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# Defense Primer: The Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy (OUSD(P))

## Background

Congress established the position of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy (USD-P) in 1978 (P.L. 95-140) and has expanded its role several times through legislation. The current Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy (OUSD(P))—sometimes referred to as OSD Policy—leads the development of the National Defense Strategy (NDS), routinely represents the Department of Defense (DOD) to interagency and international partners, and has a key role in preserving civilian control of the military.

Congress first prescribed specific responsibilities for the USD-P in 1986 in the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act, as part of efforts to “strengthen civilian authority” in DOD, “increase attention to the formulation of strategy and to contingency planning,” and “provide for more efficient use of defense resources” (P.L. 99-433). In this act, Congress charged OUSD-P with guiding and reviewing contingency plans made by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS). Over time, Congress has given OUSD-P additional responsibilities and directed changes to the office’s organization and processes.

OUSD(P) is one of six OUSDs in the larger Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) (U.S.C. 10 §131). Each OUSD reports directly to the Secretary of Defense (**Figure 1**).

**Figure 1. OUSD(P) Within the Office of the Secretary of Defense**



Source: CRS, information from U.S.C. 10 §131.

## Responsibilities

OUSD(P) has several congressionally mandated responsibilities, laid out in Title 10, Section 134 of the *U.S. Code*. Many of these responsibilities require it to work with components throughout DOD. The chief example is the NDS, which OUSD(P) develops and which provides broad strategic guidance to the department. OUSD(P) also provides more specific budgetary direction to the military services through annual Defense Planning Guidance (DPG). Staff develop the DPG with input from counterparts across OSD and the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). The DPG is a key component of DOD’s Planning, Programming, Budgeting, and Execution (PPBE) process. OUSD(P) also provides guidance to combatant commands for their preparation of campaign and contingency plans and global force posture, and reviews these plans. OUSD(P) also coordinates with the CJCS and Director of Cost Assessment Program Evaluation (CAPE) to develop planning scenarios and objectives to assess capabilities and readiness. In short, OUSD(P) plays integral roles in strategy development, resourcing, contingency planning, and force evaluation.

OUSD(P) also has external responsibilities, enumerated in DOD Directive (DODD) 5111.01. This directive assigns the USD-P the responsibility to “[represent] DOD in matters involving the National Security Council; the Department of State, and other Federal departments, agencies, and interagency groups with responsibility for national security policy.” OUSD-P is to “[c]ommunicate with other government officials, members of the public, and representatives of foreign governments, as appropriate, in carrying out assigned responsibilities and functions.” To fulfill their duties, OUSD(P) staff routinely liaise with their counterparts in these agencies, foreign governments, and international organizations. Relatedly, OUSD-P “establishes DOD policy for defense-related international agreements and represents DOD in negotiating such agreements.”

The USD-P and OUSD(P) staff routinely testify before Congress, complete reporting requirements, and meet with congressional leadership and staff. According to DOD policy, USD-P communications with Congress must go through the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Legislative Affairs, “except for communications with the Defense Appropriations Committees,” which must go through OUSD(Comptroller)/Chief Financial Officer.

## Organization

The USD-P is appointed by the President “from civilian life” with the advice and consent of the Senate (U.S.C. 10 §134). Under the USD-P are seven Assistant Secretaries of Defense (ASDs), also politically appointed and Senate

confirmed (U.S.C. 10 §138). Each ASD develops policy and strategy, oversees its implementation, and guides and oversees DOD activities in their area of focus, either functional or regional. The number of ASDs and their roles have evolved with defense priorities. At present, three ASDs are established in statute: Cyber Policy, Space Policy, and Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict. A brief summary of the ASDs follows.

### Functional ASDs

- **ASD Cyber Policy**, established by Congress in the FY2023 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) (P.L. 117-263), focuses on DOD cyberspace policy and strategy.
- **ASD Space Policy**, established by Congress in the FY2020 NDAA (P.L. 116-92), focuses on space warfighting and missile defense and includes the office responsible for nuclear arms control and countering weapons of mass destruction.
- **ASD Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC)**, established by Congress in the FY1987 NDAA (P.L. 99-661), focuses on special operations, counternarcotics, counter-transnational organized crime operations, conflict stabilization, irregular warfare, and counterterrorism. SO/LIC also performs a role unique among ASDs, acting as a service secretary for Special Operations Forces and providing oversight and reporting directly to the Secretary of Defense on these issues.
- **ASD Strategy, Plans and Capabilities (SPC)** focuses on DOD-wide strategy and produces several strategy and planning documents, including the NDS and guidance for force development, employment, and posture. It also reviews campaign, contingency, major force deployment, and military operational plans.

### Regional ASDs

Each regional ASD focuses on a specific area of the world, to include the national governments and international organizations therein, as well as relevant security cooperation programs, including foreign military sales.

- **ASD Homeland Defense and Hemispheric Affairs (HDHA)** has a regional focus on the Western Hemisphere and the Arctic. Unlike the other regional ASDs, HDHA also has a functional component, centered on homeland defense and mission assurance. Mission assurance describes processes designed “to protect or ensure the continued function and resilience of capabilities and assets” in a disrupted environment (DODD 3020.40). HDHA also covers defense support of civil authorities (i.e., “support provided by federal military forces ... for domestic emergencies, cyberspace incident response, law enforcement support”) (JP 3-28).
- **ASD Indo-Pacific Affairs** focuses on the Indo-Pacific region, including the People’s Republic of China and defense policy issues related to Antarctica.
- **ASD International Security Affairs** focuses on Europe, the Middle East, and Africa.

Each ASD oversees a Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (PDASD) and Deputy Assistant Secretaries of Defense (DASDs). PDASDs and DASDs come from the Senior Executive Service or are politically appointed but not Senate confirmed. OUSD(P) has seven PDASDs and 21 DASDs.

### Related OUSD(P) Agencies

OUSD(P) also is home to the Defense Policy Board, the Defense Prisoner of War/Missing in Action Accounting Agency, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA), the Defense Technology Security Administration, and the Office of the Special Coordinator for Afghanistan.

### Issues for Congress

- **ASD for nuclear deterrence:** The Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC)-reported FY2025 NDAA would replace the current ASD for Nuclear, Chemical, and Biological Defense Programs (which lies in A&S) with an ASD for Nuclear Deterrence Policy and Programs (S. 4638) in order to “consolidate the principal policymaking, programmatic, and resourcing responsibilities for U.S. nuclear forces” (S.Rept. 118-188). Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin objects to this proposal, writing to Congress that the new position “poses significant implementation challenges,” would “carve out functions and authorities from [OUSD(A&S)] and [OUSD(P)],” and would “create unclear lines of authority.” Congress may consider implications of OSD restructuring and shifts in authorities to accommodate an ASD with both policy and programmatic responsibilities.
- **ASD SO/LIC authority:** The SASC-reported FY2025 NDAA would direct an update of ASD (SO/LIC)’s “service secretary-like role,” in overseeing special operations forces (S. 4638; S.Rept. 118-188). In its guidance and oversight functions, OUSD(P) plays a key role in preserving civilian control of the military. Congress may consider whether or not legislation might enhance civilian oversight within DOD and support congressional oversight efforts.
- **Budget reform:** In 2023, Congress created a commission to explore reforming the PPBE process. As Congress explores reform options, it may consider the role OUSD(P) plays, particularly in the “planning” phase to tie budgetary guidance to defense priorities.
- **Security cooperation:** Congress has expressed interest in DOD’s management of security cooperation (a term that describes all DOD interaction with foreign security establishments, to include foreign military sales). In OUSD(P), the responsibility for managing security cooperation rests with multiple stakeholders: DSCA (which reports directly to the USD-P), the ASD for SPC, and the regional ASDs. In its oversight role, Congress may consider how OUSD(P) prioritizes, integrates, and evaluates security cooperation programs.

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