

House Democrats ratify \$733 billion for US military

Patrick Martin
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By a near-party-line vote Friday, the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives approved the National Defense Authorization Act, providing \$733 billion for the Pentagon, with the bulk of the spending directed toward preparing the US military for future wars with China and Russia.

Not a single Republican House member voted for the bill, which passed 220–197, because they objected to a series of “progressive” amendments incorporated into the NDAA to ensure a top-heavy Democratic vote for the overall legislation.

All of these amendments will be stripped out of the bill in the House-Senate Conference Committee, which will now ensue. The resulting military authorization bill will come back to the House as unamendable “must pass” legislation, which most “progressive” Democrats will claim they have no choice but to support.

The eight Democrats who voted against the bill included four newly elected representatives who have been frequent targets of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi—Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib and Ayanna Pressley—and four other liberals—Mark Pocan, Barbara Lee, Earl Blumenauer and Adriano Espaillat.

The amendments approved included one barring President Trump from waging war on Iran without congressional approval. A similar amendment has already been defeated in the Senate.

Others on the wish list include repeal of the 2002 Authorization for the Use of Military Force, the legal basis for the Bush administration’s invasion of Iraq; a one-year prohibition for using US military funds to support the Saudi-led war in Yemen; a provision blocking the deployment of low-yield nuclear weapons on US submarines; another barring the transfer of new prisoners to the Guantanamo Bay prison; reinstatement

of eligibility for military service of transgender soldiers; and a ban on the use of Defense Department funds to build Trump’s wall on the US-Mexico border or to house people detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

There were a few obvious slaps at Trump personally, including a ban on the use of Pentagon funds for political parades or to pay for the use of Trump-owned properties.

In the unlikely event that any of these amendments survive the conference committee, President Trump has already threatened to veto final legislation that contains them.

More significant were the amendments that the Democratic leadership successfully blocked, especially one to reduce the overall funding level by \$16.8 billion. This was voted down by an overwhelming 307–115 margin, with about half of the House Democrats voting to reject the amendment. The final “debate” in the House-Senate Conference Committee will thus be between the Senate figure of \$750 billion, the largest amount ever allocated to the Pentagon, and the House figure of \$733 billion, the second largest such amount.

Also defeated were amendments to bar Pentagon funds from being used to pay for the detention of children and other undocumented immigrants by Customs and Border Protection, and to bar the deployment of federal troops to the US-Mexico border.

One amendment, introduced by Republican Representative Mike Gallagher of Wisconsin and passed in a bipartisan vote, would reinforce the blacklisting of the Chinese telecom giant Huawei. Trump recently indicated that he would relax the ban on US companies trading with Huawei, imposed earlier this year, but the amendment backed by Democrats and Republicans alike would require the Commerce

Department to certify that Huawei does not pose a threat to the security of the US telecommunications infrastructure before the ban could be lifted.

House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer crowed about the near-unanimous Democratic vote for the NDAA. “The big picture is, it shows we’re together,” he said. “This bill, it was a tough number for a lot of people, but what they were saying was: They wanted to have us unified.”

House Armed Services Committee Chair Adam Smith of Washington State refused to answer reporters’ questions about the likely fate of the liberal amendments in the House-Senate Conference Committee that he will co-chair. “I’m not going to answer a hypothetical like that,” he said, in response to a question about choosing between the amendments and passing the bill. But he reiterated his commitment to winning final passage of the NDAA.

Assuming the NDAA passes on time, it would mark the 60th consecutive year that Congress has accomplished that feat. For all the media chatter about gridlock and supposedly unbridgeable differences between the Democrats and Republicans in Washington, the two capitalist parties are united in insuring the vital interests of American imperialism. They can squabble mightily about comparatively small amounts of money while rubber-stamping three-quarters of a trillion dollars to sustain the biggest and most lethal military machine in world history.

The conference committee is nearly certain to side with the Senate version, which passed by a huge bipartisan majority, 86–8, with six of the seven Democratic senators running for president being absent from the vote because they were campaigning.

Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman James Inhofe (Republican from Oklahoma) expressed satisfaction with the House action, even though he is opposed to nearly all the liberal amendments. Praising his Democratic counterpart Adam Smith, he said, “We both have the commitment. We’ve got to get a bill.” He explained, “The main thing that I wanted out of the House was to get something out of the House into conference, and then we can go to work.”

Meanwhile, back-channel talks are continuing between House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and the Trump administration on legislation to raise or waive the caps on spending for both the Pentagon and domestic social

programs, set by the 2011 deficit-reduction law and scheduled to take effect once again on October 1, the beginning of the next fiscal year.

Under the 2011 law, mandatory cuts of about \$125 billion would be imposed on fiscal 2020 spending, automatically reducing the Pentagon budget to \$576 billion and discretionary domestic spending to \$543 billion. The spending caps do not apply to Overseas Contingency Operations—wars in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq, and drone warfare throughout North Africa and the Middle East—currently accounting for about \$70 billion. But the effect would be to impose a significant cut in military spending rather than the 4 percent rise proposed by the Senate.

The budgetary impact of the 2011 law, the September 30 deadline for passage of 12 appropriations bills for various federal departments and agencies, and the impending breach of the federal debt ceiling—now estimated by the Treasury to take place in early September—mean that the Democratic Party will soon be called upon to take actions that will further expose its pretensions to be fighting Trump or defending the interests of working people. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi & co. will be ratifying higher military spending and further cuts in domestic social programs, while refusing to use the financial crunch as leverage against Trump’s vicious attacks on immigrants and more broadly on democratic rights.



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