

House Democrats vote for record US military spending

By Patrick Martin
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By an overwhelming bipartisan vote Thursday, the US House of Representatives approved the largest military authorization bill in American history. The National Defense Authorization Act approves \$716 billion to fund US military aggression around the world, and gives President Trump the power to order cyberwarfare attacks on Russia, China, Iran and North Korea without further congressional action.

The NDAA passed on a roll-call vote of 359 to 54. House Republicans backed the legislation by a near-unanimous vote of 220-5. House Democrats supported it by the margin of 139-49. The entire House Democratic leadership backed the military authorization bill: Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, Minority Whip Steny Hoyer, Deputy Minority Whip James Clyburn, and Adam Schiff, the ranking Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee.

Debbie Dingell, the multimillionaire Democrat from the 12th Congressional District of Michigan, was one of the representatives voting for the military authorization bill. The Socialist Equality Party filed nearly 6,000 signatures last week to place our candidate, Niles Niemuth, on the ballot against Dingell in the November 6 election. One of the central issues being raised by Niemuth is opposition to militarism and war.

The final form of the NDAA was approved by a House-Senate conference committee on Monday. A statement issued by the conference committee leaders, including Democratic Senator Jack Reed of Rhode Island and three Republicans, hailed the bill, claiming, “This legislation will strengthen our military’s readiness, provide our troops a pay raise, support effective implementation of the National Defense Strategy, drive further innovation in emerging technologies to secure our military advantage and continue to reform the Department of Defense.”

Among the costliest provisions are:

- A 2.6 percent pay increase for uniformed military personnel, the largest in a decade
- An increase of 15,000 active-duty troops
- One new US nuclear-powered aircraft carrier
- Two new Virginia-class nuclear-powered submarines armed with atomic weapons
- 13 other new warships
- 77 new Joint Strike Fighters

Adam Smith of Washington state, the ranking Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee, played a key role in the conference committee. During the brief floor debate on the bill Thursday, he said, “This bill does step up to confront our adversaries in Russia and China,” adding that it contained provisions to enhance “the absolutely critical work of pushing back against President Putin’s ongoing campaign to undermine U.S. alliances, partnerships, and democratic values around the world.”

The bill “restates our commitment to NATO and our partners,” Smith said. “It extends the prohibition on military cooperation with Russia. It declares that Russia violated the Chemical Weapons Convention ... It strengthens the prohibition on funding for activities that would recognize the sovereignty of Russia over Crimea. It requires a whole-of-government response to malign foreign-influence operations and campaigns, it improves our cyber and counter-influence infrastructure, and a good deal more.”

Among the anti-Russia and anti-China provisions are the largest funding to date for the European Deterrence Initiative, which builds up NATO forces in Eastern Europe, along the borders of Russia. New NATO units have been deployed in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, aimed at ensuring that NATO will be involved immediately in the event of any conflicts fomented by the rabidly nationalistic and anti-Russian governments of the four countries.

The bill would also lead to the creation of a new

position on the White House National Security Council, devoted to countering supposed Russian interference with US elections. Smith portrayed this and other provisions as a victory for the Democratic Party's anti-Russian campaign, which has been aimed at portraying Trump as a Russian puppet.

However, the White House issued a statement Thursday hailing the passage of the bill, and declaring, "The Administration commends the House of Representatives for passing the Conference Report to accompany H.R. 5515, the John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year (FY) 2019, and encourages its swift passage in the Senate." The statement noted the NDAA fully authorizes US aid to Israel, including "co-development and co-production of missile defense systems."

The NDAA also authorizes Trump's unprecedented request to stage a military parade in Washington D.C. shortly after the November 6 election, an exercise that will be used to promote the dominant role of the military in American public life.

Anti-China provisions in the NDAA include requiring a public report on Chinese military and "coercive activities" in the South China Sea and elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific region, and a five-year extension of the Maritime Security Initiative, under which the US provides military assistance to countries in the Asia-Pacific region, the main arena for US-China competition. The bill also requires the secretary of defense to draft a five-year plan for an "Indo-Pacific Stability Initiative."

The NDAA authorizes \$235 million to expand air base systems "to enhance the combat power of U.S. forces in the Indo-Pacific region," the conference committee said. While the bill prohibits the federal government from doing business with any company using telecommunications equipment or services supplied by Chinese firms Huawei Technologies or ZTE, it stops short of measures—opposed by the White House—which would effectively force ZTE into bankruptcy by cutting off its supplies of US-built components.

Particularly ominous are the sections of the NDAA on cyberwarfare. The bill authorizes the Pentagon to conduct "unattributed" cyber operations without having to comply with the usual restrictions on covert operations, such as requiring a Presidential Finding which is submitted to key leaders of Congress. According to the bill "clandestine military activity or operation in cyberspace shall be considered a traditional military activity."

Section 1642 of the bill is described by one analyst as a

"mini-cyber AUMF," referring to the Authorization for the Use of Military Force passed by Congress in 2001 before the invasion of Afghanistan and in 2002 before the invasion and occupation of Iraq. It pre-authorizes US military cyber operations if the president determines that (1) there is "an active, systematic, and ongoing campaign of attacks against the Government or people of the United States in cyberspace, including attempting to influence American elections and democratic political processes" and (2) that Russia, China, North Korea or Iran are responsible. In that event, the president may order US cyberwar forces "to take appropriate and proportional action in foreign cyberspace to disrupt, defeat, and deter such attacks."

This provision effectively gives Trump and any successor, Democrat or Republican, the power to launch a full-scale cyberwar without further congressional authorization, merely on his own declaration that the United States is under attack. Moreover, the language is so broad that the activities of WikiLeaks, for example, could be construed as an attack requiring cyberwar retaliation, given the claim by the US intelligence agencies that WikiLeaks published material stolen from the Democratic National Committee by Russian government hackers.

So pervasive is the embrace of militarism in US ruling circles that the passage of the biggest military authorization bill in US history is barely considered to be news. It was not reported by the New York Times at all, while the *Washington Post* reported the bill's passage only in its online edition, but not in print. No evening television news program reported the House vote.

The brief report in the Post emphasized the congressional unanimity. The article noted, "The 359-to-54 vote on the \$716 billion measure, which the Senate is expected to take up late next week, comes after one of the shortest negotiation processes for the behemoth defense bill in recent history—an indicator of how few politically controversial issues arose during the debate."

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