

Barack Obama signs \$618 billion defence bill, advances security cooperation with India

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Washington: In a major development, US President Barack Obama has signed into law the \$618 billion defence budget for 2017, which enhances security cooperation with India. The bill also conditions nearly half of the funding to Pakistan on a certification that it is taking demonstrable steps against the Haqqani Network.

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Currently vacationing in Hawaii, Obama on Friday signed the National Defence Authorisation Act (NDAA) 2017, which asks defence secretary and secretary of state to take steps necessary to recognise India as America's "major defence partner".

A summary of the bill released by chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee Senator John McCain said NDAA-2017 "enhances security cooperation" between the US and India.

It also asks the administration to designate an individual within the executive branch who has experience in defence acquisition and technology to reinforce and ensure, through inter-agency policy coordination, the success of the Framework for the US-India Defence Relationship; and to help resolve remaining issues impeding US-India defence trade, security cooperation, and co-production and co-development opportunities.

The NDAA, which among other things creates a USD 1.2 billion Counter-ISIL Fund, imposes four conditions on Pakistan to be eligible for \$400 million of the \$900 million of the coalition support fund (CSF).

The US defence secretary needs to certify to the Congress that Pakistan continues to conduct military operations that are contributing to significantly disrupting the safe haven and freedom of movement of the Haqqani Network in Pakistan and that Islamabad has taken steps to demonstrate its commitment to prevent the Haqqani Network from using any of its territory as a safe haven.

Early this year, US defence secretary Ashton Carter refused to give a similar certification to Pakistan due to which it was not given \$300 million under coalition support fund.

In his signing statement, Obama did not mention to any of these provisions of the bill, but he did expressed disappointment over certain other provisions in NDAA-2017.

He said: "I remain deeply concerned about the Congress's use of the National Defence Authorisation Act to impose extensive organisational changes on the department of defence, disregarding the advice of the department's senior civilian and uniformed leaders.

"The extensive changes in the bill are rushed, the consequences poorly understood, and they come at a particularly inappropriate time as we undertake a transition between administrations. These changes not only impose additional administrative burdens on the department of defence and make it less agile, but they also create additional bureaucracies and operational restrictions that generate inefficiencies at a time when we need to be more efficient."

(With PTI inputs)
