

Lockheed Martin offers to site F-16 fighter jet production in India

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11 April 2016

Lockheed Martin, a premier member of the US military-industrial complex, has announced that it is eager to begin manufacturing its prized fourth-generation fighter jet, the F-16, in India. According to Lockheed Martin India head Phil Shaw, the company is in discussions with New Delhi about producing F-16s in India for both the Indian air force and other militaries.

This offer, which would and could only be made with the approval and encouragement of the Pentagon and the Obama administration, is part of Washington's concerted campaign to make India a "frontline state" in its drive to strategically isolate, encircle, and if need be wage war on China.

Shaw told the Chennai-based daily *The Hindu* last month that Lockheed Martin is "in discussions with the US government, the Government of India, and our Indian industry partners about potential new production F-16 aircraft to address India's fighter recapitalization requirements." Noting that the "details" of "the aircraft and industrial offer would be determined in conjunction with the two governments in question," Shaw added that it "could include unprecedented technology sharing or other favorable terms to woo the government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi."

In 2012, the US and India signed a Defense Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI) aimed at promoting the co-production and co-development of advanced weapon systems. By offering India economic incentives and assistance in developing advanced weaponry, Washington not only hopes to help US companies cash in on the Indian elite's massive military "modernization" program. Even more importantly, it aims to make India's military interoperable with the US military and dependent on US technology and supplies so as to further integrate it

into the US's anti-China "pivot."

Modi and his two-year-old Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government have dramatically expanded India's military-security cooperation with the US. This includes giving the go-ahead for a number of DTTI projects, expanding an annual Indo-US naval exercise to include Japan, endorsing the US's provocative anti-China stance on the territorial disputes in the South China Sea, and expanding military ties with the US's principal allies in the region, Japan and Australia.

However, the US is pressing India to take further steps—steps that would effectively transform India into a charter member of a US-led, NATO-type alliance in the Indo-Pacific region. Making those US demands public, the head of the US Pacific Command, Admiral Harry Harris, called, in a New Delhi speech last month, for the Indian and US navies to jointly patrol the Indian and Pacific Oceans, including the disputed South China Sea. He also urged India to join the US, Japan, and Australia in a "quadrilateral security dialogue."

Notably, the public offer of F-16 production came in the run-up to US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter's three-day visit to New Delhi and Goa this week. Carter's visit to Goa will coincide with a visit of the *USS Blue Ridge*, the command flagship of the US Seventh or Pacific Fleet

In preparation for Carter's trip, Pentagon officials visited India and met with Indian officials to discuss Lockheed Martin's F-16 offer, as well as one from Boeing regarding co-production of the F/A 18 Super Hornet.

"Members of my team, and industry, are right now ... in India looking at the potential co-production of fighter aircraft," Carter told a Council for Foreign Relations (CFR) meeting in New York last week. "These conversations," continued Carter, "represent

the growing enthusiasm of the US-India partnership, and even more than that, its promise. While these negotiations can be difficult and global competition is high, I have no doubt that in the coming years, the United States and India will embark on a landmark co-production agreement that will bring our two countries closer together and make our militaries stronger.”

In his CFR address, Carter said he expects many agreements will be inked while he is in India.

The US has been pressing India to sign three “foundational” military co-operation agreements” that have been under discussion for a decade. These include a Logistics Support Agreement (LSA) that would give the US military routine access to Indian ports and air bases for refuel and resupply. In December, a senior Indian official said that the only obstacle to India signing the LSA was whether it would apply in the event the US went to war.

In its article on the Lockheed Martin offer, the *Hindu*, voicing the calculations of sections of the Indian elite, suggested that it could provide a major boost to India in its military-strategic competition with China and arch-rival Pakistan. The article claimed that India would derive “three potential benefits” from the Lockheed Martin deal: “First, the addition of 90 airplanes” in the medium multi-role combat class; “second, India emerging as the production source for markets such as Indonesia that are still eying the F-16 as a means to modernize air fighter fleets; and third, India becoming the top maintenance, repair, and overhaul (MRO) hub for the 3,500-plus F-16s in service worldwide—including those in Pakistan.”

The Obama administration’s February announcement that it plans to sell eight F-16 fighters to Pakistan triggered a flurry of protests from the Indian political and military-security establishment. Indian Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar summoned US Ambassador Richard Verma to convey India’s “displeasure” and various op-ed columns cited the sale as evidence that Washington cannot be trusted to uphold Indian interests.

Pakistan, for its part, has been protesting for years that the US’s forging of a “global strategic partnership” with India and lavishing of arms deals and diplomatic “favours” on New Delhi have overturned the regional balance of power and triggered a South Asian arms race.

Significantly, Lockheed Martin is offering to sell India a more advanced version of the F-16 than that on offer to Pakistan. The *Hindu* article noted some “experts” believe the US will never agree to sell the more advanced version to Pakistan “for fear that the technology could leak to China.”

Both US and Indian strategists are pressing for India to squander more money on armaments in the name of planning for waging a two-front war against Pakistan and China simultaneously.

Ashley Tellis, a senior associate at the misnamed Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, has issued a report titled “Troubles, they come in Battalions: The Manifest Travails of the Indian Air Force.” It urges India to “expand its investments in advanced munitions, combat support aircraft, electronic warfare, physical infrastructure, and pilot proficiency,” so as to maintain “air superiority over its rapidly modernizing rivals, China and Pakistan”.

A high-level official in the George W. Bush administration, Tellis played a major role in the negotiation of the Indo-US nuclear accord, an agreement meant to provide tangible proof of Washington’s readiness to build up India as a “counterweight” to China. While publicly presented as a deal solely about civilian nuclear energy, the Indo-US nuclear accord, by enabling India to trade for advanced nuclear technology and fuel, enables New Delhi to concentrate its indigenous nuclear program on the expansion of its nuclear arsenal.

In a March 15 article for the South Asia Analysis Group, Dr. Subhash Kapila, a prominent member of India’s military-security establishment and former diplomat, charges the previous Congress Party-led government, which presided over massive increases in military spending, of “virtual criminal neglect of India’s war-preparedness.” At the end of his bellicose rant, Kapila calls for “India to build up the war-preparedness of the Indian Armed Forces at optimum levels to face the joint military threat of the China-Pakistan Axis.”



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