

F-16s for the subcontinent

VIEW



RASHED RAHMAN

The leading role of the military-industrial complex as the engine of the US economy has been documented extensively over the years. The US therefore sees the F-16 deals as a win-win plan all the way

Pak. Defense

Daily Times
29/10/95

Air Force, along the lines of what it did for the UAE fleet. The manufacturer claims these upgraded F-16s would be superior to any existing fighters in service the world over. Washington may also allow the sale of an entire array of weapons platforms mounted on these F-16s, including visual range air-to-air missiles and 100 kilometre standoff ground targeting missiles.

The simultaneous sale of advanced fighters to both Pakistan and India signals recognition by Washington that its sanctions policy in view of the nuclear weapons programmes of the two countries has been overtaken by events. This has cleared the way for the US to offer a resurrection of civilian nuclear power cooperation to India, suspended since the 1974 nuclear test. After the nuclear tests by both India and Pakistan in 1998, Washington has by now recognised the reality of both subcontinental countries being in possession of nuclear weapons, with hardly any chance of either rolling back its programme. Becoming a major weapons supplier to both Pakistan and India will increase Washington's leverage with both, help it strengthen the role it has been playing to persuade both countries to turn from conflict and tension to

peace and normalisation. This is a boon to Lockheed Martin's factories in particular, and the American military-industrial complex in general. The leading role of this military-industrial complex as the engine of the US economy has been documented extensively over the years. The US therefore sees the F-16 deals as a win-win for it all the way.

Whether it is a win-win or lose-lose for the poor people of the subcontinent remains a moot point. There is no denying that the deals imply a diversion of scarce resources from the welfare of the people to expensive military toys in the name of maintaining the conventional military balance (which is by now clearly an imbalance in India's favour).

Even more worrying, the quantum and details of what is on offer for Pakistan and India suggests that India will definitely be boosted by the US to become a "major world power" and Pakistan may well be left dangling as usual as an increasingly dependent "minor ally" of Washington.

The writer, currently a freelance contributor, has held editorial positions in various Pakistani newspapers

THE ANNOUNCEMENT BY THE US government that it had cleared the sale of around 26 F-16s to Pakistan, with more possibly to follow, was greeted, true to the script, in opposite ways in Islamabad and New Delhi. Pakistan saw it as a vindication of its long-standing opposition to the sanctions regime imposed on it by Washington since the 1990 Pressler Amendment because of its covert nuclear programme. India on the other hand expressed its "great disappointment" with the decision, in line with its long-standing opposition to any major military sales to Pakistan.

Pakistan has been at pains to characterise India's objections as unjustified. It has also denied speculations on any 'deal' with Washington to either barter away its nuclear weapons capability or a *quid pro quo* to help Washington in its anti-nuclear programme campaign against Iran.

The US has attempted to sweeten the 'bitter' pill for India by mooted its desire to promote India as a major world power with an eye to matching the growing economic and military might of China, and through the offer of state-of-the-art F-16s and even F-18s to India, with 18 aircraft to be immediately delivered, and another 108 to be assembled in India via a technology transfer agreement.

After the initial reservations of the Indian Air Force concerning the possibility of buying F-16s from the US, the Indian government seems to have reconsidered its position on taking up Lockheed Martin's (the manufacturer of the F-16) offer. The Indian Air Force's reservations centred on Washington's unreliability as a supplier (the Pakistan example being a case in point), and the considerable effort required to shift from largely Soviet-era Russian technology to the US package. However, the need to modernise India's largely 1960s vintage Soviet-era MiG fleet (with a smattering of French Mirages thrown in) has persuaded New Delhi that of all the options available (Russia, France, other European suppliers), on balance the American deal offers the greatest advantages.

After all, in recent years India has opened the doors to arms supplies from the US and Israel. Its burgeoning weapons acquisition programme has increased pressure on Pakistan to maintain some semblance of conventional military balance, the nuclear deterrence theory notwithstanding. The idea of buying the American planes has been made more attractive by Lockheed Martin's offer to build 'exclusive' F-16 warplanes for the Indian