# Obama to name Ashton Carter as Pentagon chief

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US media reports citing top Obama administration officials indicate that the White House will shortly announce the appointment of Ashton Carter, former deputy secretary of defense, as the replacement for Chuck Hagel, who was fired as Pentagon chief last week.

The appointment of Carter became something of a foregone conclusion after the three other potential candidates whose names were floated by the White House—Senator Jack Reed of Rhode Island, Jeh Johnson, secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, and Michele Flournoy, another former deputy secretary of defense, all withdrew from consideration.

The position of defense secretary in the final two years of a beleaguered administration was apparently none too attractive, especially amidst complaints that control over military policy had been largely shifted to the White House National Security Council staff.

Nonetheless, the selection of Carter has a definite significance, both for the foreign policy of the Obama administration and for its relations with the incoming Congress, in which both the House of Representatives and the Senate will be controlled by the Republican Party.

Carter stands on the right wing of the Democratic foreign policy establishment. He was a supporter of the 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq, as well as an advocate of preventive war against North Korea, which he advocated in 2006 in a notorious commentary co-authored by his long-time mentor, former Clinton administration Defense Secretary William Perry.

Senate Republicans who will conduct confirmation hearings immediately praised Carter as a nominee likely to receive a near-unanimous vote. He was confirmed unanimously in 2009 for the post of chief Pentagon purchasing officer and in 2011 for deputy secretary of defense. In that capacity, Carter effectively ran the Pentagon's day-to-day operations under Leon Panetta and Hagel, both longtime legislators with little administrative experience.

In policy matters, Carter is identified much more with the global priorities of the Obama White House, both the "pivot to Asia" and the more recent provocations against Russia over Ukraine, than with the ongoing wars in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan.

He began his Pentagon career in the Reagan administration as a civilian analyst in the nuclear weapons program. He was involved in studies on missile defense systems and programs to ensure "continuity of government" in the event of nuclear war—essentially the establishment of military dictatorship in the United States.

These programs were developed more broadly in several administrations, notably by Reagan's National Security Council under Lt. Col. Oliver North in the form of plans for mass arrests of opponents of a future military intervention in Central America. Similar plans were developed after the 9/11 attacks under the auspices of Vice President Dick Cheney.

Carter switched back and forth between the Pentagon and Harvard University, taking higher level positions in the Clinton administration and ending as assistant secretary of defense for international security policy, where his main focus was the integration of former Soviet bloc countries into NATO, as well as the dismantling of the nuclear arsenals of the former Soviet republics of Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan. This experience suggests he could become the point man for the current US-NATO campaign against Russia.

While back at Harvard during the Bush administration, Carter was a prominent Democratic Party voice on military and security policy, focused

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especially on the danger of weapons of mass destruction. He supported Bush's attack on Iraq on the basis of (nonexistent) WMDs, and called for the "war on terror" to be transformed into a "war on WMDs," with a particular focus on Iran and North Korea, the other two countries that, with Iraq, comprised Bush's "axis of evil."

In 2006, after North Korea successfully tested an atomic bomb, Carter and former defense secretary Perry wrote a joint op-ed for the *Washington Post* advocating a US missile strike to destroy North Korea's long-range Taepodong missile. "Should the United States allow a country openly hostile to it and armed with nuclear weapons to perfect an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of delivering nuclear weapons to US soil?" they asked. "We believe not."

Two years later, in 2008, Carter wrote a think tank report on possible US air strikes on Iran's nuclear fuel production facilities.

As deputy Pentagon chief from 2011 to 2013, Carter played a leading role in the "pivot to Asia," particularly in negotiating closer military ties with India. He was also called upon to manage the Pentagon budget under conditions where the funds appropriated were restricted somewhat by the so-called sequester, i.e., automatic cuts established as part of a 2011 budget deal between the Obama White House and the Republican-controlled House of Representatives.

He was so successful in juggling funds between various accounts, insuring that there was no serious disruption to the ability of the US military to conduct its worldwide operations, that the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Martin Dempsey, hailed him as the "superhero of sequestration" during the ceremonies marking his retirement from the Pentagon a year ago.

The selection of either Carter or Flournoy would represent an effort by Obama to conciliate the military brass, which has been increasingly critical of his policies in the Middle East since he abruptly reversed himself in August 2013 and cancelled planned air strikes against the Assad regime in Syria.

The *Wall Street Journal*, in its analysis of the Carter nomination, observed, "The installation of a defense secretary who is an expert on Pentagon budgets and procurement will likely solidify the position of Gen. Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, as the most potent voice on military strategy in the Obama administration."

Carter is hardly likely to oppose expanded US military intervention in the Middle East. He has spent the year since he left the Pentagon at Stanford University, serving as a guest lecturer at the Hoover Institution, a leading right-wing think tank and stronghold of the neo-conservatives who spearheaded the US attacks on Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 and are currently beating the drums for war against Syria and Iran.

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