

# Understanding the NDAA – The Backbone of U.S. Defense Policy

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## Overview

The National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) is an annual bill that authorizes defense programs and policies across the Department of Defense (DoD), Department of Energy (nuclear), and parts of the Intelligence Community. It is a must-pass legislative vehicle that has been enacted for over 60 consecutive years.

## Why It Matters

Passed every year, providing a consistent platform for policy and funding  
Authorizes key programs: pay raises, modernization, mental health, family support  
One of Congress's strongest tools for influencing national security strategy

## Key Players

House Armed Services Committee (HASC)  
Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC)  
Department of Defense (DoD) and Executive Branch  
Congressional leadership and stakeholder advocates

## The NDAA Process – Step-by-Step

President's Budget Request – Submitted in Feb/March, often includes legislative proposals  
Hearings – Posture hearings with military and civilian leaders  
Markup – Subcommittees and full committees draft and amend the bill  
Committee Reports – Include Items of Special Interest (ISIs), often treated as binding  
Floor Consideration – Debated and amended in both chambers  
Conference Committee – House and Senate reconcile differences  
Final Passage & Signature – Becomes law before October 1 if possible

## Opportunities to Influence

Member Interest Letters – Submitted to SASC/HASC with policy and funding requests  
Amendments – During markup and floor consideration (limited access)  
Stakeholder Coordination – Industry, advocacy groups, military installations

## Tips for Staffers

Track the timeline early and often  
Cultivate relationships with authorizers and committee staff  
Read both the bill text and committee reports for full context  
Remember: language in the report can be as powerful as law

## Next Steps

Review recent NDAA bills and committee reports  
Draft a sample Interest Letter with your boss's priorities  
Explore related courses: Appropriations 101, Congressional Investigations, Op-Ed Writing