

Executive Summary

“As currently postured, the U.S. military continues to be only marginally able to meet the demands of defending America’s vital national interests.”

The United States maintains a military force primarily to protect the homeland from attack and to protect its interests abroad. There are other uses, of course—for example, to assist civil authorities in times of emergency or to deter enemies—but this force’s primary purpose is to make it possible for the U.S. to physically impose its will on an enemy when necessary.

It is therefore critical that the condition of the United States military with respect to America’s vital national security interests, threats to those interests, and the context within which the U.S. might have to use “hard power” be understood. Because such changes can have substantial implications for defense policies and investment, knowing how these three areas change over time is likewise important.

Each year, The Heritage Foundation’s *Index of U.S. Military Strength* employs a standardized, consistent set of criteria, accessible both to government officials and to the American public, to gauge the U.S. military’s ability to perform its missions in today’s world. The inaugural 2015 edition established a baseline assessment on which each annual edition builds, one that both assesses the state of affairs for its respective year and measures how key factors have changed during the preceding year.

The *Index* is not an assessment of what *might* be, although the trends that it captures may well imply both concerns and opportunities that can guide decisions that are germane to America’s

security. Rather, the *Index* should be seen as a report card for how well or poorly conditions, countries, and the U.S. military have evolved during the assessed year. The past cannot be changed, but it can inform, just as the future cannot be predicted but can be shaped.

What the *Index* Assesses

The *Index of U.S. Military Strength* assesses the ease or difficulty of operating in key regions based on existing alliances, regional political stability, the presence of U.S. military forces, and the condition of key infrastructure. Threats are assessed based on the behavior and physical capabilities of actors that pose challenges to vital U.S. national interests. The condition of America’s military power is measured in terms of its capability or modernity, capacity for operations, and readiness to handle assigned missions. This framework provides a single-source reference for policymakers and other Americans who seek to know whether our military is up to the task of defending our national interests.

Any discussion of the aggregate capacity and breadth of the military power needed to protect U.S. security interests requires a clear understanding of precisely what interests must be defended. Three vital interests have been specified consistently (albeit in varying language) by a string of Administrations over the past few decades:

- **Defense** of the homeland;
- **Successful conclusion** of a major war that has the potential to destabilize a region of critical interest to the U.S.; and

- **Preservation** of freedom of movement within the global commons (the sea, air, outer-space, and cyberspace domains) through which the world conducts its business.

To defend these interests effectively on a global scale, the United States needs a military force of sufficient size, or what is known in the Pentagon as capacity. The many factors involved make determining how big the military should be a complex exercise, but successive Administrations, Congresses, Department of Defense staffs, and independent commissions have managed to arrive at a surprisingly consistent force-sizing rationale: an ability to handle two major conflicts simultaneously or in closely overlapping time frames.

At its root, the current National Defense Strategy (NDS) implies the same force requirement.¹ Its emphasis on a return to long-term competition with major powers, explicitly naming China and Russia as primary competitors,² reemphasizes the need for the United States to have:

- Sufficient military capacity to deter or win against large conventional powers in geographically distant regions,
- The ability to conduct sustained operations against lesser threats, and
- The ability to work with allies and maintain a U.S. presence in regions of key importance that is sufficient to deter behavior that threatens U.S. interests.

No matter how much America desires that the world be a simpler, less threatening place that is more inclined to beneficial economic interactions than violence-laden friction, the patterns of history show that competing powers consistently emerge and that the U.S. must be able to defend its interests in more than one region at a time. Consequently, this *Index* embraces the two-war or two-contingency requirement.

Since its founding, the U.S. has been involved in a major “hot” war every 15–20 years. Since World War II, the U.S. has also maintained substantial combat forces in Europe and other regions while simultaneously fighting major wars as circumstances demanded. The size of the total force roughly approximated the two-contingency model, which has the inherent ability to meet multiple security obligations to which the U.S. has committed itself while also modernizing, training, educating, and maintaining the force. Accordingly, our assessment of the adequacy of today’s U.S. military is based on the ability of America’s armed forces to engage and defeat two major competitors at roughly the same time.

We acknowledge that absent a dramatic change in circumstances such as the onset of a major conflict, a multitude of competing interests that evolve during extended periods of peace and prosperity will cause Administrations and Congresses to favor spending on domestic programs rather than investing in defense. Consequently, winning the support needed to increase defense spending to the level that a force with a two-war capacity requires is admittedly difficult politically. But this does not change the patterns of history, the behavior of competitors, or the reality of what it takes to defend America’s interests in an actual war.

This *Index*’s benchmark for a two-war force is derived from a review of the forces used for each major war that the U.S. has undertaken since World War II and the major defense studies completed by the federal government over the past 30 years. We concluded that a standing (Active component) two-war-capable force would consist of:

- **Army:** 50 brigade combat teams (BCTs);
- **Navy:** 400 battle force ships and 624 strike aircraft;
- **Air Force:** 1,200 fighter/ground-attack aircraft;
- **Marine Corps:** 30 battalions; and

- **Space Force:** satellite platforms, ground stations, and personnel sufficient to support warfighting requirements.

This recommended force does not account for homeland defense missions that would accompany a period of major conflict and are generally handled by Reserve and National Guard forces. Nor does it constitute the totality of the Joint Force, which includes the array of supporting and combat-enabling functions that are essential to the conduct of any military operation: logistics; transportation (land, sea, and air); health services; communications and data handling; and force generation (recruiting, training, and education) to name only a few. Rather, these are combat forces that are the most recognizable elements of America's hard power but that also can be viewed as surrogate measures for the size and capability of the larger Joint Force.

The Global Operating Environment

Looking at the world as an environment in which U.S. forces would operate to protect America's interests, the *Index* focused on three regions—Europe, the Middle East, and Asia—because of the intersection of our vital interests and actors able to challenge them.

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. military and political reengagement with the continent along with modest increases in European allies' defense budgets and capability investments. The U.S. military position in Europe is the strongest it has been for several years.

Joint exercises have continued, and a large withdrawal from Germany was cancelled. 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 has maintained its collective defense posture throughout the pandemic. Its renewed emphasis on collective defense has resulted in a focus on logistics. The biggest challenges to the alliance derive from gaps in capability and readiness among 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 2020 (assessed in the *2021 Index*), with no substantial changes in any individual categories or average scores. The *2022 Index* again assesses the European operating environment as "favorable."

The Middle East. The Middle East region is highly unstable, in large measure because of the erosion of authoritarian regimes, and remains a breeding ground for terrorism. Although Iraq has restored its territorial integrity since the defeat of ISIS, the political situation and future relations between Baghdad and the United States will continue to be difficult as long as a government that is sympathetic to Iran is in power. U.S. relations in the region will remain complex, but this has not stopped the U.S. military from operating as needed.

The supremacy of the nation-state is being challenged in many countries by non-state actors that wield influence and power comparable to those of small states. The region's primary challenges—continued meddling by Iran and surging transnational terrorism—are made more difficult by Sunni-Shia sectarian divides, the more aggressive nature of Iran's Islamist revolutionary nationalism, and the proliferation of Sunni Islamist revolutionary groups. COVID-19 exacerbated these

Global Operating Environment: Summary

VERY POOR	UNFAVORABLE	MODERATE	FAVORABLE	EXCELLENT
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Operating Environment: Europe

	VERY POOR	UNFAVORABLE	MODERATE	FAVORABLE	EXCELLENT
Alliances				✓	
Political Stability				✓	
U.S. Military Posture				✓	
Infrastructure				✓	
OVERALL				✓	

Operating Environment: Middle East

	VERY POOR	UNFAVORABLE	MODERATE	FAVORABLE	EXCELLENT
Alliances			✓		
Political Stability		✓			
U.S. Military Posture			✓		
Infrastructure			✓		
OVERALL			✓		

Operating Environment: Asia

	VERY POOR	UNFAVORABLE	MODERATE	FAVORABLE	EXCELLENT
Alliances				✓	
Political Stability			✓		
U.S. Military Posture				✓	
Infrastructure				✓	
OVERALL				✓	

Global Operating Environment

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

economic, political, and regional crises during 2020 and continued to do so throughout 2021, and the result could be further destabilization of the post-pandemic operational environment for U.S. forces.

The U.S. benefits from operationally proven procedures that leverage bases and infrastructure in the region and from the logistical processes that are needed to maintain a large force forward deployed thousands of miles away from the homeland. The personal links between allied armed forces are also present, and joint training exercises improve interoperability and give the U.S. an opportunity to influence some of the region's future leaders.

America's relationships in the region are pragmatic, based 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 varied throughout the year, in general terms, the *2022 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 with 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 need to move 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. However, the U.S. has strong relations with allies in the region, and their willingness to host bases helps to offset the vast distances

that must be covered. The militaries of Japan and the Republic of Korea are larger and more capable than European militaries, and both countries are becoming more interested in developing missile defense capabilities that will be essential in combatting the regional threat posed by North Korea.

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 difficulty that would be involved in projecting U.S. 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 to defend its interests without substantial opposition or high levels of risk.

Threats to U.S. Interests

America faces challenges to its security at home and interests abroad from countries and organizations with:

- Interests that conflict with those of the United States;
- Sometimes hostile intentions toward the U.S.; and
- In some cases, growing military capabilities that are leveraged to impose an adversary's will by coercion or intimidation of neighboring countries, thereby creating regional instabilities.

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. Because this *Index* focuses on

the military component of national power, its assessment of threats is correspondingly an assessment of the military or physical threat posed by each entity addressed in this section.

Our selection of threat actors discounted troublesome states and non-state entities that lacked the physical ability to pose a meaningful threat to vital U.S. security interests. This reduced the population of all potential threats to a handful that possessed the means to threaten U.S. vital interests and exhibited a pattern of provocative behavior that should draw the focus of U.S. defense planning. This *Index* characterizes their behavior and military capabilities on five-point, descending scales.

All of the threat actors selected—Russia, China, Iran, North Korea, and terrorist groups in the Middle East and Afghanistan—remained actual or potential threats to U.S. interests over the past year. All amply demonstrated a commitment to expanding their capabilities to pursue their respective interests that directly challenged those of the U.S.

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 that appear to pose the greatest threat.

Russia remains the primary threat to American interests in Europe as well as the most pressing threat to the United States. Moscow remains committed to massive pro-Russia propaganda campaigns in Ukraine and other Eastern European countries, has continued its active support of separatist forces in Ukraine, regularly performs provocative military exercises and training missions, and in 2021 pressured Ukraine with a large buildup of forces along its border, raising speculation about a possible incursion. It also has sustained its increased investment in the modernization of its military and has gained significant combat experience while continuing to sabotage U.S. and Western policy in Syria and Ukraine. Its economy was affected in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic but rebounded in the later stages and has grown in 2021. The

2022 Index again assesses Russia’s behavior as “aggressive” and its growing capabilities as “formidable” (the highest category on the scale).

China is the most comprehensive threat the U.S. faces. It remains “aggressive” in the scope of its provocative behavior and earns the score of “formidable” for its capability because of its continued investment in the modernization and expansion of its military and the particular attention it has paid to its space, cyber, and artificial intelligence capabilities. It continued to exercise its first domestically produced aircraft carrier, commissioned in December 2019, and construction of its second continues. 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 and aggressive naval and air patrols in the South China Sea. It has continued to probe the South Korean and Japanese air defense identification zones, drawing rebukes from both Seoul and Tokyo, and has been especially aggressive in sailing and flying through the seas and airspace around Taiwan.

Iran represents by far the most significant security challenge to the United States, its allies, and its interests in the greater Middle East. This is underscored by its open hostility to the United States and Israel, sponsorship of terrorist groups like Hezbollah, history of threatening the commons, and increased activity associated with its nuclear program. Iran relies heavily on irregular (including political) warfare against others in the region and fields more ballistic missiles than are fielded by any of its neighbors. Its development of ballistic missiles and its potential nuclear capability also make it a long-term threat to the security of the U.S. homeland. In addition, Iran has continued its aggressive efforts to shape the domestic political landscape in Iraq, adding to the region’s general instability. The *2022 Index* extends the *2021 Index*’s assessment of Iran’s behavior as “aggressive” and its capability as “gathering.”

North Korea’s military poses a security challenge for American allies South Korea

Threats to U.S. Vital Interests: Summary



Behavior of Threats

	HOSTILE	AGGRESSIVE	TESTING	ASSERTIVE	BENIGN
China		✓			
Russia		✓			
Iran		✓			
North Korea			✓		
Non-State Actors		✓			
OVERALL		✓			

Capability of Threats

	FORMIDABLE	GATHERING	CAPABLE	ASPIRATIONAL	MARGINAL
China	✓				
Russia	✓				
Iran		✓			
North Korea		✓			
Non-State Actors			✓		
OVERALL		✓			

Threats to U.S. Vital Interests

	SEVERE	HIGH	ELEVATED	GUARDED	LOW
China		✓			
Russia		✓			
Iran		✓			
North Korea		✓			
Non-State Actors		✓			
OVERALL		✓			

and Japan as well as for U.S. bases in those countries and on Guam. North Korean officials are belligerent toward the United States, often issuing military and diplomatic threats.

Though Pyongyang has refrained from nuclear tests during 2021, it has engaged in a range of provocative behavior that includes missile tests.

North Korea has used its missile and nuclear tests to enhance its prestige and importance domestically, regionally, and globally and to extract various concessions from the United States in negotiations on its nuclear program and various aid packages. Such developments also improve North Korea's military posture. U.S. and allied intelligence agencies assess that Pyongyang has already achieved nuclear warhead miniaturization, the ability to place nuclear weapons on its medium-range missiles, and an ability to reach the continental United States with a missile. North Korea also uses cyber warfare as a means of guerilla warfare against its adversaries and international financial institutions. This *Index* therefore assesses the overall threat from North Korea, considering the range of contingencies, as "testing" for level of provocation of behavior and "gathering" for level of capability.

A broad array of terrorist groups remain the most hostile of any of the threats to America examined in the *Index* even though they fall short of the state-level capabilities possessed by countries such as Iran. The primary terrorist groups of concern to the U.S. homeland and to Americans abroad are the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda and its branches remain active and effective in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and the Sahel of Northern Africa. Though no longer a territory-holding entity, ISIS also remains a serious presence in the Middle East, in South and Southeast Asia, and throughout Africa, threatening stability as it seeks to overthrow governments and impose an extreme form of Islamic law. Its ideology continues to inspire attacks against Americans and U.S. interests. Fortunately, Middle East terrorist groups remain the least capable threats facing the U.S., but they cannot be dismissed.

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. This *Index* focuses on the more apparent sources of risk and those that appear to pose the greatest threat.

Based on the assessments of these threat sources, the *2022 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."

The Status of U.S. Military Power

Finally, we assessed the military power of the United States in three areas: capability, capacity, and readiness. We approached this assessment service by service as the clearest way to link military force size; modernization programs; unit readiness; and (in general terms) the functional combat power (land, sea, and air) represented by each service.

We treated the United States' nuclear capability as a separate entity because of its truly unique characteristics and constituent elements, from the weapons themselves to the supporting infrastructure that is fundamentally different from the infrastructure that supports conventional capabilities. And while not fully assessing cyber as we do the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Space Force (newly scored in this edition), we acknowledge the importance of new tools and organizations that have become essential to deterring hostile behavior and winning wars.

These three areas of assessment (capability, capacity, and readiness) are central to the overarching questions of whether the U.S. has a sufficient quantity of appropriately modern military power and whether military units are able to conduct military operations on demand and effectively.

As reported in all previous editions of the *Index*, the common theme across the services and the U.S. nuclear enterprise is one of force degradation and the effort needed to rebuild after such degradation, which has been caused by many years of underinvestment, poor execution of modernization programs, and the negative effects of budget sequestration (cuts in funding) on readiness and capacity in spite of repeated efforts by Congress to provide relief from low budget ceilings imposed by the Budget Control Act of 2011. Pursuant to guidance provided by then-Secretary of Defense

James Mattis in the 2018 NDS, the services undertook efforts to reorient from irregular warfare to large-scale combat against a peer adversary, but such shifts take time and even more resources. Substantial progress was made in regaining readiness in 2020, but slippage because of continued underinvestment in defense relative to need has been noted in 2021, and the forecast for 2022 is gloomy given the level of funding requested in the President's FY 2022 budget submission.

Even though the military has been heavily engaged in operations for the past two decades, primarily in the Middle East but elsewhere as well, experience in warfare is ephemeral and context-sensitive. Valuable combat experience is lost as servicemembers who individually gained experience leave the force, and it retains direct relevance only for future operations of a similar type: Counterinsurgency and adviser support operations in Iraq, for example, are fundamentally different from major conventional operations against a state like Iran or China. In general, the withdrawals of U.S. military forces from Iraq in 2011 (now a decade in the past) and from Afghanistan this year have amplified the loss of direct combat experience across the Joint Force. Thus, although portions of the current Joint Force are experienced in some types of operations, the force as a whole lacks experience with high-end, major combat operations of the sort toward which it has only recently begun to redirect its training and planning, and it is still aged and shrinking in its capacity for operations even if limited quantities of new equipment like the F-35 Lightning II fighter are being introduced.

We characterized the services and the nuclear enterprise on a five-category scale ranging from "very weak" to "very strong," benchmarked against criteria elaborated in the full report. These characterizations should not be construed as reflecting either the competence of individual servicemembers or the professionalism of the services or Joint Force as a whole; nor do they speak to the U.S. military's strength relative to other militaries around the world in direct comparison. Rather, they are

assessments of the institutional, programmatic, and material health or viability of America's hard military power.

Our analysis concluded with these assessments:

- **Army as "Marginal."** The Army's score remains "marginal" in the *2022 Index*. The Army has sustained its commitment to modernizing its forces for great-power competition, but its modernization programs are still in their development phase, and it will be a few years before they are ready for acquisition and fielding. In other words, the Army is aging faster than it is modernizing. It remains "weak" in capacity with only 62 percent of the force it should have. However, 58 percent (18) of its 31 Regular Army BCTs are at the highest state of readiness, thus earning a score of "very strong" and conveying the sense that the service knows what it needs to do to prepare for the next major conflict. That said, its capability score remains "marginal" given the age of its equipment and the size and maturity of its modernization programs.
- **Navy as "Marginal," Trending Toward "Weak."** The Navy's current battle force fleet of 296 ships and intensified operational tempo combine to reveal a service that is much too small relative to its tasks, resulting in a capacity score of "weak," which is unchanged from the *2021 Index*. It desperately needs a larger fleet of 400 ships, but current and forecasted levels of funding will prevent this from occurring for the foreseeable future. This has the unhappy effect of causing the service to age more rapidly than it can replace older ships, thus making it easier for major competitors to achieve technological parity. It also has made it difficult for the Navy to conduct the training essential to achieving high levels of readiness. Consequently, the Navy is rated "marginal" on a downward slope to "weak" in readiness.

U.S. Military Power: Army

	VERY WEAK	WEAK	MARGINAL	STRONG	VERY STRONG
Capacity		✓			
Capability			✓		
Readiness					✓
OVERALL			✓		

U.S. Military Power: Navy

	VERY WEAK	WEAK	MARGINAL	STRONG	VERY STRONG
Capacity		✓			
Capability			✓		
Readiness			✓		
OVERALL			✓		

U.S. Military Power: Air Force

	VERY WEAK	WEAK	MARGINAL	STRONG	VERY STRONG
Capacity			✓		
Capability			✓		
Readiness		✓			
OVERALL		✓			

U.S. Military Power: Marine Corps

	VERY WEAK	WEAK	MARGINAL	STRONG	VERY STRONG
Capacity			✓		
Capability				✓	
Readiness				✓	
OVERALL				✓	

U.S. Military Power: Space

	VERY WEAK	WEAK	MARGINAL	STRONG	VERY STRONG
Capacity		✓			
Capability		✓			
Readiness		✓			
OVERALL		✓			

U.S. Military Power: Nuclear

	VERY WEAK	WEAK	MARGINAL	STRONG	VERY STRONG
Nuclear Stockpile				✓	
Delivery Platform Reliability				✓	
Warhead Modernization			✓		
Delivery Systems Modernization				✓	
Nuclear Weapons Complex			✓		
National Labs Talent			✓		
Force Readiness				✓	
Allied Assurance				✓	
Nuclear Test Readiness		✓			
OVERALL				✓	

- Air Force as “Weak.”** This is a downgrade from an assessment of “marginal” in the *2021 Index*. Though the Air Force possesses 86 percent of the combat aircraft that this *Index* recommends, public reporting of the mission readiness and physical location of these planes would make it difficult for the Air Force to respond rapidly to a crisis. Additionally, the need to source these aircraft from all locations for a single major fight would likely preclude a response to any other major combat action. Modernization programs are generally healthy, but the advanced age of key aircraft in the Air Force’s inventory is driving the service to retire planes faster than they can be replaced, leading to a capability score of “marginal.” The service also lost ground in readiness compared with the preceding year. A score of “weak” in this area is the result of a shortage of pilots and flying time that implies a lack of effort or focused intent given the general reduction in operational deployments as U.S. actions overseas have ebbed.
- Marine Corps as “Strong.”** The score for the Marine Corps was raised to “strong” from “marginal” for two reasons: (1) because the *2021 Index* changed the threshold for capacity, lowering it from 36 infantry battalions to 30 battalions in acknowledgment of the Corps’ argument that it is a one-war force that also stands ready for a broad range of smaller crisis-response tasks, and (2) because of the Corps’ extraordinary efforts to modernize (which improves capability) and enhance its readiness during the assessed year. However, in the absence of additional funding in FY 2022, the Corps intends to reduce the number of its battalions even further from 24 to 21, and this reduction, if implemented, would harm the Corps’ overall ability to perform the role it has set for itself: enabling the projection of naval power into heavily contested combat environments. The service has moved ahead aggressively with a redesign of its operating forces and the acquisition of new warfighting tools, but it remains hampered by old equipment and problematic funding.

U.S. Military Power

	VERY WEAK	WEAK	MARGINAL	STRONG	VERY STRONG
Army			✓		
Navy			✓		
Air Force		✓			
Marine Corps				✓	
Nuclear				✓	
Space		✓			
OVERALL			✓		

- Space Force as “Weak.”** The Space Force was formally established on December 20, 2019, as a result of an earlier proposal by President Trump and legislation passed by Congress. The *2021 Index* provided an overview of the new service, explaining its mission, capabilities, and challenges, but did not offer an assessment. With an additional year to gain more insight, the *2022 Index* scores the USSF as “weak” in all measured areas. The service has done quite well in transitioning missions from the other services without interruption in support, but it does not have enough assets to track and manage the explosive growth in commercial and competitor-country systems being placed into orbit. The majority of its platforms have exceeded their planned life span, and modernization efforts to replace them are slow and incremental. The force also lacks defensive and offensive counter-space capabilities.
- Nuclear Capability as “Strong” but Trending Toward “Marginal” or even “Weak.”** This is the opposite of the conclusion reached in the *2021 Index*, which reported a trend from “marginal” to “strong.” The grade of “strong”

recognizes the Trump Administration’s commitment to reversing the decline in the U.S. nuclear enterprise and the Biden Administration’s decision to sustain the commitment to modernization of the entire nuclear enterprise—warheads, platforms, command and control, personnel, and infrastructure—and allocate needed resources accordingly. Without this commitment, this overall score will degrade rapidly to “weak.” Progress in modernization efforts, combined with assurances from senior leaders that the forces remain reliable, warrants a more optimistic assessment than we have been able to provide in previous editions. That being said, this score of “strong” with a conditional trend toward “marginal” or “weak” reflects a greater risk of a degradation in nuclear deterrence than has been seen in the recent past. Current forces are assessed as reliable today, but nearly all components of the nuclear enterprise are at a tipping point with respect to replacement or modernization and have no margin left for delays in schedule. Failure of on-time appropriations and lack of Administration support for nuclear modernization could lead to a rapid decline in this portfolio to “weak” in future editions.

In the aggregate, the United States’ military posture continues to be rated “marginal” and features both positive and negative trends: progress in bringing some new equipment into the force, filling gaps in manpower, and rebuilding stocks of munitions and repair parts alongside worrisome trends in force readiness, declining strength in key areas like trained pilots, and continued uncertainty across the defense budget that is now having a negative effect both on major acquisition programs and on installation-level repair capabilities. **The 2022 Index concludes that the current U.S. military force is likely capable of meeting the demands of a single major regional conflict** while also attending to various presence and engagement activities but that it would be very hard-pressed to do more and certainly would be ill-equipped to handle two nearly simultaneous MRCs—a situation that is made more difficult by the generally weak condition of key military allies. The presidential decision to withdraw forces from Afghanistan might provide some breathing room for force recovery but only if other operational demands do not retask the military services.

In general, the military services continue to prioritize readiness and have seen some improvement over the past few years, but modernization programs, especially in shipbuilding, continue to suffer as resources are committed to preparing for the future and recovering from 20 years of operations. In the case of the Air Force, some of its limited acquisition funds are being spent on aircraft of questionable utility in high-threat scenarios while R&D receives a larger share of funding than efforts meant to replace quite aged aircraft are receiving. As observed in the *2021 Index*, the services have also normalized reductions in the size and number of military units, and the forces remain well below the level needed to meet the two-MRC benchmark. The Marine Corps’ plan to reduce its size even further so that it can redirect savings in manpower toward the capability modernization that it views as essential for success in future combat provides a stark example of the consequences of the government’s underinvestment in defense.

Congress and the Administration took positive steps to stabilize funding in the latter years of the Budget Control Act of 2011 (BCA). This mitigated the worst effects of BCA-restricted funding, but sustained investment in rebuilding the force to ensure that America’s armed services are properly sized, equipped, trained, and ready to meet the missions they are called upon to fulfill will be critical.

As currently postured, the U.S. military continues to be only marginally able to meet the demands of defending America’s vital national interests.

Endnotes

1. Though issued during President Donald J. Trump's Administration, the 2018 NDS has not yet been superseded by a similar document, focused on the military, from the Administration of President Joseph R. Biden. However, the Biden Administration has released interim guidance in which it sets out the broad outlines and priorities of its national security agenda. In particular, President Biden's *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* reiterates the same core national security interests and the same set of major competitor countries posing challenges to U.S. interests that the preceding Administration identified and places them in a global context wherein the U.S. military must be ready to handle several problems in geographically separated locations. See President Joseph R. Biden, Jr., *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, The White House, March 2021, pp. 8–9, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf> (accessed August 19, 2021).
2. James Mattis, Secretary of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*, p. 2. <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf> (accessed August 19, 2021).