



SECURITY &
DEMOCRACY
FORUM

Understanding the NDAA: The Backbone of U.S. Defense Policy

A Practical Guide for Congressional Staff and Policy
Professionals

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Course Objectives

- Understand what the NDAA is and why it matters
- Learn the step-by-step NDAA legislative process
- Identify points of influence
- Recognize how to use the NDAA to advance priorities



What Is the NDAA?

- Annual legislation that authorizes defense spending
- Covers DoD, DOE (nuclear), IC elements, and defense-related programs in other agencies
- Distinct from appropriations bills





Why the NDAA Matters

- Passed annually for 60+ years
- One of the few "must-pass" bills
- Major defense policy tool for Congress
- Often includes significant policy reforms

Who Drives the NDAA Process?

- Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC)
- House Armed Services Committee (HASC)
- DoD and Executive Branch
- Congressional Leadership



The NDAA Process Timeline

- President's Budget Request (Feb/March)
- Hearings (Mar/April)
- Committee Markups (Apr/May)
- Floor Consideration (May/June+)
- Conference Committee (Summer/Fall)
- Final Passage (Goal: by Oct 1)

Step 1 – Budget Request

- Submitted by the President
- Often includes policy proposals
- Establishes topline guidance for defense spending





Step 2 – Hearings

- Posture hearings with DoD leadership
- Subcommittee-specific hearings
- Opportunity to surface member priorities

Step 3 – Markup Process

- Subcommittee Markups: draft and vote on Chairman's Mark
- Full Committee Markup: consider cross-cutting amendments
- Closed to the public, but pivotal for shaping the bill

Step 4 – Committee Report

- Explains rationale for provisions
- Includes guidance not in bill text (Items of Special Interest)
- Functions as quasi-law for agencies



Step 5 – Floor Consideration

- Floor debate, amendments, and voting
- Senate often considers 100+ amendments
- House may have thousands
- Structured via unanimous consent or rule

Step 6 – Conference Committee

- House and Senate negotiate differences
- Conference Report = final agreed text
- Must pass both chambers again without amendment
- Joint Explanatory Statement (JES)

Influence Points

- Member Interest Letters
- Working with authorizers early
- Floor amendments (if member is strategic)
- Conference support



What Does a Win Look Like?

- Authorization of funding
- Mandates or directives to DoD
- Report language pushing analysis or study
- Colloquy





Reading the NDAA

- Main text
- Funding tables
- Committee Reports (esp. Items of Special Interest)

Recap

- NDAA is a must-pass vehicle for defense policy
- Many doors to influence, few stay open long
- Track, time, and tailor your input



Questions & Next Steps

- Open Q&A
- Encourage review of recent NDAs
- Invite to take other related modules (Dealing with Congress, Op-Ed Writing)