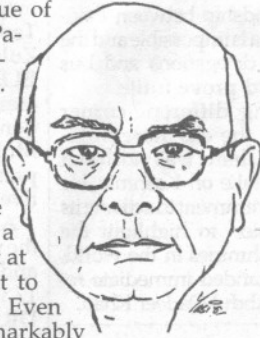


# Rice's masterly evasi

BY MAZHAR QAYYUM KHAN

Almost on every issue of serious concern to Pakistan, with the exception, perhaps, of Dr A.Q. Khan's underground proliferation network, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was evasive in her response while fielding questions from a PTV World correspondent at the conclusion of her visit to Islamabad on March 17. Even conceding that she is remarkably quick in the uptake and her knowledge of international affairs is deep enough for her to frame instant answers, her replies streaming forth with terrific speed suggested as if she was ready with the phrases that cleverly sidestepped the actual questions.



Her remarks were, in fact, specimens of masterly crafted words that led the questioner to have a generalised overview of subjects in inconclusive and evasive terms and in no way made him wiser.

Senior diplomats, as a matter of routine, are given 'Briefs', documented accounts of perceptions of the two sides on subjects likely to come up during their meetings. In case of sensitive matters even the phraseology to be used in discussions or giving answers to newsmen's specific queries is debated and finalised (or at least suggested). One should not be surprised if she had already decided on what to say when faced with the prospect of talking about ticklish matters.

At least this visit's scenario was not as bad as the one seen on her recent fence-mending tour of France soon after she became Secretary of State. Not only were the credentials of every member of the audience at the forums she was to address thoroughly screened beforehand but also they were required to submit their questions in advance. The questions were vetted, 'suitably' modified, replaced or even rejected. French Foreign Minister Michel Barnier's son was handed back a different question and the pity is he did not protest but asked the question the Secretary wanted to speak about. So much for the French regard for principles.

The highly qualified and even more highly rated Dr Condoleezza Rice did not feel up to the mark to tackling a French audience because a vast majority of public opinion in the country was against the American invasion of Iraq. She feared unpalatable questions to be raised like the hoax about weapons of mass destruction and Baghdad's links with Al-Qaeda to serve as a mask for the unprovoked aggression. Were the audience allowed to ask questions freely, the visit of the top US diplomat to France would have been marred by embarrassment. So much for President Bush's penchant for democracy, freedom of expression and Christian values.

Many would have preferred to stay away from such stage-managed shows although no clear word to that effect appeared in the press reflecting once again the Western media's timid complicity with the authorities in matters concerning the so-called na-

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tional interests.

Considering how tightly measured and controlled her utterances abroad are it is not far-fetched to assume that whatever the nature of questions, say for instance about F-16, her answer would have been the identical.

Thus, when asked a direct question by a PTV World correspondent about the US position on the supply of F-16s to Pakistan, Dr Rice thought it fit only to refer to discussion with Pakistani leaders on Islamabad's defence and strategic needs. A Pakistani official summing up discussion with her on F-16s observed, "Both the sides decided to continue with talks on the vital matter with the US Secretary of State assuring of constant contact with the Indian leadership to pave the way for an acceptable solution to the F-16 issue".

So much for the truth in the US repeated assertions of not having zero-sum relations with Pakistan and India. Undoubtedly, Washington does not want to ruffle New Delhi's feathers. It would also be a failed exercise were the US to link the fighter aircraft's sale to India with its supply to Pakistan. The Indian Air Force is not so keen to get the American fighter for the simple reason that Washington would not give it a long-term guarantee of replacement of spareparts. MiG-29s and Mirages would be far easier for IAF to absorb than adding a new aircraft to its inventory. Its curiosity for F-16s was only aroused by Pakistan's possession of them.

In this situation—India's continued hostility to our armed forces acquiring teeth, its own indifference to getting F-16s and the US seeking its prior approval—it is idle to pin hopes that Washington would stop dragging its feet and make the aircraft available to us.

Over time we seem to have developed an emotional attachment to F-16. There are equally good and even better fighter aircraft available in the market. We should consider tapping another source and, at the same time, intensify research, in cooperation with China, to improve the technology of F-7.

If our scientists and engineers can break the nuclear code, there is no reason to believe that they would disappoint us in making the country self-sufficient in defence production. It is a tall order, keeping in view the quick strides technology is making rendering yesterday's inventions obsolete but a minimum deterrence in all fields of defence should not be out of their reach.

Dr Rice was similarly evasive as she replied to a question about the provision of Patriot missiles to India. She had discussed its strategic and defence requirement at New Delhi and was keeping in mind

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the balance of forces in the Subcontinent and the happy turn Indo-Pakistan relations were taking. Conclusion could very well be that while the supply of F-16s to Islamabad depended upon the sweet of New Delhi, the provision of Patriot missiles to India could be justified on the improvement of political climate between the two countries.

She maintained that she had expressed concern over India's decision to get gas from Iran. There were conflicting signals about its response though it could, instead of making its views known, well wait for Pakistan to bow to the US pressure. In that event, the project would stand scuttled. In fact, Islamabad is already having second thoughts, to put it mildly.

Even before Secretary Rice had left Washington, Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz remarked that the decision about the gas pipeline would be taken by the end of the year and that Pakistan was examining the two other available options from Central Asia. It surprised those who had taken his Tehran statement last month seriously that Pakistan had decided to get the Iranian gas, with or without Indian participation.

When asked about the US anti-Muslim policies, Dr Rice unconvincingly talked of helping Iraqis, Kuwaities and Afghan women. Only the gullible would buy her contention that Muslims were free to worship in her country as a proof of its pro-Muslim policies and ignore the constant discriminatory treatment to which they are subjected.

Dr Rice was emphatic about the need to break Dr Khan network's "tentacles" and wanted its mode of working exposed. She discussed with President Musharraf the "importance of democratic reforms...that would, in fact, lead to free and fair elections in 2007," thus endorsing the government stand and reiterated the US commitment of maintaining long-term friendly relations with Pakistan.

No official encounter between Washington and Islamabad could conceivably take place without 'terrorism' rearing its ugly head on the negotiating table. Nevertheless, the subject has for so long been rammed into the public worldwide that it has become outworn and no longer raises the spectre of doom. It is being taken as one of those things that might materialise but if life has to go on, it has to take a back seat for other immediate and tangible concerns to be addressed.

Secretary Rice earlier this month told *The Washington Post* that the US had been able to blunt Al-Qaeda with Pakistan's help but lest terrorism should get away from the public radar she was not ready to underestimate the dangers its remnants presented. Therefore, the search for Osama bin Laden and his lieutenant Al-Zawahiri would continue, with Islamabad once believing them to be in Waziristan but now saying it has lost track.

The Secretary of State's visit, in sum, broke no new ground. If anything, it created a negative impact at the public level. Tying the sale of F-16s to India's discretion and the setback on the sorely needed natural gas could not have been expected to improve the US image in the Muslim world it says it is constantly trying to do.

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