

Preface

As Americans, we understand that we are fortunate to live in a country with unparalleled peace, prosperity, and freedom. We also understand that these things have come at a high cost and that they are maintained only through eternal vigilance. Our powerful, ready, and valiant military has prevented our adversaries—from Communist dictatorships to terrorist state and non-state actors—from destroying what so many lives and so much treasure have been sacrificed to preserve.

President Ronald Reagan aptly called it “peace through strength.”

At a time when the nation is reeling from a deadly disease outbreak, racial unrest, and economic upheaval, we must avoid the tendency to turn inward and ignore the many looming outside threats to our security.

The U.S. has maintained military superiority for so long that many take it for granted, but it is far from guaranteed. Though our men and women in uniform use what we have provided them effectively, they are still using decades-old ships, planes, tanks, and other equipment that desperately need upgrading—all while the capabilities of those who would do us harm continue to grow.

The governments of Russia and Communist China are openly hostile to the United States and have attempted to influence our elections, have threatened our allies, and have spread propaganda through our media. They continue to build up their militaries, including their nuclear capabilities, which they use for aggression, not for maintaining peace. In its quest to dominate the world, China is growing military spending by more than 6 percent a year while

the U.S. defense budget is not even keeping up with inflation.

If our adversaries ever gained the upper hand against us militarily, it would take years for us to catch up, and by that time, it would be too late. When they’ve had the upper hand with other nations, they’ve shown their propensity to use it.

We must ensure that the bad actors who desire to dominate and destroy other nations—including our own—never win this competition, but the United States can be assured of that only if we have a defense budget that is sufficient to support our current troops and equip them for the future.

When addressing West Point graduates in 1981, President Reagan stated, “A truly successful army is one that—because of its strength and ability and dedication—will not be called upon to fight, for no one will dare to provoke it.” No one wants war, and we should make every effort to deter future wars, but deterrence is premised on being able to credibly demonstrate the ability to cause potential opponents to regret their actions.

We Americans carry insurance on our vehicles, homes, and health because we know that bad things can happen despite our best efforts to prevent them. The U.S. armed forces are America’s insurance policy against emerging dangers from around the world. Just as it is too late to buy a homeowner’s policy after your house is on fire, when something inevitably happens that threatens our country, our people, and our way of life, it will be too late to build the military we suddenly find that we desperately need.

It is the constitutional obligation of our government to provide for the common defense, and it is our individual responsibility to hold our government accountable for doing so. This *2021 Index of U.S. Military Strength* is The Heritage Foundation's contribution to informing our leaders and the American public about the status of our military in relation to our adversaries.

We take that responsibility very seriously, and we hope that this report card on the U.S. armed forces helps decision-makers to

be better informed and helps citizens to hold their elected representatives accountable for providing adequately for our nation's defense. In doing so, we can all play our part in ensuring that America's founding promises of peace, prosperity, and freedom remain promises kept—both for this generation and for generations of Americans yet to come.

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