

Decision on F-16s

FINALLY, after a delay of two decades, the US has decided to sell the latest version of F-16 fighter planes to Pakistan. The number of aircraft to be supplied is subject to negotiations, but the State Department spokesman made it clear on Friday that these would be new planes and not those manufactured for Pakistan in the 1980s. This is a welcome departure from past practice and is in sharp contrast with the American attitude towards the 32 F-16s Pakistan had paid for in the eighties. In the heyday of Pakistan's involvement with the US-led anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan, Washington had agreed to sell these aircraft and looked away from Islamabad's nuclear plans. However, after the Soviets withdrew, President George Bush Sr refused to issue the certificate required under the Pressler amendment, and the F-16s were held up. What followed was an unhappy chapter in US-Pakistan relations, for Washington not only held up the delivery of the planes, it also refused to return the money Pakistan had paid for them. A decade later, in the Clinton era, compensation was made in the form of the sale of some other items to Pakistan.

Like the decision to hold back the F-16s, the latest step too stems from a radical shift in America's foreign policy priorities. If the decision not to sell the F-16s resulted from the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, followed by the collapse of the USSR and the end of the Cold War, this one has to do with America's war on terror. The terrorist attack on New York and Washington in September 2001 and the US decision to attack Taliban-led Afghanistan turned Pakistan once again into a front-line state. The spin-off for Pakistan included loan write-offs, rescheduling of debts and a 3.1 billion dollar military and economic pack-

age decided at the Camp David summit in 2003. Since then military sales have been going on, but the deal on the F-16s took time to materialize because of several factors, including Indian opposition to it.

New Delhi has reacted negatively to the intended sale. It forgets that in all branches of the armed forces, it has a huge superiority over Pakistan. In air power especially, the disparity between the two is overwhelming, and the sale of a small number of F-16s to Islamabad will not alter the balance of air power. Besides, New Delhi has an ambitious plan to expand its air power. It has already contracted to buy the Phalcon surveillance system from Israel, the anti-missile Patriot network from the US, 126 planes from Russia and 66 Hawks from Britain. Besides, the US has come up with a plan for a "decisively broader strategic relationship" with India to help it become a major world power. The F-16s will thus pose no threat to India but help Pakistan plug serious gaps in its air defence.

The sale of F-16s and India's continued arms purchases focus our attention once again on what looks like an unstoppable arms race in South Asia. Both Pakistan and India spend huge amounts of their resources on military purchases. This has served to keep their people impoverished and militated against the growth of Saarc into a vibrant regional grouping like Asean. They also possess nuclear weapons, and Friday's American statement tacitly recognizes this fact. It would be ideal if South Asia is made a nuclear-free zone — an old Pakistani proposal. But in an imperfect world in which the recognized nuclear powers have huge arsenals, it is difficult to see how Pakistan and India will be willing to give up their nuclear weapons unilaterally.