

Assessing the Global Operating Environment

Measuring the “strength” of a military force—the extent to which that force can accomplish missions—requires examination of the environments in which the force operates. Aspects of one environment may facilitate military operations; aspects of another may work against them. A favorable operating environment presents the U.S. military with obvious advantages; an unfavorable operating environment may limit the effect of U.S. military power. The capabilities and assets of U.S. allies, the strength of foes, the region’s geopolitical environment, and the availability of forward facilities and logistics infrastructure all factor into whether an operating environment is one that can support U.S. military operations.

When assessing an operating environment, one must pay particular attention to any U.S. treaty obligations in the region. A treaty defense obligation ensures that the legal framework is in place for the U.S. to maintain and operate a military presence in a particular country. In addition, a treaty partner usually yields regular training exercises and interoperability as well as political and economic ties.

Additional factors—including the military capabilities of allies that might be useful to U.S. military operations; the degree to which the U.S. and allied militaries in the region are interoperable and can use, for example, common means of command, communication, and other systems; and whether the U.S. maintains key bilateral alliances with nations in the region—also affect the operating environment. Likewise, nations where the U.S.

has stationed assets or permanent bases and countries from which the U.S. has launched military operations in the past may provide needed support to future U.S. military operations. The relationships and knowledge gained through any of these factors would undoubtedly make future U.S. military operations in a region easier and help to ensure a positive operating environment.

In addition to U.S. defense relations within a region, other criteria—including the quality of the local infrastructure, the area’s political stability, whether or not a country is embroiled in any conflicts, and the degree to which a nation is economically free—should also be considered.

Then there are low-likelihood, high-consequence events that, although they occur infrequently, can still radically alter conditions in ways that affect U.S. interests. Massive natural disasters like Typhoon Tip (1979)¹ or the explosion of Mount Tambora (1816)² can displace populations, upend regional power arrangements, or destroy critical infrastructure. The eruption of Mount Pinatubo did just that in 1991, causing so much damage to Clark Airbase and Subic Bay Naval Station that the cost, combined with diplomatic frictions between the U.S. and the Philippines, led the U.S. to abandon these strategic facilities.³ A massive solar flare could have a similar impact on a much larger scale because of the world’s dependence on electrical power. Scientists, analysts, planners, and officials in public and commercial ventures study such things but

seldom take concrete action to mitigate their potential impact.

Today, the world has been shaken by the COVID-19 pandemic that has caused governments to spend extraordinary sums of money not only to manage the public health crisis, but also to mitigate its economic impact on their countries. Its attendant stresses have put terrific pressures on political establishments; caused governments to divert funding from other matters such as defense capabilities to the more immediate demands of the pandemic; and, given the threat of contagion, the adoption of mitigation measures that have led to the cancellation of military exercises, training events, and deployments. It remains to be seen what the long-term consequences will be, but for the assessed year of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has minimized activities that would normally keep military forces in a ready status, pressured related financial accounts, and caused problems for allied countries that

would otherwise work to ensure that their military forces are able to collaborate effectively.

The impact of the pandemic on specific countries will be addressed in the assessments of military readiness, political stability, and access to training, exercise, and operational basing opportunities.

Each of these factors contributes to an informed judgment as to whether a particular operating environment is favorable or unfavorable to future U.S. military operations. The operating environment assessment is meant to add critical context to complement the threat environment and U.S. military assessments that are detailed in subsequent sections of the *Index*.

A final note: The *Index of U.S. Military Strength* refers to all disputed territories by the names employed by the United States Department of State. This should not be interpreted as reflecting a position on any of these disputes.

Endnotes

1. Meghan Evans, "Earth's Strongest, Most Massive Storm Ever," *Scientific American*, October 12, 2012, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/earths-strongest-most-massive-storm-ever/> (accessed May 17, 2020).
2. Robert Evans, "Blast from the Past: The Eruption of Mount Tambora Killed Thousands, Plunged Much of the World into a Frightful Chill and Offers Lessons for Today," *Smithsonian Magazine*, July 2002, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/blast-from-the-past-65102374/> (accessed May 17, 2020).
3. Philip Shenon, "U.S. Will Abandon Volcano-Ravaged Air Base, Manila Is Told," *The New York Times*, July 16, 1991, <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/07/16/world/us-will-abandon-volcano-ravaged-air-base-manila-is-told.html> (accessed May 17, 2020).