

Conclusion: Global Threat Level

America and its interests face challenges around the world from countries and organizations that have:

- Interests that conflict with those of the U.S.;
- Sometimes hostile intentions toward the U.S.; and
- In some cases, growing military capabilities.

The government of the United States constantly faces the challenge of employing, sometimes alone but more often in concert with allies, the right mix of U.S. diplomatic, economic, public information, intelligence, and military capabilities to protect and advance U.S. interests.

In Europe, Russia remains the primary threat to American interests. The *2018 Index* again assessed the threat emanating from Russia as a behavior score of “aggressive” and a capability score of “formidable,” the highest category on the scale. Moscow continues to engage in massive pro-Russia propaganda campaigns in Ukraine and other Eastern European countries and over the past year has performed a series of provocative military exercises and training missions that are viewed as warnings to neighboring countries, particularly the Baltic States. It also has increased its investment in modernizing its military and has gained significant combat experience while continuing to sabotage U.S. and Western policy in Syria.

In the Middle East, Iran remains the state actor that is most hostile to American interests. The *2018 Index* assesses Iran’s behavior as “aggressive” and its capability as “gathering.” In the years since publication of the *2015 Index*, Iran has methodically moved closer to becoming a nuclear power, successfully maneuvering to stabilize its program through the nuclear agreement negotiated with the U.S.; has continued to back Houthi rebels in Yemen in what some consider a proxy war between Iran and its Sunni Arab neighbors; has continued to exert influence in the region through its backing of the Assad regime and Hezbollah; and has further deepened its exploitation of instability of Iraq by providing direct support to Shia militias.

Also in the Middle East, a broad array of terrorist groups, most notably ISIS and the Iran-sponsored Hezbollah, are the most hostile of any of the global threats to America examined in the *Index*. They also are evaluated as being among the least capable. In 2017, the threat posed by ISIS decreased due to a loss of territorial control and the need to focus its efforts on defending its remaining stronghold and preserving its influence in the region.

In Asia, China moved from “aggressive” to “testing” in the scope of its provocative behavior. China continues to militarize the islands that it built on reefs in international waters and continues to claim sovereignty. It also has continued to field new equipment, most notably in naval power, perceived to be most important in its efforts to shape the Western Pacific maritime domain in line with its interests.

North Korea’s level of behavior remained “aggressive” from the *2017 Index* to the *2018 Index*. Its capability level has also remained at “gathering” as Pyongyang continues to develop and refine its missile technology, especially in the area of submarine-launched ballistic missiles.

The terrorist threats emanating from the Afghanistan–Pakistan region returned to “aggressive” in the *2018 Index* after a one-year drop to “testing.” However, the capability score for the region’s terrorist threat dropped to “capable.”

Just as there are American interests that are not covered by this *Index*, there may be

additional threats to American interests that are not identified here. The *Index* focuses on the more apparent sources of risk and those in which the risk is greater.

Compiling the assessments of these threat sources, the *2018 Index* again rates the overall global threat environment as “aggressive” and “gathering” in the areas of threat actor behavior and material ability to harm U.S. security interests, respectively, leading to an aggregated threat score of “high.” This score is a full category worse than the *2016 Index* assessment of “elevated,” driven by increases in the capability of Russia, Iran, and China.

Behavior of Threats

	HOSTILE	AGGRESSIVE	TESTING	ASSERTIVE	BENIGN
Russia		✓			
Iran		✓			
Middle East Terrorism		✓			
Af-Pak Terrorism		✓			
China			✓		
North Korea		✓			
OVERALL		✓			

Capability of Threats

	FORMIDABLE	GATHERING	CAPABLE	ASPIRATIONAL	MARGINAL
Russia	✓				
Iran		✓			
Middle East Terrorism			✓		
Af-Pak Terrorism			✓		
China	✓				
North Korea		✓			
OVERALL		✓			

Threats to U.S. Vital Interests

	SEVERE	HIGH	ELEVATED	GUARDED	LOW
Russia		✓			
Iran		✓			
Middle East Terrorism		✓			
Af-Pak Terrorism		✓			
China		✓			
North Korea		✓			
OVERALL		✓			

Our combined score for threats to U.S. vital interests can be summarized as:

Threats to U.S. Vital Interests

