

Congresswoman Stacey E. Plaskett
House Committee on Armed Services
National Defense Authorization Act Member Day Testimony
April 11, 2024

Chairman Rogers, Ranking Member Smith, members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony on the upcoming Fiscal Year 2025 (FY25) National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA).

The annual NDAA keeps the United States' defense apparatus robust and responsive to both present and future threats. The NDAA provides the opportunity to support our servicemembers and veterans and confront the greatest threats to our national security. I respectfully request that the committee favorably consider the following proposals for inclusion in the FY25 NDAA.

Authorization of Basic Allowance for Housing in the U.S. Virgin Islands

I request the FY25 NDAA include language to authorize the basic allowance for housing (BAH) for members of the uniformed services in the U.S. Virgin Islands. A high proportion of U.S. Virgin Islands residents serve in the U.S. military. Notably, the U.S. Virgin Islands boasts the highest percentage of women in the uniformed service among states and territories.

The current disparity lies in the Department of Defense providing only the overseas housing allowance to uniformed service personnel in the U.S. Virgin Islands. This treats the U.S. Virgin Islands as if it were a sovereign foreign nation. National Guard members in the 50 states and DC receive a flat-rate lump sum from the BAH program for housing and utilities, whereas U.S. Virgin Islands National Guard members receive reimbursements for housing and utilities through the overly burdensome and flawed OHA program.

According to a Department of Defense report submitted to Congress in June 2013, a flat-rate program for the U.S. Virgin Islands would lead to an "improved quality of life" at an estimated increased monthly cost of \$42,000, amounting to less than \$1 million annually. The Department of Defense report also noted that the transition would only be beneficial to the U.S. Virgin Islands, and as such should only be considered for the U.S. Virgin Islands.

TRICARE for the U.S. Virgin Islands

There are few places in the United States with higher per capita rates of military service than the U.S. Virgin Islands. Despite this, veterans in the U.S. Virgin Islands do not receive the same benefits as their counterparts residing in the 50 states. Veterans in the U.S. Virgin Islands are unable to utilize TRICARE Prime, which prohibits medical retirees and certain family members from accessing TRICARE in the same way as the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

I request the FY25 NDAA include language to ensure eligible servicemembers in the U.S. Virgin Islands receive the same TRICARE benefits as similarly situated service members in the 50 states.

Report on the Impact of African Coups

I am increasingly concerned by the ongoing instability in Africa. China's Belt and Road investments, Russia's Wagner Group, and other actors are using the cycles of coups across the

continent as a vehicle to effectuate influence and control. In the past 10 years, successful coups have occurred in Burkina Faso twice, Sudan three times, Mali twice, as well as in Chad, Guinea, Niger, and Gabon. Further attempted coups have occurred in many of these nations, in addition to The Gambia and Sierra Leone. The Annual Threat Assessment has indicated internal turmoil in this region will continue in the coming year.

I request the FY25 NDAA include an assessment, with classified and unclassified sections, on the impact of cyclical coups on long-term instability in the region as it relates to United States security interests, regional multi-state organizations, regional access to global markets, and the impact of sub-state actors on global security. It is critical that we understand the conduct of China and other nefarious actors in the region. This information will inform an effective strategy to counter hostile foreign engagement, which bolsters undemocratic regimes and further depletes nations' resources.

Sense of Congress Supporting Haiti's Stability

Following the assassination of Haitian President Jovenel Moïse on July 7th 2021, our Caribbean neighbor has faced a humanitarian catastrophe. The United States cannot take an apathetic approach to Haiti, which faces complete control by gangs, endemic poverty, and violence. A multinational security support mission to Haiti with global partners including Kenya aligns with United States national security interests. It is critical that we bolster Haiti's development of a long-term stabilization plan.

I request the FY25 NDAA include language to express the sense of Congress that the stability of Haiti is vital to the Caribbean and United States and as such, a secure and prosperous Haiti is in our national and global interest.

Report on the Impact of China, Russia and its Proxies in Africa and the Caribbean

I request the inclusion of language to direct the Department of Defense to assess the impact of China and Russia's malign influence in Africa, South America, Central America, and the Caribbean on national security and economic interests of the United States. This builds upon my amendment included in the FY23 NDAA, which directed the Department of Defense to assess the standing U.S. military force posture in the Caribbean, given U.S. national and regional security interests in the region.

The continued expansion of Russian and Chinese influence threatens the national security, economic prosperity, and democratic values of the United States. Russia has exploited the instability of African nations to secure access to valuable resources and in turn, undermine democratic aspirations. China's economic investments and financial assistance target vulnerable countries in the region and carry collateral conditions, including diplomatic expectations. We must recognize the expansion of Chinese and Russian influence to the Caribbean, South America, Central America, and Africa – and the importance of the U.S. national security apparatus.

Report on the Strategic Value of Caribbean Undersea Cable Networks

In furtherance of my FY23 NDAA request for an assessment of the development of a trans-Atlantic submarine fiber optic cable connecting the United States, United States Virgin Islands, Ghana, and Nigeria, I would like the FY25 NDAA to include a holistic assessment on the strategic value of undersea telecommunications connecting the United States to South America, Central America,

the Caribbean, and Mexico. This report should include assessments of the lifespan of existing links between the United States and nations in the region as well as recommendations for future strategic investments in the development of telecommunications infrastructure in South America, Central America, the Caribbean, and Mexico.

As China gains geopolitical and economic influence in Africa and the Caribbean, we must protect the United States' national security data and communication interests, while providing provide economic advantages to the United States and its diaspora community partners.

Thank you for your consideration of my priorities. I ask that the committee favorably consider these requests as it drafts the Fiscal Year 2025 National Defense Authorization Act.