

Harvest of the visit

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Profuse personal praise, pampered egos and a pocket full of peanuts and promises. That has been the American way of seeing off Pakistan's rulers, particularly the military ones who, by some unerring miracle, are in power just when America needs them most. So, how different has the latest visit been?

Praise for General Musharraf was effusive indeed, and not without visible effect. But no debt write-off, no increased market-access, no encouraging word on Kashmir, no balm for the Pakistanis in the US, no F-16s, the promise of a measly five year aid-package of 3-billion dollars and a near-commitment to throw Pak troops into the Iraqi inferno. Shorn of the spin and sophistry, this is the rustic simplicity to which the results are being reduced by the man-on-the-street.

A harsh verdict obviously, which excludes from the equation the intangibles which can prove invaluable. General Musharraf had the occasion to present Pakistan's case on regional and world issues to President Bush and his team formally during the talks, and personally when Bush took him for a walk (not a ride, hopefully) through the lush lawns of Camp David. How much of it sank into Dubya Bush is, of course, an imponderable.

A personal accord was, nonetheless, struck between the two leaders which could be important in future. General Musharraf also got the ear of key Congressional leaders who can be lethal for a vassal in need. He addressed American business leaders and the media as well. And we know that General Musharraf can be persuasive — except, of course, when he is defending a military presidency. Thus, getting on the right side of the new Imperium must count for something.

The science and technology agreement was a pleasant surprise, though. After the nuclear blasts of 1998 and then 9/11, Pakistani students and researchers have been shut out of cutting edge sciences. If their access can be restored and enhanced, this alone could outweigh all else that is being trumpeted as the achievements of the visit. But the proof of the pudding is in eating. Likewise for the agreement to talk about free-trade. These talks could stretch to the moon, and may end up costing us more in intellectual property rights than the potential benefits of increased exports.

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The need was for a debt write-off as well as a heftier package exclusively for social sector uplift. The former carries, among other things, a tremendous symbolic value for the people who attribute Pakistan's vulnerability to American arm-twisting mainly to its precarious loan-dependency. More social sector funding is, of course, imperative to reverse the multiplying poverty, deprivation and decaying state services. Even by the unflattering "services ren-

dered" criterion, Pakistan deserved more. After all, Egypt pockets around 3 billion dollars annually; and General Ziaul Haq had weaselled much more out of the tight-fisted Americans 20-years ago. Hence, the pervasive perception of having sold ourselves short yet again.

On principle, the 1.5 billion dollar military half of the package is a dead waste for a dirt-poor country. So much could be done for poverty alleviation with this money. Secondly, relying again on American weapons despite past betrayals at critical times cannot count as wisdom. For both these reasons, the American arms-embargo (slapped instantly after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan) was a blessing in disguise.

In military terms, the weapons reportedly on offer do not address Pakistan's urgent needs vis-a-vis the frenetic Indian build-up. The F-16s were critical because of the increasing technological imbalance in the air-power of the two antagonists. PAF's 30 odd F-16s are 20-years old, and still the only hi-tech match to

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India's 300. And India is intensely focused on putting the PAF in an absolutely no-contest position.

It has spread its multi-billion dollar arms purchases cleverly across the US, Russia, France, Britain and Israel who are obviously not keen to lose its bigger market. Hence, General Musharraf's frustration at their disinclination to sell us hi-tech planes. The joint declaration issued after Mr Vajpayee's visit to China, envisages military cooperation as well. Simultaneously, India continues to acquire more advanced attack aircraft, decisive force-multipliers like the American-Israeli Phalcons, sophisticated radars and long-range anti-aircraft missiles. The daily testing of the multi-warhead ground-to-air Trishul is not a fireworks display.

But despite General Musharraf's pointed stress on the dangers inherent in this asymmetry, the F-16s drew a blunt no from Bush himself. And much of the hardware being offered (transport and surveillance planes, helicopters) is tailored, primarily, for anti-terrorist operations as the US would like these to be conducted along the Afghan border. Secondly,

it can be effective in combat only if there is air parity, if not superiority. That luxury the US and India are determined not to allow Pakistan, indicating what might be in the offing if they see things getting out of hand.

But the implications of the F-16s transcend the Indo-Pak arms equation. Like Kashmir, as General Musharraf specifically pointed out, they are an emotive issue in Pakistan — symbolizing past betrayal. The American refusal, thus, is being seen as the continued absence of trust in Pakistan. In fact, of the presence of a perception in Washington that it could well be a future enemy and, hence, to be starved of hi-tech weaponry.

Nonetheless, General Musharraf chose to clothe the Pak-US ties as a new "strategic partnership". There can obviously be no such thing without mutual trust and respect. These critical ingredients have, however, always been absent from the Pak-US relations, thanks mainly to our domestic disorder and a self-serving, supplicating ruling elite. Without infusing trust and respect into the equation, there can be no shared objectives and no stable, strategic partnership. It is once again a need-driven re-engagement by the US, likely to wax and wane as its needs and Pakistan's utility do.

Otherwise, the least President Bush could have done was to have called for a cessation of violence in Kashmir — a repetition thereby of the stop-cross-LoC-infiltration mantra for Pakistan, and an equitable addition therein of the need for India to rein in its brutal occupation forces. Not a word on that, even as the Indian crackdown exacts a daily human toll far higher than in Palestine. Even ministers of the Indian Occupied Kashmir government aren't spared the lash if they intercede for the harassed people. Instead, while General Musharraf was still in town, eight "Jihadis" with alleged links to Kashmir and Pakistan were arrested from around Washington DC. A coincidence?

President Bush might also have survived a few soothing words for the Pakistanis in the US and a promise to save them from avoidable indignities. But if he did not feel the need to please public opinion in Pakistan, it was mainly because he knows that it does not count for much in policy-making. It could not have gone unnoticed that no specimen of his "real democracy" was included in General Musharraf's entourage. Besides, the alternate liberal-moderate leadership has also tied its fortunes to Washington. So the MMA may rave and rant as much as it wants.

Even so, it would be a grave mistake to send Pak troops to Iraq, no matter who commands them, to strengthen the immoral, illegal and repressive occupation. There is no peace to keep there, and no justification for Pakistani soldiers to kill Iraqis or be killed by them. We earned our share of infamy and pain when General Ziaul Haq led the massacre of Palestinians in Jordan, and when Pak troops died in Somalia trying to save American necks. And, further back in time, when our martial race helped the British crush the Indian uprising of 1857, fight the Afghans and oust the Ottomans from Arab lands to pave the way for Israel. Let America's Arab protégés and Iraq's ethno-lingual brothers earn their keep now.