

House Sends Trump Bill to Restrict War Powers on Iran, Setting Up Veto

The bipartisan measure amounts to an unusual rebuke of the president's expansive war powers. President Trump has promised to veto it.



By Catie Edmondson

March 11, 2020

The House gave final approval on Wednesday to a bipartisan resolution aimed at forcing President Trump to get explicit approval from Congress before taking further military action against Iran, in a bid by lawmakers to reassert congressional war powers that is all but certain to be thwarted by a presidential veto.

The vote, 227 to 186, amounted to a rare move by Congress to claw back its authority over matters of war and peace from a president who has a penchant for unilateral action and little patience for consulting with lawmakers. It lands a jab at Mr. Trump as he attempts to confront the growing outbreak of coronavirus, more than two months after he moved without congressional authorization to kill Iran's most important commander.

Mr. Trump has threatened to veto the legislation, arguing that it is unnecessary because the United States is not currently engaged in any use of force in Iran, and that it would send "a very bad signal" of weakness to Iran. The Senate passed the measure last month in a bipartisan vote, but neither that resolution nor the one that was approved on Wednesday drew the two-thirds majority support needed to override a veto.

Still, lawmakers argued on Wednesday that action to curtail the president's war-making authority was not only necessary, but urgent to stop the erosion of Congress's war powers.

"We do not authorize the president's reckless actions, nor have we provided authorization for the use of force against Iran," said Representative Jim McGovern, Democrat of Massachusetts.

The administration's justification for the January strike that killed Maj. Gen. Qassim Suleimani, he continued, "has been about as clear as mud."

As lawmakers pressed the White House in the weeks after the strike for a legal justification for the killing, the administration offered a series of shifting explanations, first maintaining that the president acted in response to an imminent threat, and later giving lawmakers an unclassified memo that asserted it was "in response to an escalating series of attacks in preceding months" by Iran and Iran-backed militias.

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On Wednesday, Republican lawmakers defended Mr. Trump and the strike, and in scorching terms accused Democrats of attempting repeatedly to undermine the president's rightful powers as commander in chief.

"Iran and its proxies are watching right now as we spin our wheels," said Representative Michael McCaul of Texas, the top Republican on the Foreign Affairs Committee, adding that they would see a "divided" Congress. "Now is not the time to tie our commander in chief's hands."

The measure was a companion to legislation passed in the Senate led by Senator Tim Kaine, Democrat of Virginia. Eight Republican senators, enraged by the administration's handling of the strike — including the prickly briefings they received from Mr. Trump's top national security officials afterward — crossed party lines in February to support the measure.

It is the second time Congress has invoked the War Powers Act to attempt to restrict presidential war powers. A bipartisan measure to cut off American assistance to the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen passed both chambers, but Mr. Trump vetoed it in 2019.

In another bid to restrain the president's ability to strike Iran, the House in January voted to repeal a 2002 war authorization used by Mr. Trump and two previous presidents to justify all manner of strikes without securing approval from the legislative branch.

Wednesday's vote, aimed at preventing Mr. Trump from unilaterally plunging the nation into another intractable conflict, underscored how war weary members of Congress — and their constituents — have grown after decades of conflict, even as a bipartisan group of lawmakers on Capitol Hill has vented frustration about the administration's strategy for withdrawing troops from Afghanistan.

“Here is the reality: The American people do not want war with Iran. Congress has not authorized war with Iran,” said Representative Eliot L. Engel of New York, the Democratic chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee. “That should be crystal clear.”