money, of course, is no object. It rarely is for governments. It never is for governments spending on patriotism. Have you ever stopped to consider why governments on principle have no respect for money? Because a government is the only body, apart from the awkwardly named non-government organisation, or NGO, which does not have to earn what it spends. A government simply orders us to pay a large percentage of what we have earned, legitimately, and gives that arbitrary order the force of law through the will of parliament. Governments do not earn, they spend. And "patriotic spending" is the ultimate holy cow: he who challenges it does so at serious risk. Pakistan's defence budget is passed as a one-line item. The one section that is never questioned in an Indian finance minister's speech is any rise in defence spending.

Bill Clinton was the only politician I can recall who actually took advantage of the peace dividend following the collapse of the Soviet empire, and cut the budgets of both the Pentagon and the CIA. But Clinton was an unusual man. With George Bush, life is back to normal. To be fair, 9/11 did not take place under Clinton's watch, but Bush is a traditionalist of the military-industrial complex cadre who would have found ways and means to strengthen its profitability.

True, the F-16s can carry nuclear weapons. And if George Bush has decided to go ahead with the delivery of these planes, then this means official American recognition of Pakistan, and by corollary, India, as acceptable and mature nuclear powers. This is the most welcome aspect of this arms deal. America cannot now revert to the non-proliferation regime.

If it has sold some of its finest weapons-delivery means to nuclear powers, then it cannot pretend that it still expects them to eliminate their nuclear arsenals. Clinton put serious pressure on both countries to disband their nuclear arms, as Strobe Talbott's excellent memoir on the subcontinent, *Engaging India: Diplomacy, Democracy and the Bomb*, reveals.

Clinton had bullied Narasimha Rao into inaction when Rao wanted to declare India's nuclear status, and thought, mistakenly, that he could repeat his performance. (Choice morsel from Talbott's book, always worth re-savouring: the Clinton White House learnt of Pokharan 2 from CNN rather than the CIA. The CIA therefore got all the three Bigs of the last 15 years wrong. It failed to predict the collapse of the Soviet Union. It failed to predict India's bomb. And of course it got Iraq hopelessly wrong. Clinton must have cut the CIA budget with special glee.) Bush has ended that element of Clinton's policy, for there is no endorsement better than arms sales.

Since one consequence of nuclear capability is the MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction)

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syndrome, the presence of F-16s in both countries might, paradoxically, strengthen notions of security among the insecure, and contribute further to the search for peace. Peace has never been a problem for sensible people. One assumes that insensible opinion in Pakistan has now concluded that Kashmir cannot be solved by war, and insensible opinion in India has decided that Pakistan cannot be destroyed by military aggression. Hawks will always search for better claws, but is there any ceiling to an arms race?

Just recently President Pervez Musharraf declared that Pakistan had crossed a vital threshold when it achieved more than minimum deterrence capability. Indian defence ministers have always been blunt about their ability to deliver maximum punishment on the enemy in case India becomes the victim of a first strike. So what has the policy become now? Maximum deterrence? Mid-level deterrence?

The truth may be simpler. There is a visceral attraction to new weapons systems which defence establishments might find impossible to resist. War is fought between enemies, but the puppeteers of war, the arms manufacturers have no enemies. They only have friends. Any and every customer is welcome in the arms bazaar. They have no ideology. Their faith is written with the ink on a chequebook. Their inspiration is fear, and

their catechism is the spread of suspicion. The fear does not have to be real; imaginary will do, as long as it can be sustained in the imagination.

Morality does not enter this game. Morality is for nerds. As long as you have the wherewithal, weapons are available, whether it be a flying machine or flying mortar. During a conversation the other day, Inder Malhotra, one of the greats of Indian journalism, mentioned that the 16 months of ceasefire that had held between India and Pakistan must be the longest uninterrupted trouble-free period in memory. The one incident of exchange of mortar, he added, was by "non-state" sources. Was mortar of such calibre so freely available to "non-state sources", I wondered.

He laughed at my naivete. Had I seen the news on television, he asked, the previous evening? All I had to do was see the weapons that had been seized from an Indian Rajdhani train to realize what was available on our sub-continent from "non-state" sources. Some arms manufacturer somewhere must be thanking God for creating Indians and Pakistanis of a particular variety.

A basic question must be addressed even if it cannot be adequately, or convincingly, answered: do India and Pakistan need any more hi-tech, exorbitantly priced weapons for each other? Aren't the nuclear bombs and missiles sufficient?

It is obvious that President Bush treats Pakistan as a vital strategic partner of America in the world's most volatile region, and wants to reward President Musharraf for the risks the latter has taken in pursuit of a joint strategy with Washington. But surely President Bush also appreciates that there are imponderables.

Would Pakistan be as cooperative in its support of American military action as it was during the war against the Taliban, if the United States moved against Iran? Nor can Pakistan choose to be aloof, as it has been about the war in Iraq. Iran is a border state. There cannot be a clause in the sale contract insisting that the F-16s are permitted to fly in only one direction — towards India!

One presumes that the American decision is part of a larger scenario in which Pakistan is a pro-American fortress guarding the eastern walls of the Middle East region. This would in turn fit in well with the American desire to see peace between India and Pakistan, so that Pakistan stops being a hostage, in its mind, to the Indian threat. The problem with such formulations is that they are drawn on shifting sand, vulnerable to passing storms.

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I only have the questions. I wish I had the answers.

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