

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 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 *2019 Index* again assesses 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, regularly performs provocative military exercises and training missions, and continues to sell and export arms to countries hostile to U.S. interests. 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 and Ukraine.

In the Middle East, Iran remains the state actor that is most hostile to American interests. The *2019 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, and it continues to enhance its capabilities relating to ICBMs, missile defense, and unmanned systems. Iran also continues to perpetuate and exploit instability to expand its influence in the region—both in its direct involvement in regional engagements and through its proxies, particularly in Syria.

Also in the Middle East, a broad array of terrorist groups, most notably the Iran-sponsored Hezbollah, remain the most hostile of any of the global threats to America examined in the *Index*. As of mid-2018, the Islamic State had been essentially decimated, having lost more than 98 percent of previously held territory, but it has not been completely eliminated and has made efforts to reassert itself in the region. Despite the declining strength of ISIS forces, the growing assertiveness of Iranian-backed Shia militias contributes to a scoring inflation from “aggressive” to “hostile” in level of behavior. Fortunately, Middle East terrorist groups also are evaluated as being among the least capable of the threats facing the U.S.

In Asia, China returned to “aggressive” in the scope of its provocative behavior from “testing” in the *2018 Index*. The People’s Liberation Army continues to extend its reach and military activity beyond its immediate region and engages in larger and more comprehensive exercises, including live-fire exercises in the East China Sea near Taiwan. It has also continued to conduct probes of the South Korean and Japanese air defense identification zones, drawing rebukes from both Seoul and Tokyo. There is also little evidence that Chinese cyber espionage and computer network exploitation have abated.

North Korea’s level of behavior fell to “testing” from the *2018 Index* to the *2019 Index*. In a 2018 summit, South Korean President Moon Jae-in and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un committed to mutual nonaggression and force reduction. Kim Jung-un also declared that North Korea no longer needed to conduct nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile tests. Both statements would appear to contribute to a positive appearance of cooperation and an improved level of behavior, but they could also reflect North Korea’s improved confidence in its nuclear capabilities as opposed to being a sign of genuinely good faith. North Korea’s 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.

Finally, the terrorist threats emanating from the Afghanistan–Pakistan region dropped to “testing” in the *2019 Index*. Fatalities attributed to terrorism inside of Pakistan continue to fall as various terrorist groups within the region find themselves in competition with each other for recruits, territory, and resources.

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 *2019 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.”

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

