

Policy Recommendations for Finalizing the 2025 National Defense Authorization Act

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The House version of the FY 2025 NDAA contains far better protections against Chinese malign foreign influence and politicization of the Department of Defense.

The Senate version of the FY 2025 NDAA contains far better provisions for the procurement of ships and funding of INDOPACOM priorities.

Politicized initiatives like “Draft our Daughters” do not enhance the military’s mission as a lethal fighting force or rebuild trust with the American people.

There are two competing versions of the Fiscal Year 2025 National Defense Authorization Act (FY 2025 NDAA), one in the Senate and one in the House.¹ By and large, there will be much upon which Senate and House negotiators can agree, as the two versions include support for deterrence in the Indo-Pacific and increasing American servicemembers’ quality of life. The provision in the Senate version of the bill that would require all women aged 18–26 to register for the draft is both highly contentious and the one that is most likely to sink the entire bill if not removed. Other potential areas of disagreement include the topline defense budget number (the Senate’s is higher), the higher support for shipbuilding by the Senate, and some strict research security proposals by the House.

Both versions also contain many proposals that are consistent with the proposed defense budget outlined

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in The Heritage Foundation’s “Conservative Defense Budget for Fiscal Year 2025” *Special Report*.²

Once Members of the Senate and the House meet to finalize the FY 2025 NDAA, they should consider the following recommendations to produce the military budget our nation needs to carry out the missions demanded by its national security and defense strategies.

Policy Recommendations

- **Remove “Draft our Daughters.”** The most divisive issue in the current House and Senate drafts of the NDAA is not directly related to military capability and lethality. Instead, it is a divisive, politicized initiative that would distract the military from its core mission. The proposal to include women in the draft is both wildly unpopular with Americans and disproportionately unpopular among the women it would affect. A national survey by Scott Rasmussen found that a majority of Americans overall and American women oppose being included in the draft. Heritage Vice President for National Security Victoria Coates issued the following statement regarding the “Draft our Daughters” provision in the Senate NDAA:

There is no justification to “Draft Our Daughters” for military service. The Senate defense bill’s provision for mandatory registration of all young women for conscription puts ‘fairness’ over military necessity. It would waste time and resources during a war in order to evaluate and train thousands of draft-age women to find the subset qualified for the requirements of military service. Including women in the selective service is pointless virtue-signaling from those who believe the military should be a social experiment and not a lethal fighting force.

Women are welcome to serve in the all-volunteer force and have done so with honor and distinction. Congress mandated that women be allowed in the military full-time in 1948 and they have been able to attend the military service academies for nearly fifty years. There are numerous women who have reached the very highest echelons of leadership as 4-star generals and flag officers. The Senate’s provision does nothing to expand the opportunities for women in today’s military.

As The Heritage Foundation has stated before, the current selective service registration system should be shut down. Expanding the mandatory registration requirement to young women will do nothing for national defense should America find itself in a conflict with mass casualties of front-line troops.

The American people do not support mandatory conscription for our daughters in wartime and neither should their Members of Congress.³

- **Improve servicemembers' quality of life.** Both versions succeed here, including a 19.5 percent pay raise for junior enlisted servicemembers and a 4.5 percent pay raise for all other servicemembers, which should be supported. The Senate version also includes a 2 percent pay raise for DOD civilian employees. Given how bloated the civilian bureaucracy at DOD has become, this money would be better spent on the servicemembers or on direct military capability.
- **Increase funding for shipbuilding.** The Senate version contains significant shipbuilding funding that the House failed to include. The Navy will never reach its fleet capacity goals if it continues to “divest to invest” and buys fewer new ships than it retires. The Senate version of the FY 2025 NDAA goes some way toward addressing this by purchasing a third *Arleigh Burke*-class destroyer, authorizing a second *Virginia*-class nuclear submarine, and fencing off funding for the *Constellation*-class frigate until the Navy certifies the ship design.

The House version, by contrast, does not include a third destroyer and zeroes out funding for the *Constellation*-class frigate, putting the program in jeopardy before the first ship is finished. House members should instead endorse the Senate approach and support fencing off funding for the frigate as a way to prevent cost overruns and delays while maintaining support for the program.⁴

To its credit, the House version does authorize a second *Virginia*-class submarine, but the House Appropriations Committee removed funding and is moving to appropriate only enough funding for one submarine. The Appropriations Committee argues that industry can handle only one submarine this year. This is the wrong way to approach defense budgeting. Instead, Congress should feel comfortable appropriating funds well above what industry claims it can handle

in order to send a long-term demand signal to industry and spur growth. Congressional staffers with an interest in the AUKUS deal should take note, as some defense experts have argued that purchasing less than two *Virginia*-class submarines a year could jeopardize the planned future sale of these subs to Australia.⁵

- **Adopt the tougher House research security measures against Chinese malign foreign influence.** The House version contains far more provisions aimed at preventing Chinese espionage against the United States than the Senate version does, and the Senate would do well to emulate the tough approach against Chinese malign foreign influence that the House has taken.

The House version contains numerous provisions aimed at preventing the Chinese from engaging in the theft of American national security technology. Among other things, the House version prohibits DOD from contracting with any Chinese civil–military companies, prohibits Chinese nationals from visiting certain sensitive sites like nuclear facilities, and prohibits university personnel involved in DOD-funded critical technology research from seeking employment with Chinese entities for 10 years.

- **Modernize the nuclear triad.** One very positive trend in this NDAA cycle is the now-widespread agreement that the nuclear triad is in need of modernization and therefore requires significant investment. This new consensus recognizes that the American nuclear triad has atrophied and is in desperate need of revitalization if it is to meet the rapid nuclear buildup currently underway in China.⁶ Critically, both the House and Senate bills would authorize funding for the nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N), which will fill a tactical capability gap in the Indo-Pacific vis-à-vis the Chinese.
- **Ensure strong INDOPACOM funding.** Both versions of the NDAA include significant support for INDOPACOM, including authorization of the Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI). The Senate version also includes increased support for Indo-Pacific allies through a new Indo-Pacific Security Assistance Initiative and critical support to military construction efforts in the Indo-Pacific, especially on Guam. Because China is the preeminent national security challenge facing the United States, both Senate and House members should default toward supporting funding for INDOPACOM.

- **Ban corrosive race-based policies from the military.** The House version succeeds here, including a requirement that all military promotions and command decisions be based on individual merit and demonstrated performance, not on political affiliation, race, sex, ethnicity, or religion. The House version also ends affirmative action at the military service academies, consistent with the Supreme Court decision that found affirmative action unconstitutional last year.⁷
- **Additional Heritage Recommendations.** In addition, a number of recommendations that The Heritage Foundation has supported in publications like its “Conservative Defense Budget for Fiscal Year 2025” *Special Report* should be considered for inclusion.⁸ These include:
 1. Substantially increase funding for precision guided munitions relevant to the Indo-Pacific, such as the Precision Strike Missile (PrSM); Long Range Anti-Ship Missile (LRASM); Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile (JASSM); Advanced Medium-Range Air-to-Air Missile (AMRAAM); and others.
 2. Increase funding for family housing on military bases to improve quality of life for servicemembers and their families.
 3. Block Navy requests to divest-to-invest and instead fund new shipbuilding through cuts in other Navy accounts, like RDT&E, or DOD-wide spending.
 4. Do not allow ships to be retired ahead of their expected service lives (ESLs).
 5. Block hiring of new civilian personnel in the already bloated Department of Defense and focus funding on warfighting capabilities in the services.
 6. Focus new Army funding on new fires systems relevant to the Indo-Pacific, including PrSM; the Strategic Mid-Range Fires System; the Long-Range Hypersonic Weapon (LRHW); and the Multi-Domain Task Force (MDTF).⁹
 7. Station new MDTFs in the Indo-Pacific.

8. Sustain and expand funding for nuclear modernization to maintain a credible deterrent, especially in the face of China's rapidly expanding nuclear buildup.¹⁰

Conclusion

Ideally, the final version of the FY 2025 NDAA will incorporate what is best in the two competing versions currently offered by the House and Senate. This ideal NDAA would incorporate the House's banning of corrosive race-based policies and include strong research security provisions aimed at preventing Chinese espionage against the DOD, along with the Senate's strong support for military construction in the Indo-Pacific and shipbuilding, including a third *Arleigh Burke*-class destroyer, a second *Virginia*-class submarine, and fenced-off funding for the Constellation-class frigate. Crucially, the final version should not add women to the draft.

Ideally, this final version of the NDAA also will result in a defense budget that flows from strategy, focusing by necessity on the Indo-Pacific, and a DOD that is less politicized and more focused on its core mission of being as capable and lethal as possible so that it can protect the national security interests of the American people.

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Endnotes

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2. Robert Greenway, Wilson Beaver, Robert Peters, Alexander Velez-Green, John Venable, Brent Sadler, and Jim Fein, “A Conservative Defense Budget for Fiscal Year 2025,” Heritage Foundation *Special Report* No. 281, April 2, 2024, https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/SR281_6.pdf.
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9. Wilson Beaver, “The Army’s Role in the Indo-Pacific,” Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 5346, March 12, 2024, <https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/IB5346.pdf>.
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