

NDA 2020 Update

House lawmakers advanced a \$733 billion defense policy bill on 13 June 2019 after nearly 21 hours of sometimes heated debate on the size of the Pentagon budget, the size of the country's nuclear arsenal and a host of other military priorities for next year. The 33-24 final vote by the House Armed Services Committee on the draft of the defense authorization bill marked one of the most divided stances from the committee in years, as Republicans voiced concerns with Democrats' priorities in the measure.

The legislation, which sets military spending policy for the upcoming fiscal year, has been adopted by Congress for 58 consecutive years, usually by sizable bipartisan margins. Committee officials insist that's because the needs of the military usually rise above the partisan politics of Capitol Hill. But this year, the narrow passage out of committee illustrated the stark divide in defense policy between the two parties, and hints at a lengthy battle to come as the measure moves across Capitol Hill to the Republican-controlled Senate in the coming weeks.

Committee Chairman Adam Smith (D-WA) in recent days said he is committed to finding a palatable bill for both Republicans and Democrats. But during the marathon debate he repeatedly defended his party's plans for \$733 billion in defense spending for fiscal 2020 as a responsible and sufficient mark. "By a reasonably comfortable margin, this is the largest budget we will have ever passed in Congress (for defense) and it's a significant improvement on where we were before," he said before the committee vote. Smith had already set aside some of his own priorities in a bid to win support from the panel's hawkish Republicans, who are likely to influence their caucus when it comes time to vote the bill out of the House. Without that support, Democrats may struggle to gather enough votes from progressives in their own caucus, who have questioned even the lower level of spending.

But Senate Republicans have already set their authorization bill draft at \$750 billion, a mark recommended by the White House and defended by HASC ranking member Mac Thornberry (R-TX). He said that the figure is needed to keep pace with military modernization and readiness needs. Thornberry's amendment included a lengthy laundry list of weapons and platforms left out of the bill. "I worry that we talk about this like it's just numbers we're pulling out of the air," he said. "These are real things. An aircraft carrier gets delayed a year if \$733 billion is the way it comes out."

The bill includes a 3.1 percent pay raise for troops next January — a point of agreement on both sides that Smith repeatedly referenced — and provisions for increased protections for sexual assault victims, increased oversight of military housing problems and parameters for a new Space Corps within the Air Force. But fights over the effects of climate change on national security, limitations on the use of the Guantanamo Bay detention camp and a provision mandating gender integration in Marine Corps basic training further divided the committee. On a series of Republican amendments aimed at preserving funds for the nuclear arsenal — including one to protect deployment of low-yield nuclear weapons on submarines — Democrats repeatedly defeated Republican proposals.

Similarly, the committee upheld several provisions designed to put a check on President Donald Trump's ability to shift resources from the Defense Department to the U.S. southern border with Mexico. Democrats have accused Trump of abusing his emergency powers to shift Department of Defense funds for the border and send thousands of troops there. In the committee debate, Republicans generally argued Trump is taking necessary and normal steps to secure the border given political resistance to addressing the issue. "I want everybody to understand we have been sending DoD assets to the border

since the Alamo,” said Rep. Mike Rogers, who sponsored one of the amendments. “We have to do it in order to keep our border secure and deal with the humanitarian crisis.”

The measure now shifts to the full House, where Smith and Democratic leadership will have to build a coalition of supporters to get the measure to negotiations with the Senate. That chamber will vote on its draft next week. Work on a compromise draft between the House and Senate is expected to last through most of the summer and fall.