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US Congress approves massive \$770 billion war budget

By an overwhelming bipartisan margin of 88-11, the US Senate voted Wednesday to approve the largest military budget in history, nearly \$770 billion, some \$25 billion more than the Biden administration had requested.

The legislation passed the House of Representatives last week by a similar bipartisan margin, 363-70, and it now goes to the White House for President Joe Biden's signature.

The bill sets policy for the Pentagon and authorizes countless military programs, ranging from nuclear weapons development to a pay raise of 2.7 percent for military personnel, both uniformed and civilian. Congress must still pass appropriations bills, but in the case of the military these are largely a formality.

A National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) has been passed every year by Congress for more than half a century, and there has always been bipartisan support by huge margins. Whatever disputes there are between the Democrats and Republicans, the two parties are united in their support for the military machine that carries out the predatory policy of American imperialism.



Soldiers fire an M1 Abrams tank during Exercise Winter Shield at Camp Ādaži, Latvia, Dec 3, 2021. (defense.gov)

Senate Majority Leader Charles Schumer (D-NY) praised the Democrats and Republicans who joined forces to pass the bill. “For the past six years, Congress worked on a bipartisan basis to pass an annual defense authorization act without fail,” he said. “With so many priorities to balance, I thank my colleagues for working hard over these last few months, both in committee and off the floor, to get NDAA done.”

The bill authorizes spending of \$740 billion for the Department of Defense, \$27.8 billion for the Department of Energy, which builds and maintains US nuclear bombs and warheads, and nearly \$400 million for activities by other government agencies considered “defense-related.”

Besides the vast personnel costs of a military establishment comprising more than 1.3 million uniformed troops and 1.1 million reservists and civilian Pentagon employees, the NDAA calls for staggering amounts to be poured into the procurement of more warplanes, warships, tanks, armored vehicles and artillery, as well as the development of new weapons systems and technologies.

The single highest hardware expenditure is an additional \$6.8 billion to buy 85 F-35 fighters built by Lockheed Martin, adding to the most lucrative weapons contract ever awarded by the Pentagon.

Congress approved 12 more F/A-18 Super Hornet fighters than the Pentagon requested and five more Boeing F-15EX jets on top of the 12 requested, as well as increasing the number of new Navy ships from 8 to 13, added to the existing fleet of nearly 500 vessels, the world's largest.

The US Navy is larger than the navies of the next 13 countries combined, according to a 2015 estimate, when considering total tonnage of the ships it deploys, including 11 huge aircraft carriers and nine helicopter carriers—as many as the rest of the world combined.

The strategic orientation of the huge military bill is to prepare for war against Russia, China or both. As the *New York Times* acknowledged, “The legislation’s main focus—shifting attention from ground conflicts in the Middle East in favor of a renewed concentration on Beijing and Moscow—aligns with the foreign policy vision Mr. Biden outlined this summer as he ended America’s 20-year war in Afghanistan.”

The main changes in the NDAA from the White House request were to add even more funding for the build-up against China and Russia. The bill authorizes \$7.1 billion for the Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI), a cross-services effort directed against China, \$2 billion more than the Pentagon initially sought. It authorizes \$4 billion for the European Deterrence Initiative, directed against Russia, \$570 million more than requested, and increases military aid to Ukraine from the \$250 million sought by the Pentagon to \$300 million.

The NDAA directs the development of a classified “Grand Strategy with Respect to China” and several additional reports on Chinese activities in relation to military technology, military modernization, and in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The PDI includes \$500 million to address “unfunded requirements” (essentially a slush fund for anything the military wants to do in the Indo-Pacific) and refocuses the PDI on activities “primarily west of the international dateline,” according to one analysis. The language of the bill suggests that the PDI will grow far above the baseline spending level it spells out.

The NDAA pledges to maintain Taiwan's military capacity and includes a "statement of policy" that the United States will "resist a fait accompli" against the country—language that suggests US intervention in any military conflict between Taiwan and China.

"We've lost a lot of ground to the Chinese while we've been focused over the last 20 years on counterterrorism and counterinsurgency, and they've caught up in AI, machine learning, hypersonics and a lot of other things," said Democratic Senator Mark Kelly of Arizona, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee's subcommittee on emerging threats. "It's important to me that we can regain the ground we've lost."

Congressional leaders rode roughshod over the objections of "progressives" in the Democratic Party who claimed that a Biden administration would begin reducing the bloated US military budget and make funds available for social needs. Instead, Congress has passed the largest military budget in history, while the social spending in Biden's "Build Back Better" legislation is unlikely to pass this year, if ever.

The main opposition to the NDAA came not from the "progressives," but from Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, who was seeking to reform the process by which the military adjudicates the thousands of sexual assaults taking place each year in its ranks. Under the current procedure, commanding officers have complete control over the court-martial procedure, deciding what charges should be brought, if any, who will be the jurors, and who will be allowed to testify.

The final bill incorporated limited concessions on this issue, but Gillibrand was demanding a completely independent set of military prosecutors outside of the chain of command, which the Pentagon adamantly opposed. She and several Senate supporters voted against the final bill.

The bill also establishes an independent Afghanistan War Commission to "examine" the 20-year US intervention which ended in this summer's debacle, the collapse of the US puppet regime, and the restoration of the Taliban to power. The bipartisan panel, with equal numbers appointed by the two parties, would exclude any members of Congress or officials involved in US policy for the entire length of the war.

Passage of the NDAA Wednesday followed Tuesday's vote to raise the federal debt ceiling by \$2.5 trillion, necessary for the continued funding of the federal government and regular payments on its debts, a vital step in reassuring the financial markets.

The Democratic-controlled Congress has thus done the bidding of its two main constituencies, Wall Street and the military-intelligence apparatus. While the Democrats profess themselves powerless to enact any increase in domestic social spending, safeguard voting rights or provide legal status for immigrant workers and youth, Congress acts like a well-oiled machine when it comes to the interests of the ruling class.

For both the Pentagon authorization and the increase in the debt ceiling, congressional leaders devised bipartisan shortcuts that enable swift passage of both pieces of legislation.

The debt ceiling was raised after a deal between Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and Minority Leader Mitch McConnell which permitted the bill to pass by a simple majority without a filibuster.

The NDAA passed under an expedited procedure devised by Democratic and Republican leaders of the Senate and House committees responsible for the military, which brought the legislation to the floor of both houses without permitting amendments or any extended debate.

The two parties agreed to shelve a range of tactical disputes and amendments offered for the purposes of political posturing by one or another senator. Several significant policy shifts were set aside at least temporarily, including imposing sanctions to block the construction of the Nordstream 2 pipeline between Russia and Germany, repealing the Authorization for Use of Military Force against Iraq, passed in 2002, and extending draft registration requirements to include women.

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