

South Dakota's former Senator Larry Pressler is proud that an amendment he introduced in 1990 scuttled an earlier F-16's deal with Pakistan. But fifteen years later, he is willing to be a little generous with Islamabad, suggesting the US should not "entirely reject" Pakistan but that it should have a "robust pro-India stance."

Mr Pressler sits on the board of an Indian software company, so he surely has legitimate interests to defend. And most Pakistanis do not think that he should not advocate closer ties with India if he feels that is where US interests lie.

The former senator was one of a handful of people who emerged from the dark last week to publicly lobby against Bush administration's expected decision to sell the long delayed fighter jets to Pakistan. The set of arguments that he used to bolster his case was an example of some of the cheapest political point scoring that can be deployed during a lobbying effort. And it is educational to go through them because they are often used against Islamabad, and also because they give the impression of being cogent when they really are not.

The main argument Mr Pressler used was democracy and Pakistan's troubled democratic evolution compared to India's "highly developed system of human rights." To castigate

Larry Pressler's

BY AHMED QURAISHI

Perpetuating a myth is another common lobbying tactic.

the Bush administration, he resorted to the classical argument that it is easier to deal with one general in Pakistan than with a parliament and a free press in India.

The statement was ill-timed, to say the least. US authorities denied entry permission to a high ranking Indian government official with an established record of involvement in organised genocide against an unarmed religious minority. If that was not enough to undermine Mr Pressler's case, the Indian government, with its "highly developed system of human rights," squarely backed the disgraced official.

A lot of credit for highlighting this case also goes to the Indian civil society. The point here is not questioning the human rights progress in India, which is commendable despite the major blemish of Kashmir. Pakistan's evolving and robust civil society and democratic culture is shaped by the country's own set of circumstances and history. The practice of habitually comparing Pakistan and India - though quite common in the academia and the media - is often misleading

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officials find it easier to visit Islamabad than to face the "free press" in New Delhi. It fits the stereotype of despotic, press-muzzling dictatorships in the greater Middle East region, of whose Pakistan is the eastern flank.

But there are also the subtle things that get eclipsed by such stereotyping. An example is what we have discovered in the past year and a half of 'people-to-people contacts' with Indian journalists and media persons, Indian delegations of opinion makers that have visited Pakistan have been stiffly uninformed in their statements compared to the diversity of opinions of Pakistanis visiting India. God forbid if any member of an Indian delegation visiting Pakistan is quoted saying anything different from the official Indian line on any controversial issue between the two nations. This is not to question the free press in India, which is definitely vibrant. The point is that Pakistan has outgrown the stereotypes of the 1980s and 1990s. Never mind Mr Pressler's outdated pontifications.

The news that Washington is ready to transfer the F-16s to Pakistan also

jolted the Indian-American lobby. But this lobby must be given the credit that its anti-Pakistan arguments were far more creative than the ones espoused by Mr Pressler. One Indian scholar at an American think tank termed the deal as an attempt by Washington to "reinvent Imperial Britain's Pakistan project."

Questioning the viability and legitimacy of the Pakistani state has been an old Indian obsession, so that is irrelevant here. The interesting thing is that the said Indian scholar's thesis was turned down by the mainstream American media organisations. The only outlet that agreed to run the piece is an "exiled" Pakistani electronic newspaper. I am yet to come across any Indian paper that allowed an equally anti-Indian opinion on its pages written by a Pakistani writer. Just one more example of how self-defeatist some Pakistanis can be. Luckily, they are in minority.

It is often mistakenly taken for granted that democracy is Pakistan's soft spot. But the superficiality of the arguments employed by the anti-Pakistan lobby shows that the old stereotypes about Pakistan can longer survive scrutiny. Pakistanis need to be more assertive and confident when confronted by such empty propaganda. They are, after all, part of an emerging nation.

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