

US House approves Space Force, family leave in \$738 billion defence bill

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In this June 3, 2011, file photo, the Pentagon is seen from air from Air Force One. The House has passed its annual defense policy measure, which combines a 8 billion Pentagon price tag with legislation to provide federal employees with 12 weeks of paid parental leave. (AP)

Washington: The US House of Representatives approved on Wednesday a \$738 billion defense policy bill providing the first paid family leave for all federal workers and the creation of a Space Force, a top military priority for President Donald Trump. The Democratic-controlled chamber voted by 377-48, easily sending the conference report on the National Defense Authorization Act, or NDAA, to the Republican-controlled Senate, which is expected to pass it by the end of next week.

Trump said he would sign the bill as soon as it passes. “Wow!” he said on Twitter. “All of our priorities have made it into the final NDAA: Pay Raise for our Troops, Rebuilding our Military, Paid Parental Leave, Border Security, and Space Force! Congress “don’t delay this anymore! I will sign this historic defense legislation immediately!”

The establishment of the U.S. Space Force as the sixth Armed Service of the United States, under the Air Force, fulfills one of Trump’s most high-profile requests. Despite broad bipartisan support, a handful of left-leaning Democrats and libertarian-leaning Republicans opposed the measure because it did not include policy planks that would have restrained Trump’s war powers, including a ban on support for Saudi Arabia’s air campaign in Yemen.

The fiscal 2020 NDAA also does not bar the Republican president from using military funds to build a wall on the U.S. border with Mexico and lacks strong language that would have forced the cleanup of chemicals known as PFAS believed to contaminate some water supplies.

Those provisions were included in a version of the NDAA the House passed in October, but not in one passed by the Senate. They were removed during months of negotiations with Senate Republicans and Trump administration officials.

Democratic Representative Adam Smith, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, defended the bill, pointing to the family leave policy and other benefits for troops and the difficulty reaching compromise in a bitterly divided government.

“This was not an easy process. This is an incredibly important piece of legislation,” he said.

A provision prohibiting the transfer of firearms export oversight to the Department of Commerce from the Department of State was also removed, clearing the way for a rule change that would allow easier international sales of U.S.-made assault weapons.

MORE MONEY FOR THE MILITARY

The fiscal 2020 NDAA increases defense spending by about \$20 billion, or about 2.8%. It includes \$658.4 billion for Department of Defense and Department of Energy national security programs, \$71.5 billion to pay for ongoing foreign

wars and \$5.3 billion in emergency funding for repairs from natural disasters. It increases pay for the troops by 3.1% and mandates 12 weeksâ€™ paid leave so federal workers can care for their families, a U.S. first.

Because the NDAA is a â€œmust-passâ€• bill that has cleared Congress for 58 straight years, lawmakers use it as a vehicle for a wide range of policy provisions in addition to determining how many aircraft or ships the Pentagon can buy or what it can pay the troops.

While this yearâ€™s NDAA allows the Pentagon to buy 12 more Lockheed Martin-made F-35 jets than the administration initially requested, it prohibits the transfer of the F-35 to Turkey. It expresses a Sense of Congress that Turkeyâ€™s acquisition of Russiaâ€™s S-400 missile defense system, which Washington says is not compatible with NATO defenses and threatens the F-35, constitutes a significant transaction under U.S. sanctions law.

The bill says Trump should implement sanctions on Turkey over the S-400 purchase. The NDAA also reauthorizes \$300 million of funding for the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative, to include lethal defensive items as well as new authorities for coastal defense cruise missiles and anti-ship missiles.

Military aid to Ukraine has been at the center of the impeachment inquiry into Trump, after his administration held up security assistance for Kiev last summer even as the country dealt with challenges from Russia. The NDAA also contains provisions intended to address potential threats from China, including requiring reports on Chinaâ€™s overseas investments and military relations with Russia. It says Congress â€œunequivocally supportsâ€• residents of Hong Kong as they defend their rights and seek to preserve their autonomy with China and calls for improving Taiwanâ€™s defense capabilities.

- Reuters