

## US defence officials line up at India's door

Pacific Command Chief, Under Secy of Defence, among others to complete deals



US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter's two-day India visit beginning late on April 10 will be the high point of a string of visits by top defence officials of the Obama administration. The quickened pace of the India-US defence relationship is a consequence of last week's formal "Make in India" proposal from Washington on single engine F-16 and twin engine F-18 multi-role fighters. As importantly, less than a year is left in Obama's second term, and the entire gamut of India-US defence relations, including transfer of F-414 engine technology and joint development of an aircraft carrier, has to be reviewed in the limited time available.

The conveyor belt will be set in motion by foreign secretary S Jaishankar's visit to the US next week in connection with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's presence at the Nuclear Security Summit in Washington from March 31-April 1 as well as for talks on issues related to intellectual property rights. Top government sources said India will host a string of high-profile visitors from the US Department of Defence, beginning with Pacific Command Chief Admiral Harris B Harris next week. Pentagon's Director for International Cooperation Keith Webster comes to the Capital on April 4-5, a week before Carter's visit. Webster will be followed by the Under Secretary of Defence Frank Kendall, who comes to the Capital on April 7-8.

Although Under Secretary Kendall has formalised the "Make in India" for F-16s proposal, New Delhi remains upset with Washington's plan to sell six of these top-of-the-line fighters to Pakistan in guise of support to counter-terrorism. Prime Minister Modi conveyed his strong reservations on

the proposed sale to USIBC chairman Ajay Banga on the sidelines of “Make in India” show in Mumbai this month.

The deal is still to go through with powerful Arizona Senator John McCain now openly questioning the timing of the sale. Senator McCain is the chairman of the powerful Senate Armed Services Committee. Secretary Carter will discuss the proposed sale of F-16s to Pakistan with his counterpart Manohar Parrikar.

Even though India is upset at the F-16 sale to Pakistan, it is looking towards the Grippen Next Generation (NG) fighter for its single engine fighter requirement as the Swedish manufacturer SAAB is ready for full transfer of technology to the Defence Research Development Organisation (DRDO). India remains keen, however, to acquire the F-18 twin engine platform through the “Make in India” route and wants the F-414 engine for its future Tejas squadrons.

During the visit, Secretary Carter and defence minister Parrikar will also exchange notes on China’s aggressive moves in South China Sea in context of the disputed Parcel and Spratly Islands. The two sides will also discuss the security situation in the Af-Pak region as well as the growing footprint of the Islamic State in the sub-continent.