

# A Vision from the South

Gen Ricardo Ortega, Chilean Air Force, Retired

Countries that maintain armed forces for the protection and survival of their citizens have the right and duty to organize and equip those forces according to their legitimate interests. However, some countries far removed from the “advanced” world—those that have no expectation of exerting influence and that lack hegemonic interests—must contend with the costs of organizing a well-balanced defense structure that will maintain the stability and security of their borders.



In terms of affording state-of-the-art weapons systems, a gap has opened between the world powers and other countries that wish to move forward. For the latter, the cost of these systems is prohibitive. In these countries, the balance of “guns versus butter” is more relevant. Nations with a great need to progress want to develop peacefully and improve their health, education, and housing in order to meet the needs of their citizens.

Many individuals agree that a democratic form of government and free trade are basic to realizing the progress and well-being sought by nations. However, it is not easy to progress when countries must contend with crime and corruption without assistance from strong institutions such as a free press. This article does not intend to address how countries should organize themselves for their own benefit. That task is better left to the politicians. Rather, it points out

that sometimes defense is not a priority of public policy among emerging, or third-world, countries that are more concerned with reducing costs and turning their armed forces into a useful tool for development and progress.

The cost of new equipment is particularly relevant to nations that have limited resources and that cannot impoverish themselves by purchasing technologically advanced products tailored to scenarios completely alien to them. Unfortunately, defense industries have concerned themselves for the most part with manufacturing sophisticated equipment for which less-developed countries have little need or use. These countries have had to resign themselves to obtaining what first-world nations have produced for employment in their own conflicts, many of them far away and in environments that demand current technologies. In developed countries, however, one wonders whether the military constantly seeks technological superiority or whether the defense industry does so simply to sustain itself. Certainly, industry must design new equipment to keep up with the market, make a profit, and create jobs that many citizens and communities depend upon for their survival. Nevertheless, it seems strange that first-world countries produce equipment that has little effect on conflicts like Afghanistan and the enemy located there.

When the Afghanistan war ends, will we continue to witness the production of costly aircraft such as the F-22, Joint Strike Fighter, A400, Eurofighter, Rafale, and the like? Granted, these efficient platforms have great potential, but they will demand new investments

to keep them up to date—investments that only the world powers and Arab countries can afford. But what happens to the third-world nations that have their own defense requirements? Some manufacturers, such as Embraer and Airbus, have responded to this need by developing less costly equipment, such as the Super Tucano and the A390 carrier aircraft, respectively.

We won't find the answer to this problem in a consortium defined by politicians—that is, an arrangement whereby countries agree to build a particular type of aircraft, divide the costs, and buy a certain number of them. Invariably the countries strive to reach their power quotas, guarantee work for their citizens, and impose their own points of view, ultimately producing an expensive aircraft that meets no one's expectations and that demands permanent modifications and multiple versions to satisfy each country's needs. And the rest of the world has to adapt to what the market offers.

Nowadays few countries can build an aircraft by themselves. Some nations enjoy important competitive advantages and have much to offer in terms of reducing costs. But has anyone ever bothered to look for alternatives more amenable to customers of lesser economic means? In the past, we have seen aircraft like the F-5E, F-20, and countless versions of the F-16 promoted as effective and efficient “international” platforms, even though the F-16 now faces elimination from the production line in favor of new aircraft. (In reality, however, there may be no buyers for those new aircraft.)

Defense manufacturers would do well to look to the example of other corporations that have successfully offered less costly versions of their products. That is, just as the computer industry provides more affordable alternatives to Intel's Pentium processor in the form of the Celeron and AMD, and just as the automobile industry in Japan, Korea, China, and India makes less expensive, though economical and reliable, cars to compete with those made in the United States and Europe, so can the defense industry make available new, basic products or perhaps reengineer older, proven equipment at a lower cost to accommodate third-world nations. Indeed, China, India, and Russia are trying to meet the demands of such countries in this way.

Manufacturers who are reluctant to take this approach should realize that first-world nations are reducing their stockpiles, recognizing the futility of maintaining sophisticated and expensive Cold War-era weapons no longer applicable in the current environment. True, airpower goes hand in hand with technology, and the aircraft industry wishes to keep pace; however, as mentioned earlier, today's platforms are so costly that very few third-world governments are willing to put their citizens' health, housing, and education needs in jeopardy by purchasing them.

In sum, the problem addressed in this article merits a different approach than the one now in place. Otherwise, manufacturers will price themselves out of the market and will have to sell their aircraft for less, based on political agreements—an undesirable option.

Clearly, then, industry must consider ways to reduce costs for the benefit of emerging countries—if not now, then very soon.

### **Contributer**



Gen Ricardo Ortega Perrier, Chilean Air Force, retired (MBA, Gabriela Mistral University [magna cum laude]; MS, University of Chile [distinguished graduate]), served as commander in chief of the Chilean Air Force from November 2006 to November 2010. In that capacity, he was the senior officer in charge of combat readiness, efficiency, training, and equipment for the Chilean Air Force, which includes 14,000 military personnel and civilians. During his military career, he held various positions, among them chief of staff of the Air Force, instructor at the Air Force Academy, flight instructor in the Combat School, observer for a United Nations team in the Middle East, and instructor at the Chilean Air War College and the Chilean Naval War College in the fields of strategy and operations. As a fighter pilot, General Ortega has 3,452 flying hours in the L-13, T-34, PA-28, T-35, HU-16B, B-200, 99-A, and A-37B aircraft. On 5 November 2010, by constitutional orders, General Ortega retired as commander in chief of the Chilean Air Force.

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