



## The To-Do List

**C**ongress returns after the month-long August recess with a number of national security items on the fall to-do list, not the least of which is Senate debate on the must-pass Fiscal 2018 defense authorization bill.

Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John McCain is expected to return to the Capitol from treatment for an aggressive brain tumor to manage floor consideration of the massive Pentagon policy bill, adding an emotional undertone to a measure that typically draws heated debate but ultimately receives wide bipartisan support.

The Arizona Republican has already signaled that he doesn't expect his diagnosis to slow him down, particularly as he battles the Trump administration on a number of national security fronts.

Indeed, McCain put the administration on notice just days after beginning chemotherapy: Either produce a new strategy for the 16-year war in Afghanistan before Senate debate begins, or he would do it himself.

McCain has been agitating for a new war strategy, criticizing the current and previous administrations for failing to devise a new plan in Afghanistan to achieve US national security interests in the region. McCain, a key proponent of the Iraq surge during the George W. Bush administration, has advocated sending several thousand more troops to Afghanistan.

"The reason for this failure is a lack of successful policy and strategic guidance from Washington over many years, which has continued in the first several months of this new administration," McCain said in an Aug. 3 statement, following news reports that Trump wished to fire Afghan war commander Gen. John W. Nicholson Jr. "Our Commanders in Chief, not our commanders in the field, are responsible for this failure," McCain said.

While Afghanistan will be a centerpiece of this year's much-anticipated debate on the defense bill, the measure will attract a myriad of other amendments, from changes to Pentagon bureaucracy to levels of defense spending.

Personnel matters may factor big in this year's defense debate, following a tweet in late July from Trump stating that he would seek to ban transgender individuals from serving in the military, effectively overturning a policy put in place by his predecessor. Trump argued the military cannot bear the "tremendous medical costs and disruption" associated with allowing transgender service members to serve.

The tweet drew immediate backlash from Democrats, such as

Air Force F-35As conduct flight training in May. This fall, Congress will take up myriad defense issues ranging from strategy to personnel readiness to spending levels.

New York Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, who called the proposed ban "cruel and discriminatory," warning that it would hurt military readiness and morale.

But defense hawks also opposed the President's tweet. McCain blasted the President for attempting to make policy on Twitter and said his plans were "unclear" and premature, considering the military Chiefs were still conducting their own review of the issue.

"Any American who meets current medical and readiness standards should be allowed to continue serving," McCain said in a statement. "There is no reason to force service members who are able to fight, train, and deploy to leave the military—regardless of their gender identity."

Also on tap for this fall are the annual appropriations bills for the fiscal year beginning Oct. 1. In late July, the House passed a so-called "security minibus," a package of four appropriations measures that included the defense spending bill.

The defense bill totals \$658 billion, dramatically exceeding existing budget caps.

Before leaving for the August recess, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) put the House-passed bill on the Senate calendar, effectively lining it up for consideration once Congress returns. But Senate appropriators have yet to consider the defense bill in their own panel, and would likely be loath to move to debate on the House's version of the measure.

The two chambers typically take different approaches to defense spending, with senators preferring to pay for add-ons like additional F-35 fighter jets by making surgical cuts elsewhere in the budget. The House, as it did this year, is more likely to simply blow past budget caps.

McConnell's floor strategy on appropriations in September is unclear at best. Even if he did attempt to bring the minibus to the floor, Democrats would block the legislation because it ignores those caps and includes \$1.6 billion for construction of a wall along the US-Mexico border.

With just a few weeks until the start of the new fiscal year, Congress will almost certainly need to approve a stopgap funding measure, or a continuing resolution, and spend the rest of the fall trying to negotiate spending levels for defense and non-defense programs, an exercise that has become almost a fall ritual in Washington.

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