

## Conclusion: U.S. Military Power

The Active Component of the U.S. military is two-thirds the size it should be, operates equipment that is older than it should be, and is burdened by readiness levels that are more problematic than they should be. To the extent that progress has been made, it has been at the expense of both capacity and modernization. Accordingly, this *Index* assesses:

- **The Army as “Marginal.”** Based on the historical use of its ground forces in combat, the Army has less than two-thirds of the forces in its Active Component that it would need to handle more than one major regional conflict (MRC). This shortfall in capacity might be offset if the modernity or technological capability of its forces were very high, but this is not the case. The Army has fully committed to modernizing its forces for great-power competition, but its 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, and an 8 percent decrease in fiscal year (FY) 2024 procurement and research and development (R&D) funding only adds to the problem. The Army remains “weak” in capacity with 62 percent of the force it should have but has significantly increased the force’s readiness, exceeding its own internal requirement that 66 percent of its Brigade Combat Teams (BCTs) must be at the highest readiness levels, thereby scoring the highest level of “very strong.” However, with operational training being pushed down to the company level below battalion and brigade, it is unclear how ready the Army’s brigades actually are or how effective they would be in combat.

The Army has a better sense of what it needs for war against a peer, but funding uncertainties could threaten the ability of the service to realize its goals.

- **The Navy as “Weak.”** The technology gap between the Navy and its peer competitors is narrowing in favor of competitors, and the Navy’s ships are aging faster than they are being replaced. The fleet is too small relative to workload, and supporting shipyards are overwhelmed by the repair work that is needed to make more ships available. This inadequate maintenance infrastructure prevents ships in repair from returning to the fleet in a timely manner, which in turn causes readiness problems as steaming days needed to train crews to levels of proficiency are lost. The Navy is projected to have a fleet of 280 ships by 2037, which is smaller than the current force of 298 and well below the 400 needed to meet operational demands. Current and projected funding shortfalls will make it harder to deal effectively with any of these serious deficiencies. This leaves the Navy unable to arrest and reverse the decline of its fleet as adversary forces grow in number and capability.
- **The Air Force as “Very Weak.”** The Air Force has deployed an average of 28 fighter squadrons to major theaters of war since the end of World War II. This equates to 500 Active Component fighter aircraft to execute one MRC. Adding a planning factor of 20 percent for spares and attrition brings the number to 600 aircraft. An Air Force able to manage more than a single major conflict would necessarily require 1,200 active-duty, combat-coded fighter aircraft. Currently, the service has 897,

## U.S. Military Power: Army

	VERY WEAK	WEAK	MARGINAL	STRONG	VERY STRONG
Capacity		✓			
Capability			✓		
Readiness					✓
<b>OVERALL</b>			✓		

## U.S. Military Power: Navy

	VERY WEAK	WEAK	MARGINAL	STRONG	VERY STRONG
Capacity	✓				
Capability			✓		
Readiness		✓			
<b>OVERALL</b>		✓			

## U.S. Military Power: Air Force

	VERY WEAK	WEAK	MARGINAL	STRONG	VERY STRONG
Capacity			✓		
Capability			✓		
Readiness	✓				
<b>OVERALL</b>	✓				

## U.S. Military Power: Marine Corps

	VERY WEAK	WEAK	MARGINAL	STRONG	VERY STRONG
Capacity		✓			
Capability				✓	
Readiness				✓	
<b>OVERALL</b>				✓	

## U.S. Military Power: Space

	VERY WEAK	WEAK	MARGINAL	STRONG	VERY STRONG
Capacity			✓		
Capability			✓		
Readiness			✓		
<b>OVERALL</b>			✓		

## 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			✓		
Allied Assurance				✓	
<b>OVERALL</b>			✓		

three-quarters of what is needed as assessed by this *Index*. The service’s inventory of bombers is worse at 64 percent.

Accounting for better inventories in aerial refuelers and strategic lift aircraft, the USAF currently is at 83 percent of the capacity required to meet a two-MRC benchmark. However, the geographic disposition of these aircraft limits the service’s ability to deploy them rapidly to a crisis region, and its ability to replace combat losses is highly questionable because of low mission capability rates (a function of maintenance and trained crews). As a result, the USAF could likely handle only a single major conflict, and that only by resorting to global sourcing, leaving it unable to do much else.

New F-35 and KC-46 aircraft continue to roll off their respective production lines but in small numbers that are more than offset by aircraft retirements. Incredibly low sortie rates and flying hours across every pilot community will prevent any Air Force combat-coded fighter squadron from being able to execute all or even most of its wartime mission. At best, half of the cadre of pilots within the most capable units will be able to execute just “some” of the unit’s wartime missions. There is not a fighter squadron in the Air Force that holds the readiness levels, competence, and confidence levels required to square off against a peer competitor, and readiness continues to spiral downward.

As with a three-legged stool, success or failure is determined by the weakest leg. The shortage of pilots and flying time for those pilots degrades the ability of the Air Force to generate the quality of combat air power that would be needed to meet wartime requirements even if aircraft production was higher and a larger percentage of the Air Force was comprised of newer aircraft.

- **The Marine Corps as “Strong.”** The score for the Marine Corps was raised from “marginal” to “strong” in the *2022 Index* and has remained “strong” for two reasons: because the Corps’ capacity is measured against a one-war requirement rather than the two-war requirement to which the other services are held and because the Corps has made extraordinary, sustained efforts to modernize, which improves capability, and enhance its readiness during the assessed year.

Of the five services, the Marine Corps is the only one that has a compelling story for change, has a credible and practical plan for change, and is effectively implementing its plan to change. However, in the absence of additional funding in FY 2024, if the Corps retains its intention to reduce the number of its battalions from 22 to 21, this reduction will limit the extent to which it can conduct distributed operations as it envisions and to replace combat losses (thus limiting its ability to sustain operations). The Corps is already at 73 percent of the battalions and related air and logistical capabilities it should have. It needs to grow.

Though the service remains hampered by old equipment in some areas, it has nearly completed modernization of its entire aviation component, is making good progress in fielding a new amphibious combat vehicle, is fast-tracking the acquisition of new anti-ship and anti-air weapons, and is aggressively leveraging developments in unmanned systems and advanced computing and communication technologies. Full realization of its redesign plan will require the acquisition of a new class of amphibious ships, for which the Corps needs support from the Navy. The Corps is still too small and has no stated desire to grow, but it possesses fairly modern equipment, especially its air arm, and is wholly committed to adapting as rapidly as possible to meet the challenges of an evolving threat environment.

- **The Space Force as “Marginal.” The Space Force has risen from “weak” in the 2023 Index to “marginal.”** The service doubled its counterspace weapons systems with the Ascent and Tetra-1 satellites, adding the first two known offensive systems to its portfolio. Other counterspace systems are probably being developed or, like cyber, are already in play without public announcement. Nevertheless, the USSF’s current visible capacity is not sufficient to support, fight, or weather a war with a peer competitor.

The numbers and types of Backbone and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets are sufficient to support global positioning, navigation, and timing (PNT) requirements and the majority of strategic-level communications, imagery, and collection requirements of the National Command Authorities and the Department of Defense. But while that capacity is growing, the Space Force is not capable of meeting current—much less future—on-demand, operational, and tactical-level warfighter requirements. The service’s asset modernization plan has significantly accelerated the delivery of systems to the force over the past year, elevating USSF capabilities, but a majority of Backbone and ISR assets have exceeded their designed life spans, and the Department of the Air Force has been willing to

delay and/or defer the acquisition of replacement systems. The capability of these satellites is marginal, but the service has narrowed gaps in space situational awareness and defensive and offensive capabilities.

The mission sets, space assets, and personnel that transitioned to the Space Force and those that have been assigned to support the USSF from the other services have not missed an operational beat since the Space Force stood up in 2019. However, there is little evidence that the USSF has improved its readiness to provide nearly real-time support to operational and tactical levels of force operations or that it is ready to execute defensive and offensive counterspace operations to the degree that Congress envisioned when it authorized creation of the Space Force.

- **America’s Nuclear Capability as “Marginal.”** The status of U.S. nuclear weapons must be considered in the context of a threat environment that is significantly more dangerous than it was in previous years. Until recently, U.S. nuclear forces needed to address one nuclear peer rather than two or more. Given a U.S. failure to adapt rapidly enough to these developments and the Biden Administration’s decision to cancel or delay various programs that affect the nuclear portfolio, overall U.S. nuclear weapons capability is assessed as “marginal,” down from “strong” in the 2023 Index. U.S. nuclear forces face many risks that without the continued bipartisan commitment to a strong deterrent could warrant an eventual decline to an overall score of “weak” or “very weak.”

The reliability of current U.S. delivery systems and warheads is at risk as they continue to age and the threat continues to advance, and the fragility of “just in time” replacement programs only exacerbates this risk. In fact, 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—delays that appear to be occurring despite the best efforts of the enterprise. Since every other military operation—and therefore overall national defense—relies

on a strong nuclear deterrent, the United States cannot afford to fall short in fulfilling this imperative mission. Future assessments will need to consider plans to adjust America's nuclear forces to account for the doubling of peer nuclear threats. It is clear that the change in threat warrants a reexamination of U.S. force posture and the adequacy of our current modernization plans. Failure to keep modernization programs on track while planning for a three-party (or more) nuclear peer dynamic could lead to a further decline in the strength of U.S. nuclear deterrence.

**In the aggregate, America's overall military posture must be rated "weak."** The Air Force is rated "very weak," the Navy and Space Force as "weak," and the U.S. Army and the nuclear forces as "marginal." The Marine Corps is "strong," but the Corps is a one-war force, and its overall strength is therefore not sufficient to compensate for the shortfalls of its larger fellow services. Moreover, if the United States should need to employ nuclear weapons, the escalation into nuclear conflict would seem to imply that handling such a crisis would challenge even a fully ready Joint Force at its current size and equipped with modern weapons. Additionally, the war in Ukraine, which threatens the economic and political stability not just of Europe, but of other regions as well, shows that some actors (in this case Russia) will not necessarily be deterred from conventional action even though the U.S. maintains a strong nuclear capability. Thus, strong conventional forces of necessary size are essential to America's ability to respond to emergent crises in areas of special interest.

The *2024 Index* concludes that the current U.S. military force is at significant risk of being unable to meet the demands of a single major regional conflict while also attending to various presence and engagement activities. The force would probably not be able to do more and is certainly ill-equipped to handle two nearly simultaneous MRCs—a situation that is made more difficult by the generally weak condition of key military allies.

In general, the military services continue to prioritize readiness and have made some progress over the past few years, but modernization programs, especially in shipbuilding and production of fifth-generation combat aircraft, continue to suffer

as resources are committed to preparing for the future, recovering from 20 years of operations, and offsetting the effects of inflation. With respect to 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, 2022, and 2023 editions of the *Index*, the services have normalized reductions in the size and number of military units, the forces remain well below the level needed to meet the two-MRC benchmark, and the substantial difficulties involved in trying to recruit young Americans to join the military services are frustrating even modest proposals to maintain service end strength.

Congress and the Administration took positive steps to stabilize funding in the latter years of the Budget Control Act of 2011 (BCA), thereby mitigating 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. This is amplified by the extent to which the United States has drawn from its inventories of munitions and equipment to support Ukraine's defense and the extent to which the defense industry has been limited in its ability to replenish depleted stocks, much less support the expansion and deepening of U.S. capabilities in preparation for any other conflict. The Administration's proposed defense budget for FY 2024 falls far short of what the services need to regain readiness and replace aged equipment, and proposals advanced in the House and Senate<sup>1</sup> account for barely half of the current rate of inflation, which averaged 8 percent in calendar year 2022 and 4.6 percent during the first six months of 2023.<sup>2</sup>

As currently postured, the U.S. military is at significant risk of not being able to defend America's vital national interests with assurance. It is rated as "weak" relative to the force needed to defend national interests on a global stage against actual challenges in the world *as it is* rather than as we wish it were. This is the inevitable result of years of sustained use, underfunding, poorly defined priorities, wildly shifting security policies, exceedingly poor discipline in program execution, and a profound lack of seriousness across the national

security establishment even as threats to U.S. interests have surged.

In 2023, this has been compounded by the cost of U.S. support for Ukraine's defense against Russia's assault, which is further exacerbated by the limited ability of allies in Europe to shoulder a greater share of the support burden. The war has laid bare the limited inventories of equipment, munitions, and supplies of all supporting countries as well as the limitations of the industrial base that will be required to replenish them.

## Endnotes

1. At \$842 billion, the defense budget for FY 2024 proposed by the White House is 3.2 percent higher than the \$816 billion proposed for FY 2023. The \$832 billion proposed by the Senate represents an increase of 2 percent (or 3.5 percent depending on one's reference point for what constitutes defense spending). The proposal voted out of the House Appropriations Committee generally aligns with the Senate's, but as this book was being prepared, it had not been subject to a vote of the full House. All of these numbers fall well below the current rate of inflation. See Chart, "DoD Topline Growth FY22–FY23–FY24 Budgets," in U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller/Chief Financial Officer), *United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2024 Budget Request*, PowerPoint Presentation, March 2023, p. 3, [https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2024/FY2024\\_Budget\\_Request.pdf](https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2024/FY2024_Budget_Request.pdf) (accessed August 22, 2023); news release, "Bill Summary: Defense Fiscal Year 2024 Appropriations Bill," Committee on Appropriations, U.S. Senate, July 27, 2023, <https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/news/majority/bill-summary-defense-fiscal-year-2024-appropriations-bill> (accessed August 22, 2023); and press release, "Committee Approves FY24 Defense Bill," Committee on Appropriations, U.S. House of Representatives, June 22, 2023, <https://appropriations.house.gov/news/press-releases/committee-approves-fy24-defense-bill> (accessed August 22, 2023).
2. CoinNews Media Group LLC, U.S. Inflation Calculator, "Current US Inflation Rates: 2000–2023," <https://www.usinflationcalculator.com/inflation/current-inflation-rates/> (accessed August 22, 2023). Based on "U.S. Labor Department data published on Aug. 10, 2023."