

## The right stuff: F-16s to Pakistan is wise decision

By [William B. Milam](#), [Sarmila Bose](#) / April 11, 2005

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The negative chorus that has greeted the American decision to sell F-16s to Pakistan is off-key. From the criticism, it is clear that the importance of Pakistan to the long-term interests of the US, the West, and - perhaps less obviously - India, is still poorly understood.

Most observers assume that the decision was motivated by the US need for Pakistani cooperation in the war on terror. Critics emphasize that Pakistan remains a military government with a democratic facade, and that it hasn't been fully cooperative on other issues (notably A.Q. Khan and his nuclear proliferation network). We think America's longer-term interests in the region argue strongly for supporting the decision. Those interests start with Pakistan's geo-strategic and political importance. The second most populous Islamic country, situated next to democratic India, it is also a neighbor of Afghanistan and a gateway to Central Asia.

While we remain disappointed at the halting progress Pakistan has made toward democracy, we do know that it has been there before (albeit unsuccessfully), and probably has a better chance of getting there again in the next decade than many of the Islamic countries of the Middle East that have yet to make a first try.

As a stable Islamic democracy of 150 million people, Pakistan would be a political model in the Muslim world. However, a real democracy requires evolution toward a more "modern" society and the "enlightened moderation" that President Pervez Musharraf continues to advocate. On this, the president needs US help, too - on social development such as improving education and health, and on the political front to head off the religious parties seeking his removal because of his moderation and his cooperation on the war on terror.

A democratic, moderate, and modern Pakistan would be a better neighbor for India, one able to transform - if India were willing - the age-old hostile relationship into something mutually constructive.

Critics may well ask, "Can't we bring this about without selling F-16s to Pakistan?" The answer probably is no, given the history of the US-Pakistani relationship, and the doubts that many Pakistanis harbor about American willingness and ability to sustain a relationship.

This is precisely why the sale of the F-16s is the sort of measure that serves US interests.

First, it helps mitigate the insult caused by the US's shoddy behavior over the F-16s in the 1990s: Taking money and not delivering the goods is bad business and even worse foreign policy. Doing because a nation develops a nuclear program - which Pakistan, India, and many other countries believe they have as much right to develop as the US does - was shaky as well. The US now accepts both as de facto nuclear states.

To make matters worse, it took the US until 1998 to refund the money Pakistan had paid for the planes and, even then, the US refunded \$324.6 million of the \$463.7 million claim and tried to fob off the rest with gifts in kind, like white wheat.

Second, the sale of the F-16s enhances US ability to influence Mr. Musharraf and his moderate line of governance in the longer term. It proves to the Pakistani military and public that Pakistan's cooperation with the US brings benefits, and that the US understands its security concerns. This in turn promotes trust, undermines anti-Americanism, and signals that the US has learned from the mistake of abandoning Pakistan in 1990 and is now interested in building a long-term relationship.

If used wisely, this enhanced influence may move Musharraf toward a more democratic sensibility, get the US more information on what A.Q. Khan sold to whom, and allow the US a little more persuasive leverage on Pakistan's slow and erratic rapprochement with India, including the hard bargains that have to be struck to settle the Kashmir dispute (with an equal amount of persuasive effort on India to make it face up to what will be necessary from its side).

Third, the longer-term view signaled by the F-16 sale allows the US to focus on other fundamental issues: economic reforms to encourage the greater regional trade and investment necessary for sustainable economic development; social progress through the spread of education, especially for women; and repeal of *hudoon* laws - which are derived from Islamic law - and other obstructions to modernity.

The sale of F-16s in no way detracts from the economic assistance to which the US should remain committed, especially through targeted education programs, which transform society. Nor do planes that were meant to be delivered 15 years ago constitute a destabilizing factor. Rather, they address Pakistan's security concerns, rebuild trust, and signal America's long-term commitment - correctly designing policy on the basis of crucial US interests and the common interests that form the bedrock of any successful alliance.

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