

Congress Moves to Increase Pentagon Budget, Defying Biden and Liberals

More than a dozen Democrats on a key panel broke ranks to endorse a \$24 billion increase to military spending above what President Biden had requested.



By Catie Edmondson

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WASHINGTON — When Democrats won control of the House, Senate and White House, antiwar progressives saw a glimmer of hope that they might achieve one of their long-sought ambitions: cutting the Pentagon's sprawling budget.

Instead, the Democratic-controlled Congress is on track to increase the military budget by roughly \$24 billion more than what President Biden had requested, after over a dozen moderate Democrats on the House Armed Services Committee joined Republicans on Wednesday in pushing through a measure to substantially raise the cost of the annual defense policy bill.

"We are ending our longest conflict of 20 years, but more than ever, the world is watching what we do here today," said Representative Elaine Luria, Democrat of Virginia and a Navy veteran, who pressed for the increase. "The president's budget — I have been saying ever since it was released that it does not do enough."

The 42-to-17 vote capped a week in which a skeptical Congress — led by members of the president's own party — sharply questioned Mr. Biden's foreign policy as he brought a chaotic end to the war in Afghanistan and offered a new vision of American leadership that shuns ground wars in favor of economic and technological competition.

The amendment, spearheaded by Representative Mike D. Rogers of Alabama, the top Republican on the committee, would bring the total military spending budget to \$740 billion, with nearly half of the additional funding earmarked to procure new ships, aircraft, and combat vehicles as well as pouring money into the development of emerging technologies and new military laboratories.

"The bipartisan adoption of my amendment sends a clear signal: The president's budget submission was wholly inadequate to keep pace with a rising China and a re-emerging Russia," Mr. Rogers said. "I hope this bipartisan, and now bicameral, move is understood by the Biden-Harris administration."

The Senate Armed Services Committee overwhelmingly approved a similar increase along bipartisan lines in July, with only Senator Elizabeth Warren, Democrat of Massachusetts, opposing it in a closed-door vote.

While the legislation approved annually by the Armed Services Committees sets the nation's military policies, it ultimately falls to another committee to appropriate the funding, meaning that the budget number could change. But the defense policy legislation sends a potent message to the White House about what Congress expects to prioritize.

Mr. Biden had requested a \$715 billion budget, which would keep military spending essentially flat. Administration officials had proposed cutting spending on new weaponry and other military hardware while bolstering funding for the development of emerging technologies to deter China.

"What we're hearing from some Republicans, as well as some Democrats, is that they may not disagree with what the president is saying in terms of shifting priority more toward diplomacy and economic power, but that the military element of national power also should not be diminished," said Todd Harrison, the director of defense budget analysis at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

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Fourteen Democrats joined Republicans to support the measure, several of them facing tough re-election battles next year in conservative-leaning districts.

The lopsided vote underscored another reality: Even as the hard-charging liberal bloc of lawmakers pledging to cut military spending continues to grow in the House, it is often more hawkish members who populate the national security committees with the mandate to shape foreign policy.

Progressives who had already chafed at the cost of Mr. Biden's budget were livid.

"It's remarkable to me that as we end our long and expensive campaign in Afghanistan, so many are concluding that what we need is more war, more weapons and billions of dollars more than even what the Pentagon is asking for," said Representative Sara Jacobs, Democrat of California and a former State Department official.

Her argument mirrored the case that Mr. Biden made this week as he defended the turbulent withdrawal from Afghanistan and laid out a reimagining of American power abroad, arguing that his foreign policy would be centered "not through endless military deployments, but through diplomacy, economic tools and rallying the rest of the world for support."

"This decision about Afghanistan is not just about Afghanistan," the president said in a speech on Tuesday at the White House. "It's about ending an era of major military operations to remake other countries."

But the Armed Services Committee meeting that lasted into early Thursday morning showed that many lawmakers were skeptical of that approach.

That dynamic signals challenging times ahead in Congress for Mr. Biden. Top Democrats who lead crucial national security committees — several of whom were already uneasy with his decision to exit Afghanistan even before chaotic scenes in Kabul played out — have pledged to investigate the administration's withdrawal.

Lawmakers also approved a slew of amendments to the defense policy bill that require the administration to more stringently report on Afghanistan, including a measure requesting regular briefings that assess the United States' surveillance and reconnaissance capacity to conduct counterterrorism operations there. It also would require the administration to explain to lawmakers how officials plan to continue evacuating American citizens still stranded there.

Lawmakers also voted to require women to register for the selective service, mirroring an amendment that the Senate Armed Services Committee adopted last month, as well a provision that would prohibit service members from serving in "an extremist organization or engaging in extremist activities."