

Conclusion: Scoring the Global Operating Environment

The United States is a global power with global security interests, and threats to those interests can emerge from any region. Consequently, the U.S. military must be ready to operate in any region when called upon to do so and must account for the range of conditions that it might encounter when planning for potential military operations. This informs its decisions about the type and amount of

equipment it purchases (especially to transport and sustain the force); the location or locations from which it might operate; and how easily it can or cannot project and sustain combat power when engaged with the enemy.

Aggregating the three regional scores provides a Global Operating Environment score of **FAVORABLE** in the *2021 Index*.

Global Operating Environment

	VERY POOR	UNFAVORABLE	MODERATE	FAVORABLE	EXCELLENT
Europe				✓	
Middle East			✓		
Asia				✓	
OVERALL				✓	

Europe. Overall, the European region remains a stable, mature, and friendly operating environment. Russia remains the preeminent military threat to the region, both conventionally and unconventionally, but China has become a significant presence through its propaganda, influence operations, and investments in key sectors. Both NATO and many

non-NATO European countries have reason to be increasingly concerned about the behavior and ambitions of both Russia and China, although agreement on a collective response to these challenges remains elusive.

The past year saw continued U.S. reengagement with the continent, both militarily and politically, along with modest increases in

Global Operating Environment: Summary



European allies' defense budgets and capability investment. Despite allies' initial concerns, the U.S. has increased its investment in Europe, and its military position on the continent is stronger than it has been for some time. The economic, political, and societal impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are only beginning to be felt and will undoubtedly have to be reckoned with for years to come, especially with respect to Europe's relationship with China.

NATO's renewed focus on collective defense has resulted in a focus on logistics. The biggest challenges to the alliance derive from capability and readiness gaps for many European nations, the importance of continuing improvements and exercises in the realm of logistics, a tempestuous Turkey, disparate threat perceptions within the alliance, and the need to establish the ability to mount a robust response to both linear and nonlinear forms of aggression.

For Europe, scores this year remained steady, as they did in 2019 (assessed in the *2020 Index*), with no substantial changes in any individual categories or average scores. The *2021 Index* again assesses the European Operating Environment as "favorable."

The Middle East. Once considered relatively stable, mainly because of the ironfisted rule of authoritarian regimes, the Middle East is now highly unstable and a breeding ground for terrorism. Overall, regional security has deteriorated in recent years. Even though the Islamic State (or at least its physical presence) appears to have been defeated, the nature of its successor is unclear. Iraq's political situation and future relations between Baghdad and the United States will remain difficult as long as a government that is sympathetic to Iran is in power. The regional dispute with Qatar has made U.S. relations in the region even more complex and difficult to manage, although it has not stopped the U.S. military from operating.

The Middle East region's principal security and political challenges are surging transnational terrorism and meddling by Iran, which seeks to extend its influence in the Islamic

world. The Arab–Israeli conflict, Sunni–Shia sectarian divides, the rise of Iran's Islamist revolutionary nationalism, and the proliferation of Sunni Islamist revolutionary groups all continue to keep the region at risk of war. America's relationships in the region are based pragmatically on shared security and economic concerns. As long as these issues remain relevant to both sides, the U.S. is likely to have an open door to operate in the Middle East when its national interests require that it do so.

Although circumstances in all measured areas vary throughout the year, in general terms, the *2021 Index* assesses the Middle East Operating Environment as "moderate," but the region's political stability continues to be "unfavorable" and will remain a dark cloud over everything else.

Asia. The Asian strategic environment includes half the globe and is characterized by a variety of political relationships among states that have wildly varying capabilities. This makes Asia far different from Europe, which in turn makes America's relations with the region different from its relations with Europe. American conceptions of Asia must recognize the physical limitations imposed by the tyranny of distance and the challenge of moving forces as necessary to respond to challenges from China and North Korea. The complicated nature of intra-Asian relations and the lack of an integrated, regional security architecture along the lines of NATO make defense of U.S. security interests more challenging than many Americans appreciate.

We continue to assess the Asia region as "favorable" to U.S. interests in terms of alliances, overall political stability, militarily relevant infrastructure, and the presence of U.S. military forces.

Summarizing the condition of each region enables us to get a sense of how they compare in terms of the challenge the U.S. would have in projecting military power and sustaining combat operations in each one. As a whole, the global operating environment currently maintains a score of "favorable," which means that the United States should be able to project

military power anywhere in the world as necessary to defend its interests without substantial opposition or high levels of risk.