Global Operating Environment

Assessing the Global Operating Environment

Military operations do not exist in a vacuum. They require capable combat and sustainment forces, a dedicated source of human capital, but also an environment in which they can operate. That physical environment includes not only free and open air and maritime lanes, but landmasses under the sovereign control of national actors. Those actors can provide overflight rights, basing rights, access through sea lanes or ground lines of communication, or important sustainment and logistics hubs. Allies enable the employment of force by providing many of the above requirements—just as adversaries can contest the ability of the United States and its allies to employ force.

The global operating environment in many ways underpins the ability of the United States to deter and, if necessary, defeat adversary aggression. Long-term basing rights with allies and interoperability of hardware, to include platforms and munitions, enable both the United States and its allies to achieve decisive effect on the battlefield. The long-term political stability of the allies, coupled with overlapping shared national interests, ensures that these relationships endure across administrations and host nation political changes. Many of these relationships have endured for decades and in many cases more than half a century.

At the same time, the global operating environment is under increased pressure as the free and open world order that has benefited the United States for more than eight decades is under increased strain. But not all is doom and gloom. Narco-terrorists in Latin America seek to export poison to the American homeland and destabilize and weaken the United States through human migration—but the United States finally is taking decisive action to counteract such threats. China's aggression and coercion against its neighbors in Taiwan, the Philippines, Japan, and elsewhere have caused renewed interest among America's Pacific allies and partners in expanding their militaries. Russia's ill-fated invasion of Ukraine has caused immense damage to the country and people of Ukraine even as it has finally spurred action on the part of our allies in Europe to rearm and take seriously the threat posed by Moscow. Iran's attempts to orchestrate the destruction of Israel have had dire consequences for the Mullahs in Tehran. And North Korea's continued nuclear buildup and coercive threats against its neighbors and the United States have caused the United States, Japan, and South Korea to work in closer partnership.

Within the first year of the second Trump Administration, we are already seeing things change. The Administration has renewed efforts in the Western Hemisphere to mitigate illegal immigration as well as the flow of illicit narcotics. It also has focused on addressing the destabilizing efforts of the government in Venezuela through targeted anti-drug smuggling activities as well as by putting pressure on Venezuela's government, most notably by removing President Nicolás Maduro. It also has invested greater resources in targeting drug cartels in the region, particularly in Mexico, and has focused on reducing the destabilizing effects of the People's Republic of China's activities in the region. These efforts are consistent with the National Defense Strategy's emphasis on activities in the Western Hemisphere.

Additionally, the Trump Administration's actions aimed at destroying the Iranian regime's nuclear weapons infrastructure and capabilities have eliminated a persistent threat to the Middle East and, along with the military campaign against Hamas and Hezbollah following the attacks in Israel on October 7, 2023, have significantly improved security conditions in the region. Additional diplomatic efforts to recognize Israel's existence in the

region pursuant to the Abraham Accords also have reduced military tensions.

The global expansion of the People's Republic of China and its destabilizing and malign influence is evident in the global operating environment within which the U.S. operates. Beijing's aggressive pursuit of military basing, dual-use facilities, predatory economic practices, and key control of or influence on infrastructure such as the Panama Canal has created complications for U.S. forces and those of its allies and partners. There is a growing recognition of these trends, and many countries are beginning to develop countermeasures and commensurate military capabilities to deter aggressive PRC military actions.

Operating conditions evolve from one year to the next and from one security setting to the next in ways that affect the ease or difficulty of conducting U.S. military operations. The following section informs our ability to assess whether or not the U.S. military can successfully deter or, if necessary, defeat adversary aggression in the prioritized theaters of operation: the Western Hemisphere, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa.

Latin America and the Caribbean

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Regional Overview

With President Donald Trump's return to the White House in 2025, few issues have risen to prominence on Washington's agenda as rapidly and dramatically as U.S. policy toward Latin America and the Caribbean. This shift marks a major break with Washington's long-standing lack of attention to the nations with the most geographic proximity to the United States. President Trump has laid out and pursued a vision of U.S. national security that appropriately raises the prominence of the Western Hemisphere's stability. Decades of disengagement have had dramatic consequences for both the U.S. and the hemisphere, facilitating the proliferation of narco-terrorism and narco-dictatorships, the uncontested surging presence of actors like China and Russia, and destabilizing waves of mass migration, but during 2025 and early 2026, the Trump Administration has demonstrated the game-changing effects of concerted U.S. effort andd attention to these challenges.

Latin America and the Caribbean have a contradictory identity: They are a region of long-standing peace and at the same time of deep and entrenched violence. For more than 30 years, Latin America has been free of the outbreak of interstate war, but its homicide rate eclipses those of other regions of the world with some countries seeing more violence than nations at war see.

The driving factor behind this regional reality is the prevalence of armed non-state actors, including transnational criminal organizations and foreign terrorist organizations. Countries across Latin America are plagued by many of the world's deadliest and most powerful transnational criminal organizations. Fueled by revenue from drug trafficking, human trafficking, and nearly every other imaginable illicit activity, these armed criminal organizations are equipped with military-grade equipment and resources that surpass those of many of the world's armed forces. Just one of Brazil's multiple drug trafficking gangs, for example, is reported to have more members than Portugal has active-duty military personnel.[1]

Geographic and economic realities, among others, leave the United States uniquely exposed to security threats from Latin America and the Caribbean. The illicit and violent actions of armed groups in the Americas dramatically affect both the well-being of the American people and the overall security, strength, and prosperity of the United States. Mexico's powerful drug cartels kill tens of thousands of Americans each year through their deadly fentanyl trade. Gangs and human trafficking organizations cause and accelerate mass illegal migration that destabilizes U.S. cities. Regional authoritarian regimes such as those of Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela threaten U.S. security directly, amplifying these criminal threats through direct support while empowering U.S. adversaries around the world.

Additionally, despite its long absence, the specter of interstate military conflict now looms over Latin America. For example, increasingly bellicose rhetoric and actions from Venezuela's narco-dictatorship against neighboring Guyana showcase the ongoing and rising threat of war in the Western Hemisphere. Less overtly, interstate conflict in the Americas rapidly grows more realistic with the growing encroachment and influence of America's extra-hemispheric adversaries. The presence of such countries as China, Russia, and Iran has surged in the Western Hemisphere and includes clear strategic and military components, including the establishment of dual-use infrastructure and

intelligence facilities, all of which threaten to draw Latin American nations, however unwittingly, into larger potential armed conflicts.

Recognizing the severity and implications of these security threats in Latin America, the United States has long engaged with regional governments to support their security efforts. However, these partnerships and regional efforts are more and more being eclipsed by the deadly threat of transnational organized crime, anti-American authoritarian regimes, and hostile extra-hemispheric powers.

Quality of Armed Forces in Latin America

There is significant variation in the strength and capacity of Latin America's militaries: Some countries like Costa Rica and Panama simply lack traditional militaries. Historical, economic, and political realities drive the often stark contrasts in regional military capacities and roles. Daunting security threats across the Americas are pressing more governments to reevaluate the role of their militaries with an eye to increasing their power and responsibilities, but regional governments and military leaders generally face an uphill battle when it comes to restoring the effectiveness of their militaries.

The role of military forces varies significantly across the region when it comes to domestic security threats like organized crime. The legal frameworks governing Latin American militaries have developed and diverged over time in response to differing domestic circumstances, including the severity of security threats and in some cases the past presence of a military dictatorship. For example, countries like Chile, Uruguay, and Argentina have placed significant legal restrictions on the role of their militaries domestically in favor of civilian security forces; militaries in Colombia, Peru, and Mexico, on the other hand, play a substantial, even leading role in combatting their countries' powerful organized criminal threats.

However, there is a recent and clear trend among Latin American governments of expanding the domestic roles of their militaries. In countries like Mexico, Argentina, and Ecuador, for example, this shift toward the military has generally been prompted by the increasingly deadly organized criminal threats across the region, including the expansion of powerful drug trafficking gangs into previously stable parts of Latin America, which has overwhelmed civilian security forces.

Generally, Latin America's underlying economic realities, including generally stagnant growth and limited fiscal resources, undermine funding and the quality of regional armed forces. Even when accounting for the divided role between regional militaries and security forces, overall funding levels in Latin America are lower than they are in the rest of the world.

Support and funding for regional militaries have also become political and ideological issues in parts of Latin America, in some cases tying military capacity directly to electoral shifts. Under the modern Peronist movement, the political left in Argentina significantly and purposefully restricted funding for the military as well as the scope of its responsibilities in the realm of security.[2] Colombia, under far-left President Gustavo Petro, has similarly restricted the military even as armed criminal organizations gain in strength. During the late 2000s, Ecuador's far-left former President Rafael Correa also targeted and punished the military, in part because of its working partnerships with the United States against narco-trafficking threats.

While political support for militaries at times falls along consistent ideological lines, in some countries, this is not the case. For example, the rise of the leftist Morena party in Mexico has brought about unprecedented expansion of power and funding for the Mexican military. Notably, regional authoritarian regimes in Cuba and Venezuela have coopted their militaries instead of merely marginalizing them. These militaries face significant resource limitations because of their regimes' failed economic models, but they are nonetheless prioritized and empowered as core pillars of authoritarian support.

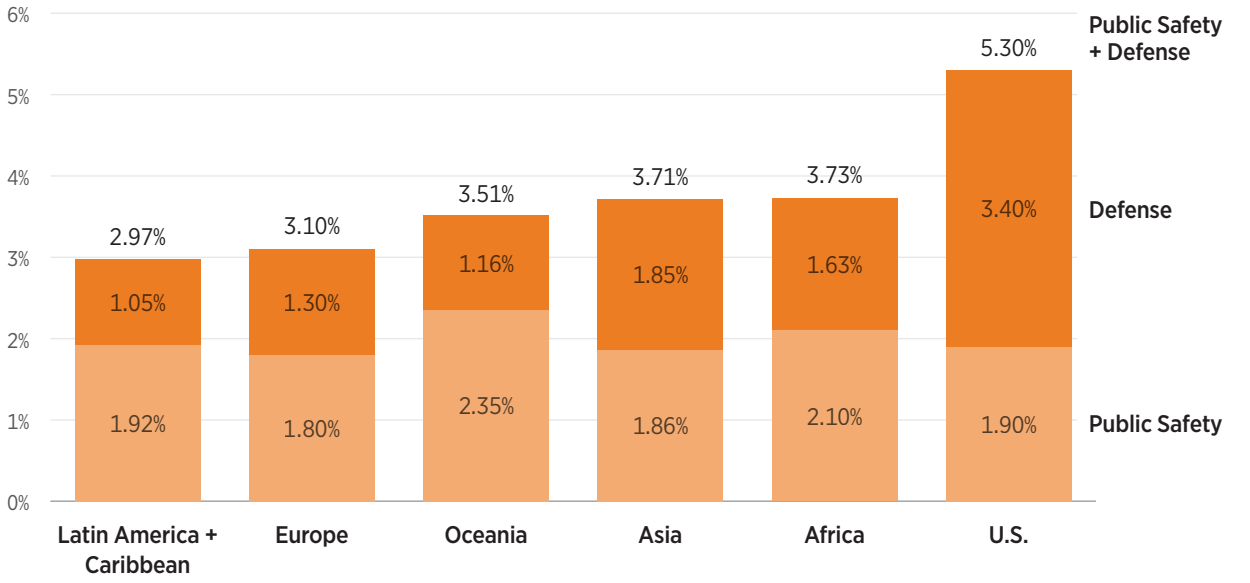
Corruption is another major impediment to the quality and effectiveness of Latin America's armed forces. From the top leadership of some regional militaries to local police officers and deployed soldiers, the corrupting influence of drug traffickers and criminal organizations continues to dull and undermine regional security forces. For authoritarian regimes in particular, criminality and corruption are features of their militaries. This is most clearly exemplified in the Venezuelan military's direct and well-substantiated role in narco-trafficking activity.

A general sense that there is an absence of credible threats of interstate war has left many regional militaries inadequately resourced, particularly with

CHART 4

Spending on Defense and Public Safety

AS A PERCENTAGE OF GDP



SOURCE: Santiago M. Perez-Vincent et al., *The Costs of Crime and Violence: Expansion and Update of Estimates for Latin America and the Caribbean*, Inter-American Development Bank, 2024, https://publications.iadb.org/es/publications/english/viewer/The-Costs-of-Crime-and--and-Violence-Expansion-and-Update-of-Estimates-for-Latin-America-and-the-Caribbean.pdf (accessed January 21, 2026).

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respect to their capacity to defend against hostile state threats. A worrying dynamic is that regional anti-American dictatorships are the militaries that have put more significant resources into bolstering their capacities to wage war against a foreign military. Weak military control by regional democracies creates a growing asymmetry not only relative to regional authoritarian regimes, but also against growing threats to sovereign control against extra-hemispheric powers. It is unclear, for example, whether the Peruvian military would be capable of retaking control of its dual-use mega-infrastructure projects that are controlled by China.

Finally, historical U.S. support and cooperation have proven to be a determinative factor in the quality of regional militaries. This is exemplified by the superior capacity of the armed forces of Colombia, among other top U.S. security partners. However, the steady reduction of and increasing restrictions on U.S. military training of and support for Latin American militaries have degraded regional military capacities and limited recent efforts by some nations to rebuild their military capacities in the face of very serious security threats.

U.S. Military Presence in Latin America

The 1990s marked a substantial, broad-based reduction of the U.S. military presence in Latin America and the Caribbean and a steady shift away from core security—particularly military—cooperation. Pushed forward by the rise of anti-American leaders in the region and disengagement by Washington, this reduced U.S. security presence contributed to the resurgence of narco-trafficking threats and increased strategic positioning of China and other hostile powers within the Western Hemisphere.

Actions by the Trump Administration have shown an intent to reverse this general shift, and the Administration appears poised to restore a more substantial focus on core security cooperation

and confronting narco-threats in the Americas. President Trump has taken several steps to restore the central role of U.S. military and security operations in America's regional policy. This has included a renewed central role for the U.S. military in border security and planning as well as preparation for potential direct U.S. military action against Mexican cartels.[3] Nonetheless, reversing the long-standing decline both in funding and in operational focus on hemispheric security threats presents a daunting task.

In 2025, the Trump Administration shifted substantial U.S. military assets and personnel into the Western Hemisphere. These assets included numerous military aircraft such as F-22 and F-35 jets and a U.S. carrier strike group that was redeployed to the Caribbean. Through Operation Southern Spear, these assets have targeted narco-terrorist threats at sea and confronted the criminal activity of the former Maduro regime, among other threats, particularly in the Caribbean and northern Pacific.[4]

In this process of refocusing U.S. military assets against threats within the Western Hemisphere and working with regional partners, the Trump Administration will have to contend with the challenging consequences of a decades-long decline of U.S. military engagement in the Western Hemisphere. This engagement is particularly low compared to our engagement in other parts of the world. The U.S. military has more active-duty forces stationed in Greece, for example, than it has on the entire continent of South America.[5] Until recently, the United States has had only two military bases across Latin America and the Caribbean: the U.S. Naval Base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and the Soto Cano Air Base in Honduras. A third, the recently reactivated Roosevelt Roads Naval Station in Puerto Rico, has been crucial in recently surging operations in the Caribbean. There are no U.S. military bases on the continent of South America. In the past, the U.S. military has had a much more robust presence across the Americas, but it ceded this presence because of regional pushback and Washington's growing focus on the Middle East in the 2000s.

The United States generally followed Latin America's post–Cold War trend of reducing the role of the military in the region in favor of civilian law enforcement. At times, regional political decisions forced the exit of the United States military. The wave of anti-American far-left leadership during the 2000s made the U.S. military a prime populist target with leaders such as Venezuela's Hugo Chávez and Ecuador's Rafael Correa ending cooperation agreements with the U.S. military. In 2004, for instance, Chávez evicted U.S. military personnel from liaison offices on Venezuelan bases; in 2005, he ended a 35-year military exchange program with the United States. In 2009, Correa withdrew the lease for the U.S. military's Manta Air Base, which had focused on counternarcotics operations; the U.S. withdrew from the base in September.[6]

Anti-American leaders succeeded in expelling the U.S. military from multiple Latin American nations, and in many cases, these actions have outlasted the regional leaders that implemented them: The U.S. military presence and security cooperation have not yet returned to a significant degree. More broadly, the ousting of the U.S. military reinforced a parallel shift in U.S. foreign policy emphasizing civilian law enforcement cooperation and economic development aid in Latin America.

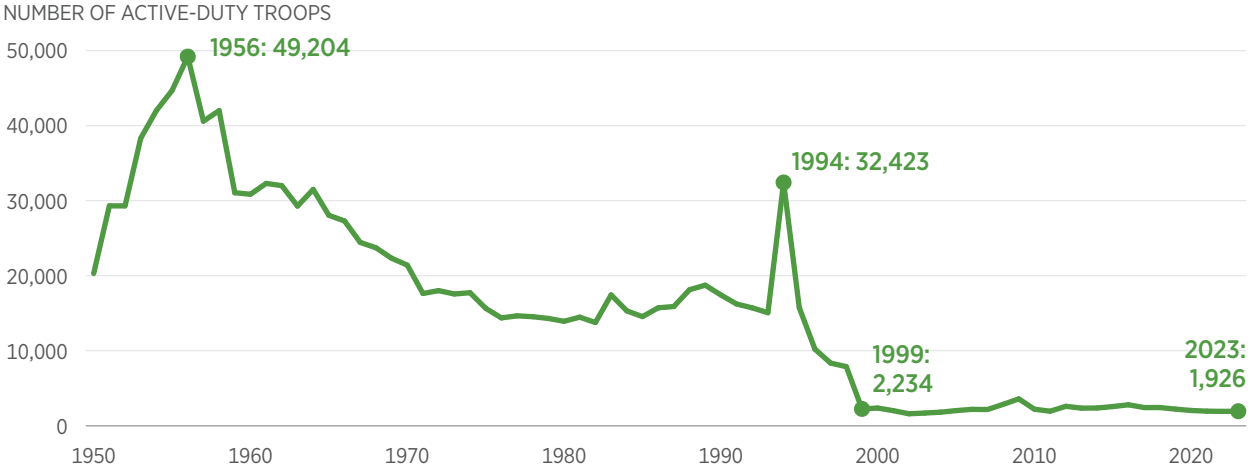
The shuttering of U.S. military bases in Panama in 1999, Puerto Rico in 2004, and Ecuador in 2009, among others, marked the substantial decline of the U.S. military presence in our own hemisphere. This has left Guantanamo Bay and Soto Cano as America's only main operating bases in the region, and even the future of these two bases has been brought into question by recent political developments. As President Trump took office in January 2025, Honduran President Xiomara Castro issued a thinly veiled threat to oust the U.S. military from Soto Cano Air Base because of U.S. deportation efforts.[7]

Through diplomatic agreements and engagement, the U.S. military has secured non-permanent access to roughly 75 cooperative service locations, strategic facilities, and other sites in regional partner nations. Facilities conditionally available to the U.S. military include airfields, radar sites, military training centers, military offices, and cooperative security locations in Latin America and the Caribbean.[8] Geographically, these bases are heavily concentrated in Central America, Colombia, and Peru; U.S. military access is far more limited in Mexico and much of South America. These facilities typically support training activities, counternarcotics, disaster response, and intelligence-related activities.[9]

The U.S. and regional militaries also conduct a series of recurring military exercises to improve

CHART 5

U.S. Troop Deployments in Latin America



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Defense, Defense Manpower Data Center, "DoD Personnel, Workforce Reports & Publications: Military and Civilian Personnel by Service/Agency by State/Country (Updated Quarterly)," https://dwp.dmdc.osd.mil/dwp/app/dod-data-reports/workforce-reports (accessed January 22, 2026).

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cooperation. Outside of Mexico, U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) has a central role in the U.S. military's regional presence across 31 countries. SOUTHCOM deploys its three main joint task forces to occupy accessible bases and coordinate with militaries in the region. At the same time, many of these exercises are geared toward humanitarian and disaster relief operations.

As indicated above, the principal U.S. military bases in Latin America and the Caribbean are:

- **Soto Cano Air Base, Honduras.** Soto Cano is the U.S. military's only main operating base in Central and South America. Located some 60 miles from the Honduran capital, Tegucigalpa, Soto Cano houses SOUTHCOM's Joint Task Force–Bravo, whose operations are focused on transnational organized crime, humanitarian assistance, and partner capacity-building.[10] The 612th Air Base Squadron maintains Soto Cano's airfield, which includes a 24-hour C-5 Galaxy–capable runway and serves as a critical strategic airlift hub for the U.S. military.[11] Soto Cano also hosts the Honduran Air Force Academy.

- **Guantanamo Bay Naval Station, Cuba.** Naval Station Guantanamo Bay in southeastern Cuba is the United States' oldest overseas military installation, dating back to 1903, and operates pursuant to a permanent lease signed with the Republic of Cuba. The Naval Station serves as a crucial forward operating base for the U.S. military as well as an operational and logistical hub for maritime security, humanitarian assistance, and joint regional operations. The base includes a facility that has been used to detain U.S. military prisoners, including some captured during the global war on terrorism. The Trump Administration is also using and expanding these facilities to manage the criminal migration threat in the United States, particularly by temporarily holding members of criminal and terrorist groups like Tren de Aragua.

- **Roosevelt Roads Naval Station, Puerto Rico.** Roosevelt Roads encapsulates the Trump Administration's refocus on the Western Hemisphere after decades of U.S. disengagement. Located on Puerto Rico's eastern coast, Roosevelt Roads operated for decades

as one of the largest U.S. naval facilities in the Caribbean and served as a major support hub for Atlantic Fleet operations. It functioned as a base during World War II and was redesignated as a naval station in 1957. Local protests led to the base's closure in March 2004 as interest on the part of the U.S. military waned. The facilities and land remained largely abandoned until President Trump's 2025 surge of U.S. military forces to the Caribbean and off the coast of Venezuela on a sustained counternarcotics mission. Since then, Roosevelt Roads has been fully reactivated and now hosts Navy carrier strike groups, F-35 and F-22 jets, Marine Corps helicopters, and C-5 Galaxy and C-17 cargo aircraft.[12] Roosevelt Roads now serves as a crucial base of operations for the U.S. military's newly prioritized Caribbean operations, supporting military strikes against narco-terrorist targets at sea as well as operations focused on Venezuela, including the capture of narco-dictator Maduro in January 2026 by U.S. forces.

General U.S. military engagement with and support for the region has similarly declined over the past several years. Landmark U.S. security initiatives in the region, such as the Merida Initiative with Mexico, have been abandoned by regional leaders while others such as Plan Colombia and the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative have wound down or been starved of resources despite the persistence and even growth of regional security threats.

The decline in U.S. military presence and resources in Latin America raises particularly pressing concerns in a period of growing threats to U.S. national security from within the Western Hemisphere that include fentanyl trafficking networks, weaponized mass migration, and China's dual-use infrastructure and powerful drug trafficking organizations. Efforts by the Trump Administration to revitalize hemispheric security initiatives offer a path to confronting these daunting threats. At the same time, regional attitudes toward the U.S. and the military appear to create a more welcoming environment for this shift in Washington.

Spiking violence and insecurity in Latin America have also led to new calls, including calls from regional leaders, for renewed engagement by the U.S. military. Ecuador's President Daniel Noboa has called publicly for the reestablishment of a U.S. military base as his country struggles to combat surging narco-violence.[13] Similarly, there have been serious discussions in Washington about possible U.S. military action against the Mexican drug cartels as their illicit activities cause record overdose deaths and instability in the United States. Even the newly bolstered role of the U.S. military at the U.S.–Mexico border sparks little controversy given the severity of the illegal migration and narcotrafficking threats.

Primary Security Threats

The lines between public security and defense have long been blurred in Latin America, not only because of the domestic role of some regional militaries, but also because of the nature of the region's security threats. Hostile foreign powers leverage Latin America's transnational organized criminal and terrorist organizations as tools of asymmetric warfare against the United States and its partners. Tren de Aragua's numerous direct links to Venezuela's narco-dictatorship, dating back to Chávez's rule, have provided material support to Colombian narco-terrorist organizations.[14] Similarly, illicit fentanyl produced and managed by Mexican cartels is fueled directly and purposefully by China and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).[15] Access to massive illicit resources and state backing have empowered Latin America's criminal and terrorist organizations to rival and surpass the capacities of regional security forces and militaries.

With few exceptions, resurgent security threats in Latin America and the Caribbean are a growing threat to U.S. national security. Existing transnational criminal organizations like the Mexican cartels are rapidly extending their footprint into new countries, and illicit drug production in Colombia is surging to unprecedented levels as armed groups reassert control of ungoverned spaces and bring about new waves of political violence that are reminiscent of the 1980s. At the same time, new criminal groups are spreading like wildfire with new gangs from Venezuela, Ecuador, and elsewhere growing to be dominant criminal forces.

The Venezuelan Regime. Under Nicolás Maduro's leadership, Venezuela posed a dynamic and multifaceted threat to hemispheric and U.S. national security by acting as a militaristic threat to its neighbors, embracing and weaponizing transnational criminal threats and migration, and offering

a staging ground for malign extra-hemispheric powers. From a security perspective, Venezuela is best understood as a criminal-military dictatorship under which the armed forces have been turned largely into tools of social control, propaganda, and organized criminal activity.

Recognizing the nature of this threat, President Trump began a concerted pressure campaign against Venezuela in 2025, and in January 2026, a highly targeted U.S. military operation captured Maduro for trial in the United States. On January 3, Operation Absolute Resolve directed U.S. military aircraft and forces into Venezuelan territory with ground operations led by Delta Force and coordinated strikes launched against Venezuelan air defense systems.[16] Within a matter of hours, U.S. forces had captured Maduro and withdrawn him from Venezuelan territory without suffering a single casualty. This highly successful operation showcased not only the capabilities of the U.S. military, but also the deep weakness and incapacities of the Venezuelan military.[17]

By removing Maduro and maintaining pressure against the remnants of his regime, President Trump aims for a stable and sustainable transition in Venezuela—a prospect that is more realistic today than it has been at any other point since the regime's rise under Hugo Chávez. Nonetheless, the remnants of the Maduro regime, including its corrupt military leadership, remain in place for the moment, leaving remaining challenges to be addressed in such a transition.

Despite Venezuela's long-standing economic crisis, its military remains a significant force by regional standards. With a reported 150,000 active-duty forces, the Venezuelan military is a central pillar of the dictatorship's regime. To consolidate and maintain control of Venezuela, the regime shifted much of the military's operational focus to maintaining domestic control, primarily through violence against domestic actors and displays of public-facing propaganda against supposed external threats.

Venezuela's armed forces are fundamentally different from those of other military dictatorships in that the Maduro regime has converted the military into an extension of its criminal activities and networks. Numerous indictments and investigations have shown that Hugo Chávez and now Nicolás Maduro have put Venezuela's military and other institutions to the explicit task of flooding the United States with illegal drugs and otherwise cooperating with narco-trafficking organizations.[18] Over time, the Venezuelan military has developed direct and deepening involvement in the drug trade, securing illicit enrichment for its top leaders, the so-called Cartel de los Soles. This has included direct partnerships with Colombian narco-guerrilla groups and trafficking gangs like Tren de Aragua, as well as the military's own direct involvement in a range of transnational criminal activities. These illicit gains have bolstered the military and help to sustain its allegiance to the Maduro regime even during Venezuela's deep socioeconomic crisis.

The past several years have seen the Venezuelan military deployed most often against public protests and demonstrations while targeting opposition political figures. This is done in active cooperation with local armed groups and actors that serve as part of the military's repressive apparatus against the public. The regime also dedicates some attention to defense against imagined foreign military intervention, although these initiatives appear to be primarily propagandistic with underlying capacity and resources clearly deteriorating. Venezuela's high-profile and televised Bolivarian Shield exercises, for example, are nationwide military–police exercises ostensibly to secure "borders, towns, coasts, cities and vital elements of the country."[19]

In capacity and equipment, Venezuela's armed forces are noted for their capabilities in aviation, anti-missile systems, and tank squadrons.[20] However, because of the economic crisis and international sanctions, access to new equipment is so limited that the military is forced to rely increasingly on partial repairs of aging Soviet-era equipment.[21]

Venezuela's military has exhibited significant deficiencies in its operational readiness and capacity. In an embarrassing 2020 incident, a Venezuelan naval ship capsized during a confrontation with a cruise ship that supposedly encroached on Venezuelan waters.[22] The uncontrolled rise of armed criminal organizations and illicit activity in Venezuela is also revelatory with respect to the degraded operational capacity of the country's military.

Venezuela's regime has long coordinated proactively with such criminal organizations as Colombian narco-guerrillas as a way to enhance its power and secure illicit financial revenue.[23] In recent years, however, the military reportedly has lost control of surging unsanctioned criminal activity within its

borders, including illegal mining, the presence of rival Colombian drug trafficking organizations, and widespread border smuggling. Concerted operations by the Venezuelan military to control growing illegal mining activity in the Amazonas region, for example, have reportedly failed and left the regime cut off from this stream of illicit revenue.[24]

Venezuela's top military and security partners are Russia and China, which provide inconstant access to military equipment, training, and resources. Notably, Russian and Chinese air-defense systems were easily bypassed and disabled by U.S. forces during the operation to capture Maduro. This highlights the limited capacities of the Venezuelan military even with Russian and Chinese military technology. The success of the U.S. operation also adds further support to the long-standing view that the benefits of aid to the military from Beijing and Moscow may be more symbolic than operational.

The Cuban dictatorship has also played a central role in Venezuela's security apparatus, deploying thousands of intelligence officers to monitor and ensure the Venezuelan military's loyalty to the regime. In Operation Absolute Resolve, U.S. forces were confronted directly by Cuban agents who played a primary role in protecting Maduro; U.S. forces dispatched these Cuban agents, leaving 32 Cuban casualties in Caracas.[25]

Cuba. At its core, Cuba's Communist dictatorship is also a military dictatorship. Raul Castro led the armed forces for nearly 50 years, strengthening its position of privilege in Cuba relative to other institutions in the dictatorship. Today, the Cuban military remains the most powerful and well-resourced entity within the regime, maintaining control of key industries. Like Cuba itself, however, the Cuban military has degraded dramatically under the Castro regime.

Today, the Cuban Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR) include an estimated 49,000 active personnel and 39,000 reserve personnel, representing only a fraction of the fighting strength they possessed in the 1980s. The Cuban military suffers from its reliance on outdated Soviet equipment, underinvestment, and an increasingly amorphous mission.

The loss of Soviet funding following the end of the Cold War also cut Cuba off from weapons and equipment as well as strategic support, which in turn drove an increasingly sharp decline in operational capacity. Even with Venezuela's patronage, there appears to have been little investment in the Cuban military's warfighting capabilities since the conclusion of the Cold War. Because of poor maintenance, of the hundreds of aircraft the Cuban Air Force received during the Cold War, including fleets of Russian MIGs, fewer than 50 are thought to be operational, and the lack of pilot training has further reduced Cuba's aerial capacity.

This underinvestment in the Cuban military belies the reality that the military sits on substantial wealth, derived through its direct control of tourism and nearly any other profitable industry in Cuba. Leaked documents indicate that the Cuban military-run umbrella subsidiary, Grupo de Administración Empresarial S.A. (GAESA), has accumulated as much as $18 billion in reserves.[26] This substantial wealth appears to be directed primarily toward enriching Cuba's military leadership and reinvesting in GAESA's business ventures rather than supporting military readiness.

Despite degraded military capabilities, Cuba remains a national security threat to the United States and hemispheric security more broadly. The regime's efforts to prop up destabilizing forces beyond its borders, acting as a key pillar of strategic support for Venezuela's narco-dictatorship, underscore these efforts. At the same time, Cuba continues to serve as a proactive partner for U.S. adversaries seeking to bolster their strategic presence in the Western Hemisphere. Cuba's housing of Chinese intelligence facilities and reception of Russian warships as recently as last year showcase this hostile posture, echoing the regime's willingness to receive Soviet nuclear missiles during the Cold War.[27]

Transnational Organized Crime. Transnational organized crime is a long-standing threat to U.S. and hemispheric security, making it easy for some to dismiss it as a manageable or foreign challenge. However, the criminal threat across the Americas is far from static and instead is growing and multiplying at a rapid pace as a wide array of criminal organizations seize and create illicit economies and networks that stretch around the globe. As transnational criminal organizations experience nearly unrestricted growth in the Americas, their impact on U.S. national security and the safety of the American people quickly grows to intolerable levels.

Mexican Drug Cartels. In many ways, Mexico's drug cartels present the most significant and urgent threat to U.S. national security from within Latin

America, claiming the lives of some 100,000 Americans each year through the fentanyl trade.[28] Additionally, Mexican cartels are intimately involved in driving mass migration to the United States through human smuggling activity.[29] For too long, however, the need to confront the drug cartel threat has not received the attention it deserves as one of Washington's urgent priorities. This has facilitated the dangerous decline and dilution of the U.S.–Mexico security relationship.

Despite long-standing efforts by the United States and Mexico to combat drug cartels, these criminal networks have grown steadily in power and influence. Driving this illicit growth is the ability of the cartels to tap into massive illicit revenue streams from drug trafficking while also diversifying into extortion and human trafficking, among other criminal activities. Mexico's drug cartels annually generate an estimated $30 billion in illicit revenue, rivaling the gross domestic products (GDPs) of multiple European economies, including those of Albania and Georgia. Drug cartels are also one of Mexico's largest employers. According to one study, "by 2022 cartels [had] between 160,000 and 185,000 units"—far more than the estimated number of combatants for groups like Hezbollah and even ISIS at its peak.[30] Mexico's cartels are also equipped with military-grade weaponry and equipment that allows them to rival Mexican security forces, bringing to bear armored vehicles, anti-aircraft weapons, and such advanced technologies as drones.[31]

Complicating the challenge, these cartels are far from a monolithic threat. As recently as 2019, the Mexican government had identified as many as 37 distinct drug cartels operating throughout the country.[32] These criminal organizations engage in open conflict among themselves as they compete for illicit routes and resources across Mexico.

Another key factor driving the growth of the cartels is their ability to operate with impunity in Mexico amid the collapse of U.S.–Mexico security cooperation. For more than a decade, the Mexican government has shifted away from efforts to confront the cartels as corruption and resignation increasingly define the country's security institutions. A testament to the growth of Mexico's drug cartels under these conditions is their expanded global footprint further south. This includes increasing violence and trafficking activity in Guatemala, Colombia, and once-peaceful Ecuador as Mexican criminal organizations consolidate their control of global illicit supply routes.[33]

The rise of synthetic drugs and the fentanyl crisis have seen an exponential increase in the deadliness of the cartel threat to the American people. U.S. opioid overdose deaths in 2023 alone eclipsed the number of U.S. casualties seen during the entire Vietnam War.

Surging drug deaths in the United States and record high levels of homicides in Mexico demonstrate the dangerous consequences of tacitly accepting the permanence of the cartel threat. New actions by the Trump Administration to bolster the U.S. military's presence at the border and press the Mexican government to take action against the cartels demonstrate renewed efforts to confront this dire threat.

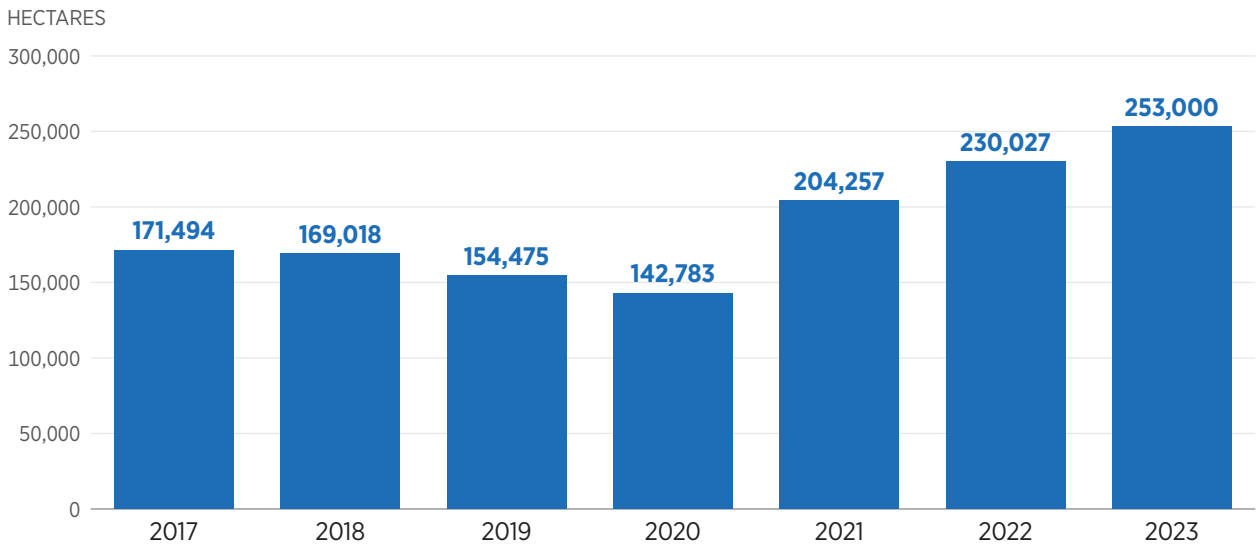
Colombian Drug-Trafficking Organizations. Colombia's guerrilla groups have deeply political origins as Marxist movements seeking to overthrow the government, but they have largely left these motivations behind to focus instead on maximizing their criminal enterprises, including drug trafficking and illegal mining.

Following the Colombian government's highly successful offensive during the 2000sof the Colombian government, with support from the U.S. through Plan Colombia, the country's narco-guerrilla threat was greatly reduced, marginalizing these armed groups to a primarily criminal threat rather than a military one. Nonetheless, this criminal threat remains dramatic, with record drug production and profits bolstering the criminal landscape in Colombia. To preserve their existence and operations, Colombia's criminal groups have taken advantage of the country's complex and large geography, including remote mountainous and jungle regions where the government struggles to project its presence.

Venezuela's narco-dictatorship has also acted as a crucial lifeline to Colombia's guerrilla groups and criminal threats. Under Hugo Chávez and then Nicolás Maduro, Venezuela's government actively supported Colombian guerrilla groups like the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia–People's Army (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN), offering them safe haven from Colombian security forces and providing material support through partnership in the drug trade. At the same

CHART 6

Colombia Coca Cultivation



SOURCE: Press release, "Colombia: Potential Cocaine Production Increased by 53 per Cent in 2023, According to New UNODC Survey," United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, October 18, 2024, https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/press/releases/2024/October/colombia_-potential-cocaine-production-increased-by-53-per-cent-in-2023--according-to-new-unodc-survey.html (accessed January 21, 2026).

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time, the broader criminal environment across the Andean region has been accelerated by instability and lawlessness in Venezuelan territory.

Under the presidency of Gustavo Petro, the Colombian government has greatly reduced efforts to confront Colombian guerrilla groups militarily. This has greatly expanded the ability of criminal organizations to operate within territory previously denied by security forces. This has led to an expansion of violence and drug trafficking activity within Colombia as well as in neighboring Ecuador.[34]

Brazilian Drug Gangs. Brazil's deadly narco-trafficking gangs such as the First Capitol Command, Red Command, and Family of the North are a less prominent but still highly powerful criminal threat. These organizations have seized control of the lucrative criminal landscape in Latin America's largest nation and economy, thereby accelerating the hemispheric spread of organized crime and instability. Brazilian gangs not only drive violence and criminality in Brazil, but also have grown to become the driving force behind the European drug trade.[35]

Within Brazil, gangs liberally employ violence against each other and the public, managing sophisticated drug trafficking, extortion networks, kidnapping, and organized theft rings. They also engage in domestic drug trafficking and dealing, targeting Brazil's large and increasingly wealthy population.

Despite the prominence and power of Brazilian criminal organizations, geography and economic realities have limited their direct criminal linkages to the United States. Brazil's distance from and limited trade flows with the United States offer fewer opportunities to conceal clandestine drug shipments among legal exports to North America. Brazil's more substantial economic ties with Europe, which represents nearly twice as much of Brazil's exports than the United States does, have driven the bulk of Brazilian drug trafficking activity to Europe.

Nonetheless, the rapid expansion of Brazilian gangs has made them some of the world's largest non-state armed groups, empowering organized criminal networks across the Western Hemisphere and beyond. For instance, linkages with

Brazilian gangs have fueled illicit drug production in neighboring Bolivia and Peru, contributing to the growth and resilience of these neighboring criminal landscapes.

Tren de Aragua. Tren de Aragua's exponential growth in recent years is a testament to the surging rise of transnational organized crime. In less than a decade, Tren de Aragua has grown from a minor prison gang in Venezuela to become one of the Western Hemisphere's largest and most expansive transnational criminal organizations—a criminal organization with a substantial foothold across major U.S. cities.

Tren de Aragua's growth was undeniably accelerated by the migration crisis and open-border policies of the Biden Administration, which bolstered the profitability and criminal opportunities that flow from tapping into human trafficking, migrant smuggling, and other related illicit activity. By exploiting the mass migration crisis through human and drug trafficking activity, Tren de Aragua gained access to substantial illicit revenue while weak border policies, both in the United States and across the region, also allowed members of the gang to establish a presence spanning the Western Hemisphere. Another undeniable driving force behind the spread of Tren de Aragua has been the Venezuelan narco-dictatorship, which has weaponized migration against the United States and the broader hemisphere.[36] Politically motivated assassinations carried out by Tren de Aragua outside of Venezuela have been directly linked to the Venezuelan dictatorship.[37]

With Tren de Aragua's rapid growth, law enforcement agencies in the United States and across Latin America have struggled to respond rapidly to this new criminal threat; however, renewed action and coordination have begun to take effect.[38]

Malign Extra-Hemispheric Powers

Recognizing the geopolitical importance of a presence in the Western Hemisphere, top global U.S. adversaries including China, Russia, and Iran have increased their regional engagement and positioning. Seizing on a lack of attention and engagement from the United States, they have accomplished this by means of dual-use infrastructure, political influence, economic power, criminal activity, and military-to-military relations.

Over the past two decades, China has made a particularly aggressive push into the Western Hemisphere, taking advantage of its economic power to build political influence and secure Chinese control of Latin American maritime ports, telecommunications networks, and other critical infrastructure throughout the region. This engagement has spilled into the military realm as well.

China's weaponization of fentanyl in collaboration with Mexico's cartels is the most destructive and dangerous means of Beijing's hemispheric encroachment. China's facilitating of the flow of precursor chemicals to Mexican cartels has driven the fentanyl crisis to its deadly current levels.[39] Chinese businesses, brokers, and criminal organizations all play critical and active roles in illegal fentanyl trafficking to the United States, while Chinese entities and financial systems also facilitate laundering of the profits to evade U.S. detection. Through subsidies and non-enforcement, the CCP tacitly supports China's central role in the fentanyl crisis.

Additionally, China engages in broader threatening positioning within the Western Hemisphere through its economic influence and investments. Among the most concerning developments is China's accumulated control of critical infrastructure such as ports and energy production plants. Beyond the political influence that this investment provides Beijing over regional governments, much of this infrastructure has a worrying potential for weaponization to destabilize the United States and the region. Dual-use infrastructure such as China's new deep-water megaport in Chancay, Peru, and its deep space base in Southern Argentina exemplify the military component of China's nominally economic projects. The deep-water megaport in Peru, for example, is completely controlled by China's COSCO shipping company, and the facilities are uniquely capable of receiving Chinese warships.[40]

China's presence around critical trade infrastructure such as the Panama Canal also raises urgent concerns about its ability to disrupt these vital trade routes, which could destabilize the U.S. economy and the U.S. military's ability to reposition maritime assets in a conflict situation. Chinese illegal fishing activity also tests the boundaries and capacities of maritime territory while accelerating criminality and instability in the Western Hemisphere.

Although less developed, China's military-to-military relations in Latin America have also notably increased in recent years. As the United States has reduced funding and placed increased restrictions

on U.S. training exchanges and weapons sales for Latin American security forces, Beijing has offered more of this engagement, even developing joint exercises with Western Hemisphere countries.

The growing influence and presence of these extra-hemispheric powers increases the risk of interstate conflict's returning to Latin America. On one hand, their military and financial support for authoritarian regimes like Venezuela's encourages the belligerence of those regimes toward neighboring democracies. On the other hand, China's control of critical infrastructure, including dual-use ports that are capable of receiving warships, threatens to bring any potential armed conflict between the United States and China into the Western Hemisphere.

Like China, Iran also leverages the Western Hemisphere's criminal networks as a strategic tool. This centers on the engagement of Iranian proxies, particularly Hezbollah, in narco-trafficking, counterfeiting, and money laundering activity in South America. Much of this presence and engagement centers around the Brazil–Argentina–Paraguay tri-border area, which is home to a substantial Lebanese diaspora. There are also concerning reports and examples of an increasingly operational Hezbollah presence beyond the tri-border region that includes intelligence collection and targeted assassinations.

Russia's significant presence in the Western Hemisphere continues the Soviet-era prioritization of Latin America as a strategic region. However, without Beijing's economic heft to buy influence, Russia's engagement strategy generally leverages high-level political support and military-to-military relations, including weapons sales. Russia has generally approached Latin America with a prioritized emphasis on anti-American leadership. This has led to a significant Russian presence in Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua. Beyond these anti-American regional dictatorships, Russia also built up significant and enduring ties to democratic nations like Ecuador and Argentina during the 2000s when their leadership was hostile to U.S. influence.

Important Alliances and Bilateral Relations

Cooperation with partner nations in Latin America and the Caribbean is fundamental to U.S. national security. In the absence of direct U.S. military and law enforcement action, regional partners have made great sacrifices to confront deadly narco-trafficking groups and other shared security threats. However, political shifts in regional leadership and inconstant U.S. engagement have taken a toll on the effectiveness of U.S. security relationships in Latin America in meeting core security threats.

Argentina. The relevance and importance of Argentina and its military are raised by geopolitical realities, including the deepening of the U.S.–Argentina relationship under the two countries' current administrations. At the same time, China's accumulated influence in Argentina makes this a strategically important relationship for both the United States and Beijing.

The recent sale of American-made F-16 fighter jets to Argentina's Air Force marked a major turning point as the Argentine military turned down China's offering of its JF-17 aircraft.[41] President Javier Milei continues to prioritize engagement with the United States, particularly as his administration seeks to restore the capacity of its armed forces. Discussions of future defense acquisitions and even co-production of equipment like Stryker armored vehicles and drones are ongoing.[42]

In recent decades, Argentina's military has suffered from the country's broader financial crisis and the political stigmatizing of the armed forces because of the military dictatorship of the 1970s and 1980s. This has generally starved Argentina's armed forces of funding while political leadership from the left has reduced the military's responsibilities in the realm of security.

Antarctic security is another issue that enhances Argentina's strategic importance. As China's ambitions in the Antarctic region increase, Argentina's positioning and facilities like its naval base in Ushuaia become more operationally vital.[43]

Despite the Milei government's clear preference for partnership with the United States, China's substantial financial and economic influence in Argentina continue to pose a challenge. Additionally, past concessions to China by the administration of Cristina Kirchner have granted Beijing a worrying military presence in Argentina that includes the shadowy deep space station in Neuquén province.[44]

Brazil. Despite its distance from the United States, Brazil's strategic importance both hemispherically and globally is driven in large part by its size and economic weight. Brazil is not only the largest country in Latin America, but also the

world's seventh-largest country in terms of population and fifth-largest in terms of geographic territory. A top 10 global economy, Brazil also has the region's most developed defense industrial base, particularly its aerospace industry. Brazil's size also makes it an important hub for drug trafficking activity and transnational criminal organizations. The Brazilian military shares responsibility for domestic security with civilian police forces.

Brazil's military spending is roughly 1.1 percent of GDP and supports approximately 360,000 active-duty armed forces personnel, making Brazil's military the second-largest in the Western Hemisphere.[45] Brazil's recent defense budgets hover around $25 billion, which significantly exceeds the defense budgets of Colombia ($10.2 billion), Chile ($5.6 billion), and Argentina ($4.7 billion) in 2024. One of the military's apparent strategic priorities is advancement of Brazil's positioning as a leading global actor.[46] Much of this is reflected in the development of Brazil's military–industrial base and procurement as the government pursues a proposed $11 billion public investment program for production of nuclear submarines, frigates, and new armored vehicles among other systems.[47] As a result of these initiatives, Brazil recently commissioned production of its two first Centauro II BR armored combat vehicles.[48]

Brazil is not a major drug-producing country, but it is the second-largest consumer of cocaine and a transit hotspot for illicit drugs. Criminal organizations like Red Command and First Capital Command have increased their transnational operations in Brazil and beyond. In response, the government has expanded Brazil's security presence along the harsh 9,767-mile border that it shares with 10 other countries. Brazil deploys security forces and equipment like unmanned aerial vehicles to monitor illicit activity along borders and in the Amazon.

In 2018, the U.S. and Brazil launched the Permanent Forum on Security with the aim of fostering bilateral cooperation on security challenges including arms and drug trafficking, cybercrime, financial crimes, and terrorism.[49] The designation of Brazil as a major non-NATO ally in 2019 under President Trump offered Brazil access to U.S. defense industry and increased joint military exchanges, exercises, and training.[50]

Overall, security cooperation between the U.S. and Brazil is substantial, particularly with reference to narco-trafficking threats. However, this relationship is increasingly being undermined by divergent political alignment under the administration of Lula da Silva.

Colombia. The Republic of Colombia is the closest and most successful U.S. security partner in the Western Hemisphere. U.S. partnership and capacity-building during the 1990s and 2000s empowered Colombia's efforts to retake the country from its existential narco-terrorist threats. Nevertheless, surging narco-trafficking and the increasingly destabilizing activities of Venezuela's authoritarian regime continue to pose serious threats to Colombia's security.

By 2001, Colombia had lost control of roughly 40 percent of its territory to narco-guerrilla insurgents and was on the brink of becoming a failed state. However, a surge in U.S. intelligence and military support for and cooperation with Colombia's security forces has restored general stability. Threats from narco-guerillas were pushed to the margins, although substantial security challenges persist.

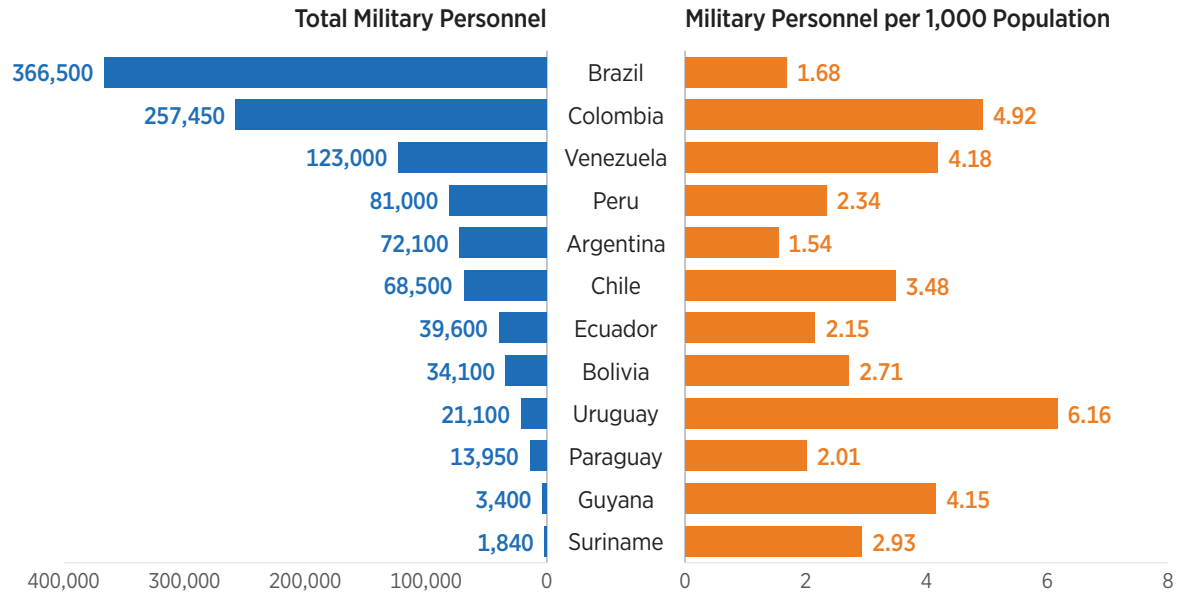
Beyond its historical security ties with the U.S., extensive experience combatting guerrilla threats has helped Colombia's military to become one of the world's and one of the region's most capable. Colombia has some 300,000 active-duty military personnel and an additional 150,000 national police.[51] On a per-capita basis, Colombia maintains one of the world's largest active-duty security forces. However, although its armed forces are highly capable and effective, limited access to new technological capabilities such as drones complicates efforts to confront resilient and well-resourced narco-trafficking threats.

As a core U.S. security partner, Colombia has generally taken a proactive approach in confronting narco-trafficking activity, but security policies have shifted under the administration of President Gustavo Petro. Since taking office in 2022, Petro has blasted the so-called drug war and delivered punishing reductions to military funding while liberally using permissive ceasefire agreements with Colombia's narco-trafficking groups. These policies are bringing about a dramatic regression of the country's hard-fought security gains and have led to a period of resurgence for Colombia's armed groups.

In the final months of President Petro's mandate, the government has adjusted its approach somewhat, ending its permissive ceasefires, but

CHART 7

Comparison of Militaries in Latin America



SOURCES: International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2025* (London: Routledge, 2025), and population data from World Bank Group DataBank, "Population Estimates and Projections," https://databank.worldbank.org/source/population-estimates-and-projections (accessed January 21, 2026).

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the resurgence of armed groups requires a more aggressive recommitment to the military's efforts to confront these threats. Even though guerrilla groups and narco-traffickers no longer credibly threaten the existence of the state, violence continues to plague ungoverned spaces in Colombia, and illicit coca production continues at record high levels. At the same time, new illicit activities such as illegal mining have proliferated, offering new revenue streams for Colombia's transnational criminal organizations.

A key factor driving the persistent armed threat in Colombia is the Venezuelan narco-regime which shares a roughly 1,400-mile border with Colombia. For the United States, Colombia is also strategically important when it comes to confronting Venezuela's regional criminal destabilization. However, as with narco-trafficking, Colombia's approach to Venezuela under the Petro administration has frequently been counterproductive. Looming elections in 2026 are likely to bring a return to Colombia's more traditional security policies, but confronting the increasingly empowered criminal threat in the country will require redoubled efforts from both the United States and Colombia.

Dominican Republic. In many ways, the Dominican Republic is the linchpin of U.S. counternarcotics cooperation in the Caribbean. It is the largest Caribbean nation and, with some 50,000 active-duty forces, has the region's the largest military. The Dominican Republic is therefore a crucial U.S. partner in maritime interdiction operations against drug smuggling activity and illegal migration, as well as in countering the encroachment of China and other hostile powers into the Caribbean. As narco-trafficking and geopolitical threats increase, they are further amplified and complicated by the deepening crisis in Haiti.

Under President Luis Abinader, the U.S.–Dominican Republic security relationship has solidified and grown through active partnership.[52] The Trump Administration has taken important steps

to further this engagement; the Dominican Republic, for example, was part of Secretary of State Marco Rubio's first trips abroad.[53]

The Dominican Republic's role in countering flows of narcotics may become even more crucial with the shift in hemispheric security dynamics. The porous U.S.–Mexico border has been an attractive route for much of the drug trafficking to the United States, particularly the fentanyl trade. However, increasingly successful actions to secure the border and confront the Mexican cartels are likely to push more of the drug trade through Caribbean smuggling routes.

With both nations located on the island of Hispaniola, the deepening crisis in Haiti also raises increasingly dire security threats to the Dominican Republic and regional stability. The near-total collapse of the Haitian government has left much of Haiti's territory, including most of the capital, Port-au-Prince, under the exclusive control of violent drug gangs.[54] The crisis has also led to massive population displacement as Haitians flee—primarily to the Dominican Republic—to escape attacks by violent gangs. Cognizant of the significant threat to the Dominican Republic that this collapse represents, the U.S. has not intervened directly; instead, it has focused on ramping up border security measures and seeking international action to stabilize Haiti.

Guatemala. Guatemala's geographic position and extensive border make it a strategically important Central American security partner for the United States as it seeks to combat the flow of illegal drugs and mass migration, among other threats. Latin America's narco-trafficking and illegal mass migration networks pass directly through Guatemala on their way to the United States.

In 2025, Mexico's cartels saw a period of growth within Mexico, aided by their lucrative fentanyl and human smuggling activity as well as by limited pressure from the Mexican state. This has led to an increased cartel presence in Guatemala and elsewhere in Central America. The cartels' expanded outreach has grown with the inclusion of illicit fentanyl and drug trafficking as well as migrant smuggling networks.[55]

As security partners, the U.S. and Guatemala have developed a substantial relationship around border security, counternarcotics, and migration. However, the security relationship has also been subject to political shifts, including from the United States. Under the Biden Administration, the U.S. withheld substantial law enforcement and security cooperation resources from the bilateral relationship during the term of Guatemala's conservative president.[56] U.S. prioritization of development aid and so-called root-causes approaches to crime and insecurity have failed to deliver substantive progress in combatting these criminal threats, and limiting the resources for core security cooperation has negatively affected the government's ability to deal with them effectively.[57]

Nonetheless, the Guatemalan government has taken commendable action to confront narco-migration threats more aggressively. This includes recently enhanced patrols by Guatemala along its borders with Mexico, Honduras, and El Salvador. Renewed deployments to the border and increased funding for the police helped to drive a tripling of drug seizures from 2023 to 2024.[58] Nevertheless, Guatemala struggles to confront the Western Hemisphere's surging narco-threats passing through its territory. Efforts to secure the country's 200-nautical-mile economic zone against drug trafficking, for example, are undermined by the country's limited naval and air force capabilities.[59]

Mexico. Mexico is the top U.S. trading partner, is the second-largest country in Latin America, and shares a 2,000-mile border with the United States. Its importance for U.S. national security therefore cannot be overstated. Nonetheless, the threats posed by drug cartels and illegal migration networks in Mexico have surged in recent years as security cooperation between the United States and Mexico has largely collapsed.

With nearly 300,000 active-duty personnel, Mexico's military is likely the most important and well-resourced regional security institution. This is due in no small part to its leading role in Mexican defense and security, including domestic operations against drug cartels. Successive Mexican administrations have shifted law enforcement responsibilities and resources to the military. President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2018–2024) took unprecedented action to empower the Mexican military, both politically and economically, while shielding it from oversight.

Corruption is a determinative reality in Mexico's security landscape and has long cast a shadow on U.S.–Mexico security cooperation. Narco-corruption in particular has compromised Mexico's public

security institutions, particularly local and civilian police forces. This reality has pushed the Mexican military into a more prominent role in domestic security against the cartel threat. However, Mexico's armed forces, including senior leaders, have not been immune to the cartels' corrupting influence. In a 2020 incident, for example, the Mexican government responded to U.S. law enforcement's arrest of a then-former Defense Minister by dramatically escalating diplomatic threats against the United States. Upon securing his release, the Mexican government pursued no criminal action against the former senior defense official.

This incident and broader corruption challenges mixed with political dynamics in Mexico have reinforced the trend of restricting U.S.–Mexico security cooperation, particularly during the administration of President López Obrador. This ultimately led to Mexico's 2021 decision to end the Merida Initiative, which had long served as the framework for Mexico's bilateral security relationship with the United States. Since then, cooperation between U.S. and Mexican security forces has been minimal despite surging levels of fentanyl deaths, violence, and illegal migration.

In an attempt to end the status quo, the Trump Administration has strengthened the U.S. military presence at the border while bringing economic and political pressure to bear to persuade the Mexican government to take effective action against the cartels. With the threat of direct U.S. military action against the cartels looming, Mexico under the leadership of President Claudia Sheinbaum faces unprecedented pressure to act.

Peru. The United States and Peru have a long-standing security relationship centered around shared challenges that include narco-trafficking and guerrilla activity. As a top global producer of critical minerals and cocaine as well as one of the largest territories in Latin America, Peru has significant strategic importance as a U.S. security partner. Additionally, Peru has become a focal point for geopolitical competition between Beijing and Washington, and China's presence in the Andean nation, especially with respect to critical dual-use infrastructure, has surged in recent years.

During the 1990s and 2000s, the U.S.–Peru security relationship was a significant source of support for Peru's efforts to confront the Shining Path narco-guerrilla threat; today, Shining Path is all but eliminated. However, Peru's narco-trafficking threats persist as varied drug-trafficking organizations continue to operate. Additionally, criminal activity in the mining sector, particularly by transnational criminal organizations, has increased to a notable extent with the advent of illegal wildcat mining in Peru. The violence and organized criminal activity that the spread of illegal mining has brought with it has created an increasingly daunting security challenge.

The U.S.–Peru security relationship has faced notable limiting challenges, many of which have stemmed from U.S. human rights concerns. In 2001, in response to an incident in which the Peruvian military mistakenly targeted a civilian aircraft, the United States responded by ending its Air Bridge Denial Program. This denied the Peruvian government the intelligence and equipment that it needed to combat the widespread use of drug smuggling flights by narco-traffickers. In 2024, the U.S. and Peru reached an agreement that restored some U.S. support against drug flights in Peru. However, the U.S. maintains a prohibition on Peru's ability to use lethal force against drug flights despite rising narco-threats across the hemisphere.

The inauguration of a Chinese megaport in Chancay in 2024 has reemphasized the global geopolitical dimensions of U.S.–Peru relations.[60] The potentially dual-use port is uniquely suited to receive Chinese warships, and China's COSCO shipping company has been granted abnormally exclusive control of the facilities. The dangers of this arrangement are exacerbated by concerns about Peru's inability to provide proper oversight on critical infrastructure. The importance of this issue is indicated by the pervasive narco-trafficking and criminal activity that passes through such facilities. At the same time, the increasingly substantial political influence that China enjoys in Peru as a result of its investments and political engagement has enhanced Beijing's increasingly opaque regional presence.

Conclusion

The Trump Administration has rightly identified Latin America and the Caribbean as regions of outsized interest for the United States. Geography and connectedness leave the American people and U.S. national security substantially vulnerable to the impact of these realities within our hemisphere. In

recent years, both regions have become more dangerous as surging instability, the resurgence of narco-terrorism, and destabilizing mass migration have led to the drug deaths of hundreds of thousands of Americans, assaults on the U.S. border, and instability across U.S. cities. Additionally, adversaries have capitalized on their ability to threaten the United States from within our hemisphere by increasing their presence and control of critical dual-use infrastructure and developing malign influence with both regional rogue regimes and democratic states.

These dangerous realities are the result of decades of neglect and disengagement by Washington and the U.S. military in our own hemisphere. The drawing down of operational presence in the region and the watering down of our cooperation and engagement laid the groundwork for criminal groups to make a dramatic comeback and created an opening for U.S. adversaries to buy influence through corruption and false promises.

However, President Trump's reengagement with the Western Hemisphere is already having a serious impact. Deployments to the Caribbean have secured what was once a primary narco-trafficking route to the United States, and the U.S. military operation that successfully captured Nicolás Maduro has opened the door to ending what has been a dramatic threat to hemispheric security and stability. Continued and deepened efforts—efforts that are based on a strong U.S. commitment and partnerships with regional leadership that is increasingly aligned with the United States against these threats—will be needed to fully undo the damage of past decades.

Scoring the Latin America/Caribbean Operating Environment

As noted at the beginning of this section, various regional considerations facilitate or inhibit the ability of the U.S. to conduct military operations to defend its vital national interests against threats. Our assessment of the operating environment uses a five-point scale that ranges from "very poor" to "excellent" conditions and covers four regional characteristics of greatest relevance to the conduct of military operations:

1. **Very Poor.** Significant hurdles exist for military operations. Physical infrastructure is insufficient or nonexistent, and the region is politically unstable. The U.S. military is poorly placed or absent, and alliances are nonexistent or diffuse.

2. **Unfavorable.** A challenging operating environment for military operations is marked by inadequate infrastructure, weak alliances, and recurring political instability. The U.S. military is inadequately placed in the region.

3. **Moderate.** A neutral to moderately favorable operating environment is characterized by adequate infrastructure, a moderate alliance structure, and acceptable levels of regional political stability. The U.S. military is adequately placed.

4. **Favorable.** A favorable operating environment includes adequate infrastructure, strong alliances, and a stable political environment. The U.S. military is well placed for future operations.

5. **Excellent.** An extremely favorable operating environment includes well-established and well-maintained infrastructure, strong and capable allies, and a stable political environment. The U.S. military is well placed to defend U.S. interests.

The key regional characteristics consist of:

a. **Alliances/Partnerships.** Alliances are important for interoperability and collective defense, as allies are more likely to lend support to U.S. military operations. Indicators that provide insight into the strength or health of an alliance include whether the U.S. trains regularly with countries in the region, has good interoperability with the forces of an ally, and shares intelligence with nations in the region.

b. **Political Stability.** Political stability brings predictability for military planners when considering such things as transit, basing, and overflight rights for U.S. military operations.

Operating Environment: Latin America

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

The overall degree of political stability indicates whether U.S. military actions would be hindered or enabled and reflects, for example, whether transfers of power are generally peaceful and whether there have been any recent instances of political instability in the region.

c. **U.S. Military Positioning.** Having military forces based or equipment and supplies staged in a region greatly facilitates the ability of the United States to respond to crises and presumably to achieve success in critical "first battles" more quickly. Being routinely present in a region also helps the U.S. to remain familiar with its characteristics and the various actors that might either support or try to thwart U.S. actions. With this in mind, we assessed whether or not the U.S. military was well positioned in the region. Again, indicators included bases, troop presence, prepositioned equipment, and recent examples of military operations (including training and humanitarian) launched from the region.

d. **Infrastructure.** Modern, reliable, and suitable infrastructure is essential to military operations. Airfields, ports, rail lines, canals, and paved roads enable the U.S. to stage, launch, and logistically sustain combat operations. We combined expert knowledge of regions with publicly available information on critical infrastructure to arrive at our overall assessment of this metric.

Overall, the U.S. enjoys limited military-to-military relationships with many Latin American and Caribbean countries; for the past several years, for example, much U.S. cooperation has been focused on humanitarian relief and related activities rather than operational counternarcotics efforts. With pro-U.S. leadership winning elections across the region, many regional governments could be more disposed to act as pro-active partners in confronting shared security threats such as narco-trafficking, but these partnerships need to be reinvigorated after decades of declining U.S. engagement.

Substantial political shifts are commonplace in much of Latin America and the Caribbean and have led to the rise of anti-American populists in the past. Electoral and regional trends suggest that the wave of anti-Americanism has largely dissipated with the failures of socialist leaders in Venezuela, Argentina, and beyond. Nonetheless, these underlying risks can still impede progress.

The redeployment of substantial U.S. military assets to the Caribbean during 2025 brought a surge in positioning to the Western Hemisphere, but beyond the Caribbean, the long-standing U.S. trend of regional disengagement has left the military with a very limited network of facilities and bases in Latin America and the Caribbean. Notably, there is no U.S. base in the entire continent of South America. This reality will complicate efforts to broaden and deepen U.S. security cooperation across the hemisphere.

The region's infrastructure suffers from complex geography and limited financing and development for large-scale projects such as ports. Nevertheless, in most populated areas, infrastructure receives more substantial funding and attention, and this provides more reliability.

With these considerations in mind, we arrived at these average scores for Latin America and the Caribbean (rounded to the nearest whole number):

- Alliances/Partnerships: **4—Favorable.**
- Political Stability: **3—Moderate.**
- U.S. Military Positioning: **2—Unfavorable.**
- Infrastructure: **3—Moderate.**

  Aggregating to a regional score of: **Moderate.**

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Asia

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Regional Overview

Asia has always been vital to the protection and advancement of America's economic and security interests. Since the 19th century, it has been U.S. policy to prevent the rise of an antagonistic regional hegemon in Asia, whether it was Imperial Japan, the Soviet Union, or China itself.

In the 21st century, Asia's importance to the United States has only grown. Asia is a key source of trade and natural resources and plays a crucial role in countless global supply chains. The sea lines of communication that run through the Pacific and Indian Oceans host the vast majority of seaborne global trade. As of February 2025, half of America's top 12 trading partners, including China, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, India, and Taiwan, were found in Asia.[1]

The U.S. also has several key security interests in Asia: a variety of treaty allies and important security partners. The region has several of the world's largest and most capable militaries, including those of China, India, Japan, Russia, Pakistan, and North and South Korea. Five Asian states—China, North Korea, India, Pakistan, and Russia—also possess nuclear weapons.

The region is a core American security focus because:

- It is home to America's top external security threat—China.
- It is home to several critical trading and treaty allies as well as India, potentially a major geostrategic partner.
- It is characterized by several military flash points that could escalate to a nuclear exchange, numerous territorial and maritime disputes, and long-standing rivalries.

China's rapid military modernization and technological development, along with its air and sea incursions around Taiwan, have generated increased concern about the potential for military conflict in the Taiwan Strait. The situation on the Korean Peninsula remains perpetually tense as Pyongyang expands its missile arsenal and tests its increasingly capable long-range missiles. China's growing and increasingly potent naval capabilities, enhanced by a massive maritime militia, are also generating alarm in Washington and among numerous treaty allies and security partners. The disputed China–India border has grown considerably more volatile since a series of violent and deadly confrontations in 2020. And in May 2025, Pakistan's terrorist attack into India nearly triggered a war.

Attempts to build a united security architecture among allies in the region are complicated by the lack of a robust NATO-like political–security organization. Instead, the Asian security landscape for the United States is shaped by a combination of bilateral alliances. In recent years, these core aspects of the regional security architecture have been supported by "minilateral" security partnerships: the U.S.–Japan–Australia and India–Japan–Australia trilaterals; the U.S.–Japan–Australia–India quadrilateral dialogue (popularly known as the Quad); the Australia–United Kingdom–United States (AUKUS) agreement; and growing U.S.–Japan–South Korea trilateral cooperation. These efforts have often been stymied by limited shared interests, disagreement on appropriate measures to counter the China threat, and historical animosities between nations (e.g., Japan and South Korea).

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a loose agglomeration of disparate states that has succeeded in expanding economic linkages among themselves over the past 50 years through a range of economic agreements like the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA). ASEAN also serves as the convening force behind the patchwork regional diplomatic and security architecture like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus). The South Asia Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which includes Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, has been less effective because of the lack of regional economic integration and the historical rivalry between India and Pakistan.

As noted, Asia is not undergirded by any significant economic architecture. Despite substantial trade and expanding value chains among the various Asian states, formal economic integration is limited. There are, however, many trade agreements among the nations of the region and among these nations and countries outside of Asia. The most prominent are the 15-nation Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the 11-nation Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), neither of which includes the U.S. or India.

Important Alliances and Bilateral Relations in Asia

The keys to a robust U.S. security presence in the Western Pacific are America's alliances with Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea), the Philippines, Thailand, and Australia. These formal alliances are supplemented by close security relationships with New Zealand and Singapore, an emerging strategic partnership with India, and evolving relationships with Southeast Asian partners like Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia. The United States also has a robust unofficial security and economic relationship with Taiwan.

The U.S. improves interoperability by sharing common weapons and systems with many of its allies, many of which field F-15, F-16, and F-35 combat aircraft and employ LINK-16 data links among their naval forces. Australia, Japan, and South Korea are partners in production of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, and all three countries have taken delivery of the aircraft. Partners like India and Australia operate American-made P-8 maritime surveillance aircraft and C-17 transport aircraft.

In addition, several "foundational" military agreements with regional partners and allies allow for the sharing of encrypted communications data and equipment, access to each other's military facilities, and the ability to refuel each other's air and naval vessels in theater utilizing Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreements (ACSAs). In the event of conflict, a patchwork of intelligence-sharing agreements enables the sharing of information in such key areas as air defense and maritime domain awareness. This advantage is enhanced by the ongoing range of bilateral and multilateral exercises that acclimate various forces to operating together and familiarize American and local commanders with each other's standard operating procedures (SOPs) as well as training, tactics, and (in some cases) war plans.

While it does not constitute a formal alliance, in November 2017, Australia, Japan, India, and the United States reconstituted the Quad,[2] a forum for the four countries to meet at various levels and in venues to discuss ways to strengthen strategic cooperation and combat common threats. In 2019, the group held its first meeting at the ministerial level and added a counterterrorism tabletop exercise to its agenda.[3] In 2020, officials from the four countries participated in a series of conference calls to discuss responses to the COVID-19 pandemic that also included government representatives from New Zealand, South Korea, and Vietnam.[4] In March 2021, the leaders of the four nations held their first virtual summit, marking a new level of interaction.[5] In September 2021, the four leaders held the first in-person Quad summit, which was followed by a second in-person summit in 2022.[6] Quad engagement has remained a leading component of U.S. engagement in Asia. In January 2025, Secretary of State Marco Rubio met with his Quad counterparts as one of his first official acts on his first day in office.[7]

Japan. The U.S.–Japan defense relationship is the cornerstone of America's network of relations in the Western Pacific. The U.S.–Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security, signed in 1960, provides for a deep alliance between two of the world's largest economies and most sophisticated military establishments.

The United States maintains "approximately 60,000 military personnel" and "7,000 Department of Defense [now Department of War] civilian and contractor employees" in Japan under the rubric of U.S. Forces Japan (USFJ).[8] These forces include, among other things, a forward-deployed carrier battle group centered on the USS *Ronald Reagan*, an amphibious group at Sasebo centered on the LHA-6 *America*, an aviation-optimized amphibious assault ship, and the bulk of the Third Marine Expeditionary Force (III MEF) on Okinawa. U.S. forces exercise regularly with their Japanese counterparts, and this collaboration has expanded in recent years to include joint amphibious exercises as well as air and naval exercises.

The American presence is supported by a substantial American defense infrastructure throughout Japan, including Okinawa. These bases provide key logistical and communications support for U.S. operations throughout the Western Pacific, cutting travel time substantially compared with deployments from Hawaii or the U.S. West Coast. They also provide key listening posts for the monitoring of Russian, Chinese, and North Korean military operations. This capability is enhanced by Japan's growing array of space systems including new reconnaissance satellites.

During bilateral Special Measures Agreement negotiations, the first Trump Administration sought a 400 percent increase in Japanese contributions for the cost of stationing U.S. troops in Japan. Late in 2021, it was reported that Japan had agreed to "ramp up its annual host-nation support for U.S. forces stationed in Japan."[9]

Despite developing a formidable military force, Japan still relies heavily on the United States and Washington's extended deterrence guarantee of nuclear, conventional, and missile defense forces for its security. In March 2025, Japan established a Joint Operations Command to unify command of its ground, naval, and air forces.[10] Previously, the Self-Defense Forces were stovepiped with insufficient ability to communicate, plan, or operate across services. Japan's inability to conduct joint operations across its own military services inhibited its capacity for combined operations with U.S. forces. By designating a single joint commanding general, Japan is now able to coordinate more effectively with U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) combatant commander counterparts.

In addition to growing concerns about China, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 caused a significant shift in the Japanese public's perception of their country's threat environment. The Japanese had been aware of the growing Chinese and North Korean threats, but Vladimir Putin's invasion made clear that their perception of a "post–Cold War world" was an illusion and that large-scale military conflicts between major powers remained a genuine threat. The Russian invasion of Ukraine crystallized Japanese fears of a possible Chinese conflict over Taiwan and called attention to the need for a stronger military posture.[11]

Before the war in Ukraine, the Japanese populace had feared that loosening any restrictions on Japan's military risked an inexorable return to the country's militaristic past. The war in Ukraine seemingly caused an overnight sea change in Japanese perceptions. Public opinion polls show strong majorities favoring greater defense spending and a counterstrike capability.[12] Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's 2015 policy of collective self-defense led to fierce debates in the national legislature and large public protests. By contrast, bold security steps announced by the Kishida administration in December 2022 elicited strong public support but did not spark any protests.

Japan responded to the deteriorating Indo-Pacific security environment by vowing to augment its defense capabilities significantly, strengthen defense cooperation with the United States, and expand defense collaboration with like-minded democracies in the Indo-Pacific. National security documents from December 2022 delineated extensive defense reforms to develop new military capabilities and bolster Japan's ability to assume greater responsibility for its own and collective defense.[13] In particular, Tokyo's announcement of its intent to develop long-range missile counterstrike capabilities was a dramatic shift from the past. Citing expanding Chinese and North Korean missile arsenals, Tokyo declared that relying solely on Japanese missile defenses or U.S. strike capabilities to defend against missile threats had become increasingly untenable. The government acknowledged that it must add capabilities to mount effective counterstrikes against adversaries to prevent potential attacks on Japanese soil.

Tokyo also broke with long-standing precedent by pledging to raise Japanese defense spending

by 2027 to 2 percent of current GDP, doubling the self-imposed limit of 1 percent that Tokyo had maintained for decades.[14] The government emphasized that implementation of a rapid and extensive defense buildup could not be achieved by a temporary increase in spending. Instead, a sustained level of elevated expenditures would be required.

In recent years, Japan has taken steps to improve its defensive weapons, command, intelligence, and logistical systems:

- Integrated air and missile defenses;
- Unmanned vehicles (drones);
- Cross-domain operations including cyber, space, and electromagnetic spectrums;
- Integrated command, control, and intelligence;
- Sea-lift and air-lift capabilities;
- Expanded stocks of ammunition, missiles, fuel, and spare parts.[15]

Japan has become increasingly alarmed by China's surging defense expenditures, rapidly expanding and modernizing military capabilities, and escalating aerial and maritime incursions into Japanese territorial waters. Tokyo is also deeply apprehensive about being drawn into a conflict over Taiwan, which is only 70 miles from Japan's southwest islands at their closest point. In December 2024, Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya noted that:

> Personally, I do not like the phrase "Taiwan emergency." Taiwan should be "safe," not "in emergency." Taiwan is an important and close friend to Japan. However, we will consistently adhere to the spirit of the joint statement made at the time of the normalization of diplomatic relations between Japan and China, and I am convinced that issues between Taiwan and the mainland should be resolved peacefully through dialogue. Taiwan must be "safe."[16]

Beginning in 2014, Japan began to reorient its forces and augment defenses to the southwest so that it could counter the Chinese threat more effectively. The Japanese Self-Defense Forces expanded existing units, created an amphibious rapid-deployment brigade, and enhanced their rapid-response capabilities. Japan also changed its strategy to improve its ability to monitor and deter Chinese incursions and, if necessary, retake islands by force. Additionally, Tokyo has deployed new radar sites, as well as surface-to-ship and surface-to-air missile units, and has increased its intelligence-gathering and security units on the islands to protect maritime choke points.

Recently, the growing potential for a Taiwan crisis has led senior Japanese officials to issue increasingly bold public statements of support for Taipei and align Japan's national interests more directly with the protection of Taiwan's security. However, there have been no declared policy changes, and Japan has not pledged to intervene directly in a military conflict to defend Taiwan or even to allow U.S. defense of Taiwan from bases in Japan. A Japanese decision to intervene in a Taiwan crisis would be subject to constitutional, legal, and political constraints. Deliberations would depend heavily on the circumstances of the situation and the political will to intervene. Potential factors include whether Taiwan is being attacked or blockaded, whether Japan's southwest islands were threatened, and the extent of international support for Taiwan's defense. However, many experts believe that Japan would be compelled to intervene militarily even without intervention by the U.S.

Republic of Korea. The United States and South Korea signed their Mutual Defense Treaty in 1953. That treaty codified the relationship that had grown from the Korean War when the United States dispatched troops to help South Korea defend itself against invasion by Communist North Korea. Since then, the two states have forged an enduring alliance supplemented by a substantial trade and economic relationship that includes a free trade agreement.[17]

South Korea has fought alongside the United States in nearly every significant conflict since the Korean War. Seoul sent 300,000 troops to fight in Vietnam, some 5,000 of whom were killed. South Korea also has conducted anti-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia and has participated in peacekeeping operations in Afghanistan and East Timor. In spite of its support for multinational crisis response, however, South Korea's defense planning is focused primarily on threats from North Korea. In

recent years, both privately and publicly, South Korean defense officials have acknowledged the need for South Korea to expand the scope of its foreign and security policies to include threats from China.

In response to Pyongyang's expanding nuclear arsenal, South Korea created a defense strategy comprised of Kill Chain (preemptive attack); the Korea Air and Missile Defense (KAMD) system; and the Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation (KMPR) system.[18] Taken together, these concepts integrate air and missile defenses, long-range precision fires, cruise missile attacks, and air-launched attacks on North Korea's missile and nuclear capabilities and its political and military leadership.

The South Korean military is a sizeable force with advanced weapons and innovative military education and training. South Korea's military spending has increased over the past 10 years from $36.57 billion in 2015 to $44.7 billion in 2025, and further increases are planned.[19] Seoul also appears to be procuring the right mix of capabilities, to include long-range fires, fifth-generation aircraft, modern missile defenses, and an armor-heavy ground force.[20] U.S.–South Korean interoperability has improved, partly as a result of Seoul's continued purchases of U.S. weapons systems and its own healthy and modern defense industrial base.

After several decades of slow decline, the American presence on the Korean Peninsula has stabilized during the past decade. In the early 1970s, President Richard Nixon withdrew the 7th Infantry Division, leaving only the 2nd Infantry Division on the peninsula. Those forces have been positioned farther back from North Korea so that few Americans are now deployed on the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). The U.S. currently maintains 28,500 troops on the peninsula, centered mainly on the U.S. 2nd Infantry Division, rotating brigade combat teams, and a significant number of combat aircraft.[21]

The U.S.–ROK defense relationship involves one of the more integrated and complex command-and-control structures. A United Nations Command (UNC) established in 1950 was the basis for the American intervention and remained in place after the armistice was signed in 1953. UNC has access to seven bases in Japan to support U.N. forces in Korea. Although the 1953 armistice ended the most intense fighting, sporadic armed clashes between the two sides have continued for decades.

Due to the ongoing hostilities, UNC retained operational control (OPCON) of South Korean forces until 1978 when it was transferred to the newly established Combined Forces Command (CFC). Headed by the American Commander of U.S. Forces Korea (USFK), who is also Commander, U.N. Command, CFC reflects an unparalleled degree of U.S.–South Korean military integration. CFC returned peacetime operational control of South Korean forces to Seoul in 1994. If war became imminent, South Korean forces would become subordinate to the CFC commander, who in turn remains subordinate to both countries' national command authorities.[22]

In 2007, then-President Roh Moo-hyun requested that the United States return wartime OPCON of South Korean forces to Seoul.[23] Under the plan, the CFC commander would be a South Korean general with a U.S. general as deputy commander. The U.S. general would continue to serve as commander of UNC and USFK. The CFC commander, regardless of nationality, would always remain under the direction and guidance of U.S. and South Korean political and military national command authorities.[24] OPCON transfer has been delayed several times at Seoul's request. Late in 2014, Washington and Seoul agreed to postpone the scheduled wartime OPCON transfer and instead adopted a conditions-based rather than timeline-based policy.[25]

In the late 2010s, President Moon Jae-in advocated for an expedited OPCON transition during his administration, but critical conditions, including improvement in South Korean forces and a decrease in North Korea's nuclear program, had not been met.[26] Moon's successor, Yoon Suk Yeol, criticized his push for a premature return of wartime OPCON before Seoul had fulfilled the agreed-upon conditions.[27] As this book was being prepared, and almost two decades after the initial proposal, the transfer had still not been made.

The ROK's government provides substantial resources to defray the costs of U.S. Forces Korea. The bilateral, cost-sharing Special Measures Agreement has offset the non-personnel costs of stationing U.S. forces in South Korea since 1991 and is renegotiated every five years.[28] Korea spends 2.6 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) on defense and has pledged to reach the NATO minimum standard of 3.5 percent in core defense spending.[29] Seoul also absorbs costs not covered in the cost-sharing

agreement, including 91 percent ($10.7 billion) of the cost of constructing Camp Humphreys, the largest U.S. base on foreign soil.[30]

Traditionally, U.S. military forces have engaged regularly in major exercises with their ROK counterparts, including the Key Resolve and Foal Eagle series, both of which involved the deployment of substantial numbers of U.S. forces to the Korean Peninsula. Several large-scale exercises were cancelled during the first Trump Administration in 2018 but were resumed in 2022 along with the rotational deployment of U.S. strategic assets—bombers, aircraft carriers, and dual-capable aircraft.[31] U.S. and South Korean forces concluded their annual combined, joint, all-domain military exercise, Ulchi Freedom Shield 25, in August 2025.[32]

Japan–Korea–U.S. Trilateral Cooperation. Contentious historical issues related to Japan's 1910–1945 occupation of the Korean Peninsula have repeatedly constrained efforts to induce the two countries to cooperate more closely on defense. South Korean–Japanese relations took a downturn in 2018 when the South Korean Supreme Court ruled that Japanese companies could be forced to pay reparations for forced labor.[33] A December 2018 incident involving a South Korean naval ship and a Japanese air force plane further exacerbated tensions and led in turn to trade restrictions between the two countries.

To counter the growing North Korean threat, the United States, South Korea, and Japan resumed trilateral military exercises in 2022 after a five-year hiatus. The three countries engaged in anti-submarine and ballistic missile exercises to enhance security coordination. Since then, the three militaries have expanded the scope, scale, and complexity of trilateral military exercises. In March 2025, U.S., South Korean, and Japanese forces conducted a trilateral naval exercise. The joint effort was followed by another trilateral air and naval exercise, Freedom Edge, in September 2025.[34]

Elected in March 2022, President Yoon Suk Youl took a bold and politically risky step in March 2023 to improve bilateral relations with Japan. Yoon announced that Korean rather than Japanese companies would provide compensation to Korean victims of forced labor.[35] His decision led to the cancellation of Japanese export restrictions, progress toward enhancing economic trade, and discussion of possibly expanding military cooperation against the common North Korean threat.

During the August 2023 Camp David summit, the United States, South Korea, and Japan committed to institutionalizing trilateral security progress and creating a framework for greater cooperation against the North Korean and Chinese threats.[36] The three countries agreed to a structured multi-year plan of annual named, large-scale, multi-domain combined military exercises near the Korean Peninsula.[37] In 2024, the three countries activated a new mechanism for exchanging information on North Korean missile launches in real time to improve cooperation on ballistic missile defense.

During the February 2025 U.S.–Japan summit, President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba affirmed the importance of Japan–South Korea–United States trilateral partnership against the North Korean threat.[38] In an April 2025 meeting with his South Korean and Japanese counterparts, Secretary of State Marco Rubio pledged to "strengthen trilateral cooperation in advancing the safety, security, and prosperity of our three countries and the broader Indo-Pacific region, while upholding shared principles including the rule of law."[39]

The Philippines. In addition to being America's defense ally longer than any other nation in Asia, the Philippines shares a close and complex relationship with the United States. After more than 300 years of colonial rule, Spain ceded the Philippines to the United States at the conclusion of the Spanish–American War in 1898. Over the next four decades, the United States gradually established democratic institutions and provided for increased autonomy, which culminated in full independence in 1946.

From 1941–1945, Filipinos and Americans fought side by side against the Japanese and their occupation of the Philippines. The bond forged during the war has persisted into the 21st century. Recent polls show that more than 70 percent of Filipinos view the United States favorably—a greater share than is reported by some other U.S. defense treaty allies in the Indo-Pacific.[40]

In the wake of World War II, the U.S. and the Philippines signed a Mutual Defense Treaty in 1951 that strengthened their bilateral security ties. The Philippines was also home to some of the largest American bases in the Pacific during the Cold War. The 1947 U.S.–Philippines basing agreement allowed multiple U.S. bases in the country, the

largest of which were Clark Air Base and Subic Bay Naval Base.[41]

Subic Bay and the complex of airfields that developed around Clark Field (later Clark Air Base) provided unparalleled replenishment and repair facilities in addition to substantially extended deployment periods throughout the East Asian littoral. These bases, while controversial reminders to some Filipinos of the colonial era, generated economic activity and provided substantial lease payments to the government of the Philippines. In 1991, the United States decided to abandon Clark Air Base after it sustained significant damage from a volcanic eruption.[42] At that time, the U.S. also offered the Philippines a reduced payment for the continued use of Subic Bay alone.[43] The Philippines rejected the offer, thereby compelling the closure of U.S. Naval Base Subic Bay.[44]

Despite the base closures, U.S.–Philippine military relations remained close, and assistance began to increase again after 9/11. American forces supported Philippine efforts to counter Islamic terrorist groups, including the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), in the south of the Philippine archipelago. From 2002–2015, the U.S. rotated 500–600 special operations forces regularly through the Philippines to assist in counterterrorism operations. That operation, Joint Special Operations Task Force–Philippines (JSOTF–P), ended during the first part of 2015.[45]

The U.S. presence in Mindanao continued at a reduced level until the Trump Administration. Alarmed by the terrorist threat there, the U.S. began Operation Pacific Eagle–Philippines (OPE–P) in 2017. The presence of 200–300 American advisers proved valuable to the Philippines in its 2017 battle against Islamist insurgents in Marawi.[46]

Despite a period of instability in 2020 and 2021 when then-Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte considered abrogating the 1998 U.S.–Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement, U.S.–Philippine defense ties have maintained positive momentum in recent years under the administration of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. In April 2023, the two countries designated additional sites under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). The EDCA, signed in 2014, authorizes the rotational deployment of U.S. forces and prepositioning of matériel at agreed locations in the Philippines for security cooperation, joint training, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.[47] The four new sites brought the total of agreed locations to nine. Two of the newly announced locations are adjacent to the South China Sea, and two are located in areas of the Philippines that are geographically near Taiwan.[48]

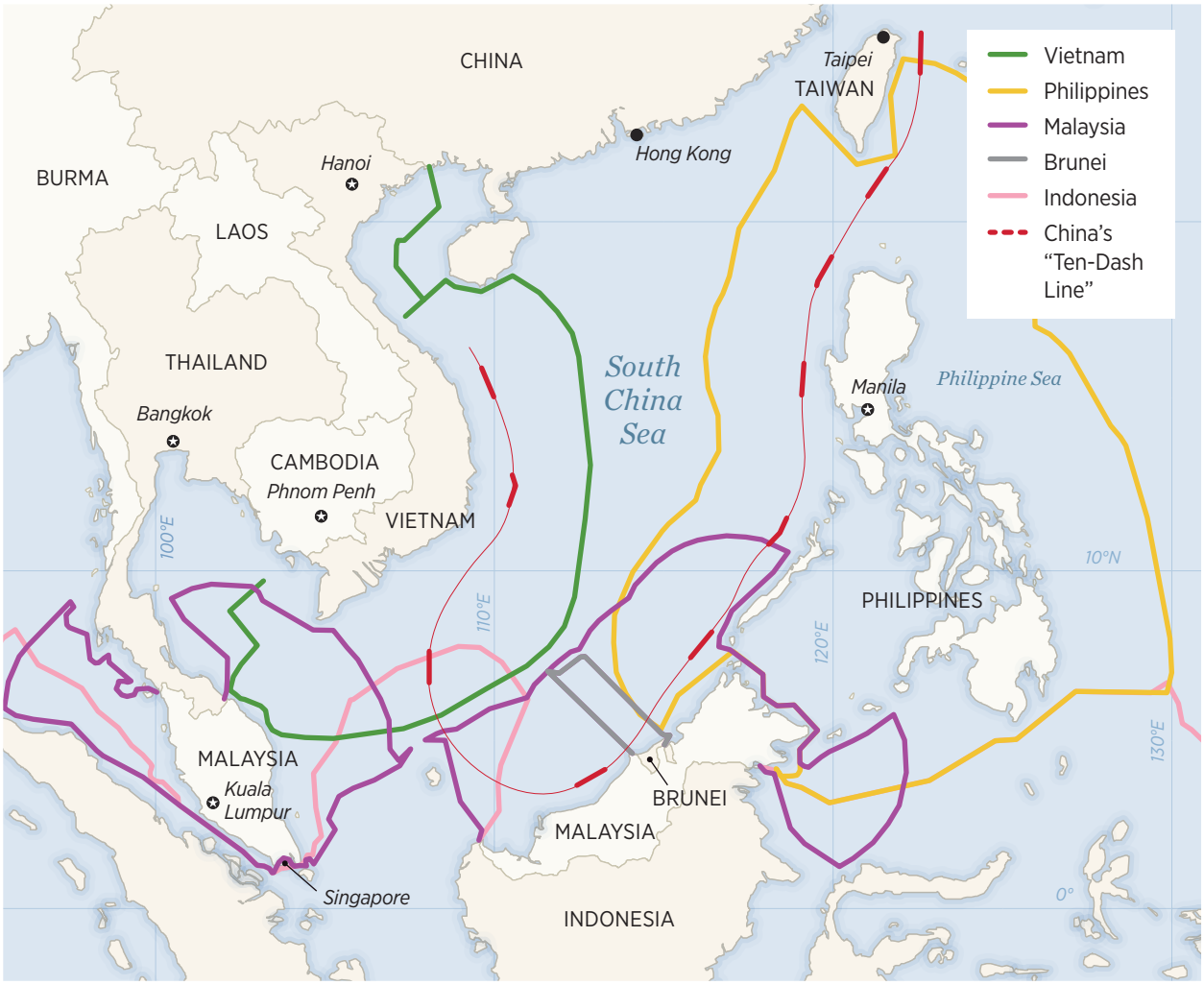
America's presence and capabilities in the Philippines have continued to deepen. In 2024, the U.S. Army deployed the Mid-Range Capability missile system, later renamed Typhon, to the Philippines for the first time.[49] The missile batteries, capable of long-range strikes and able to engage sea and air targets, remained in the Philippines as of early 2025.[50]

Despite a landmark 2016 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) arbitration ruling that China's claims over large areas of the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) are illegal and invalid, Chinese maritime aggression toward the Philippines in the South China Sea has escalated significantly.[51] Filipino efforts to resupply the *Sierra Madre*—a deliberately grounded World War II–era naval vessel that doubles as a military outpost at Second Thomas Shoal—have faced relentless interference from the Chinese Coast Guard as part of China's effort to intimidate Manila and erode the legitimacy of its territorial claims.[52] These provocative measures are often carried out on gray-hull warships retrofitted for "Coast Guard" activities, continuously challenging the Philippines' sovereignty and right to freedom of navigation in its own waters. In one particularly egregious incident in 2024, a Filipino sailor was severely injured when Chinese personnel armed with bladed weapons rammed, boarded, and attempted to scuttle Filipino vessels.[53] In August 2025, a Chinese naval destroyer collided with a Chinese Coast Guard cutter, killing two sailors as they were harassing a Filipino vessel operating in international waters.[54]

In recent years, the U.S. government has reiterated that any attack on the Philippines' armed forces, including in disputed territory, would be covered under the U.S.–Philippine Mutual Defense Treaty and would trigger U.S. intervention in defense of the Philippines.[55] In March 2025, Secretary of War Pete Hegseth reaffirmed this commitment, specifying that such an attack anywhere in the South China Sea would invoke U.S. mutual defense commitments.[56] Emboldened by this pledge to uphold the U.S.–Philippine Mutual Defense Treaty amid rising tensions with the PRC, Philippine Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro cited China's hostilities as an existential threat to his country's stability and

MAP 1

Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) Claims in the South China Sea



NOTE: Locations are approximate.
SOURCES: Center for Strategic and International Studies, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, "Maritime Claims of the Indo-Pacific," https://amti.csis.org/maritime-claims-map/ (accessed January 21, 2026), and *The Sankei Shimbun*. JAPAN Forward, "The 2023 Version of China's Map of Its Territory," 2023, https://japan-forward.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/The-2023-Version-of-Chinas-Map-of-Its-Territory-2.jpg (accessed January 21, 2026).

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the region at large. His remarks followed a surge in reckless aerial maneuvers by the People's Liberation Army Navy that buttressed his claims.[57]

During a trip to India in August 2025, Philippine President Marcos stated that the Philippines would inevitably become involved in any conflict over Taiwan. "There is no way that the Philippines can stay out [of a war] simply because of our physical geographic location," he told reporters. "If there is an all-out war, then we will be drawn into it."[58]

Thailand. The U.S.–Thai defense alliance is built on the 1954 Manila Pact, which established the now-defunct Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), and the 1962 Thanat–Rusk agreement.[59] These were supplemented by the Joint Vision Statements for the Thai–U.S. Defense Alliance of 2012

and 2020.[60] In addition, Thailand gained improved access to American arms sales in 2003 when it was designated a "major, non-NATO ally."

Thailand's strategic location in Southeast Asia has made it an important part of America's network of alliances in Asia. During the Vietnam War, U.S. aircraft based in Thailand ranged from fighter-bombers and B-52s to reconnaissance aircraft. In the first Gulf War and again in the Iraq War, some of those same air bases were essential for the rapid deployment of American forces to the Persian Gulf. Access to these bases remains critical to U.S. global operations.

In July 2025, recurring tensions along the Thai–Cambodian border escalated into open conflict with Cambodian rocket attacks on Thai territory resulting in Thai civilian casualties and airstrikes on Cambodian military positions using American F-16 fighter and Swedish Gripen fighter aircraft. A cease-fire was negotiated thanks to the efforts of President Trump, but significant tensions remain.[61] Cambodia maintains close security cooperation with China, most prominently by allowing China to develop dual-use naval facilities at Ream Naval Base in Cambodia.

U.S. and Thai forces exercise together regularly. Their collaboration in the annual Cobra Gold exercises, which were initiated in 1982, builds on a partnership that began with the dispatch of Thai forces to the Korean War, during which Thailand's approximately 12,000 troops suffered more than 1,200 casualties.[62] Cobra Gold is the world's longest-running international military exercise and one of its largest.[63] A recent Cobra Gold, held from February 25 to March 7, 2025, involved more than 3,200 U.S. personnel with 30 partner nations participating either directly or as observers in the exercise.[64] In past years, a small number of Chinese personnel also participated, but only in humanitarian assistance drills.[65]

While U.S.–Thai security cooperation remains strong, U.S. relations with Thailand overall have been marred by persistent strain and acute crises in recent years that are idiosyncratic among U.S. treaty allies. Military coups in 2006 and 2014 limited military-to-military relations for more than a decade. This was due partly to standing U.S. law prohibiting assistance to regimes that result from coups against democratically elected governments and partly to U.S. government policy choices.

In 2017, Thailand adopted a junta-drafted constitution that institutionalized elements of military rule. Nonetheless, the United States welcomed Thailand's first general elections under this constitution in 2019 as "positive signs for a return to a democratic government that reflects the will of the people."[66] Since then, bilateral military engagement has rebounded with high-level engagement and arms transfers to the Thai military of major systems like Stryker armored vehicles and Black Hawk helicopters. However, the United States denied Thailand's requests to acquire F-35 fighter jets because of concerns that the Thai military was not capable of operating the aircraft.[67]

Thailand is the only Southeast Asian country that was never colonized and has long pursued a hedging strategy that seeks to maintain good relations among competing powers.[68] In the post–Cold War era, this tradition has contributed to Thailand's geopolitical drift away from the United States and toward China—a trend that has been further encouraged by the suppression of democratic institutions in Thailand, resulting tensions in U.S.–Thai bilateral relations, China's amenability to anti-democratic regimes, and expanding Chinese–Thai economic relations. The United States and Thailand have differing threat perceptions concerning China, and this has undermined the U.S.–Thai alliance's clarity of purpose.

Relations between the Thai and Chinese militaries have improved steadily over the years. The two military forces have engaged in joint naval exercises since 2005, joint counterterrorism exercises since 2007, and joint marine exercises since 2010 and conducted their first joint air force exercises in 2015.[69] The Thais conduct more bilateral military exercises with China than any other military in Southeast Asia. President Barack Obama's sanctioning of the military junta that took power in 2014 was out of sync with historical precedent in the bilateral relationship and opened the path to this enhanced Chinese military relationship.

Thailand has purchased Chinese military equipment for many years. As of August 2025, its purchase of a Chinese diesel submarine appeared to be progressing after years of inaction; other purchases in recent years have included significant buys of battle tanks and armored personnel carriers.[70] According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), from 2006 to 2022, China

supplied significantly more military equipment to Thailand than was supplied by the U.S.[71]

These deals, however, have not been without difficulty. Thailand's 2017 acquisition of Chinese submarines, for example, has been stalled first by a combination of budget restraints, the priority of COVID-19 response, and public protest and more recently by Germany's refusal to allow export of the engines that the boats require; Thailand decided to move ahead with the purchase of Chinese submarines with Chinese engines in 2025.[72] Submarines could be particularly critical to Sino–Thai relations because their attendant training and maintenance would require a greater Chinese military presence at Thai military facilities.

Federated States of Micronesia, Republic of the Marshall Islands, and Republic of Palau. In the South Pacific, the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), and Republic of Palau, known collectively as the Freely Associated States, enjoy a unique defense partnership with the United States.[73] During World War II, these Pacific Islands were vitally important as the U.S. fought to gain a foothold in the Pacific theater in its campaign against Imperial Japan. After World War II, the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands was administered by the United States and often used for nuclear testing; the 1954 Castle Bravo test, for example, which involved the largest U.S. bomb ever tested, was conducted at Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands.[74] As the FSM, RMI, and Palau gained independence, they elected to enter a special association with the United States: the Compact of Free Association (CoFA).

About every 20 years, each of the Freely Associated States negotiates a renewal of the CoFA with the U.S. that governs its defense, economic, and immigration affairs. The CoFAs grant the U.S. control of all FAS defense matters and the power to veto any presence of third-party nations in the Compacts. The United States exclusively operates armed forces and bases throughout the FAS while being responsible for their protection, and CoFA citizens serve in the U.S. armed forces. Some restrictions apply: The United States cannot employ nuclear weapons in Palauan territory and can store them in the FSM or RMI only during war or emergency.[75]

The United States also has the right of strategic denial. Strategic denial allows the U.S. to determine unilaterally which militaries are authorized to enter FAS territories.[76] As China's influence and operations throughout the Pacific Islands grow, including most recently in the Solomon Islands, the right to strategic denial becomes increasingly important.[77]

All of the Freely Associated States have a "shiprider" agreement that allows U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) personnel and law enforcement to work with local maritime law enforcement to protect regional resources.[78] Due to limited cutter availability, the Navy often has provided a platform for this program, which has suffered as naval warships have become less available. The USCG opened the Commander Carlton S. Skinner Building, located at USCG Forces Micronesia/Sector Guam, in 2022.[79] In 2021, the U.S. signed an agreement to build a new military base in the FSM.[80] The RMI hosts U.S. Army Garrison Kwajalein Atoll, the country's second-largest employer, and the Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site.[81]

With respect to Palau, its "[e]ligible...citizens are able to serve in the U.S. armed forces, and do so at a higher rate per capita than any U.S. state."[82] In 2020, Palau requested that the Pentagon build permanent military bases.[83] It is expected that a $118 million foundational installation to support the first Tactical Mobile Over-the-Horizon Radar will be operational by 2026 with one site along the northern isthmus of Babeldaob and another on Angaur.[84] In 2020, the 17th Field Artillery Brigade maneuvered from Guam to Palau as part of the Defense Pacific 20 exercise with a High Mobility Artillery Rocket System.[85] In 2021, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin hosted Palauan President Surangel Whipps Jr. to discuss defense-related matters.[86] In 2022, the 1st Air Defense Artillery Battalion, based out of Okinawa, held its first Patriot live-fire exercise in Palau.[87]

Australia. Australia is one of America's most important Indo-Pacific allies. U.S.–Australia security ties date back to World War I. They deepened during World War II when, as Japanese forces attacked the East Indies and secured Singapore, Australia turned to the United States to strengthen its defenses and American and Australian forces cooperated closely in the Pacific War. Those ties and America's role as the main external supporter of Australian security were codified in the Australia–New Zealand–U.S. (ANZUS) pact of 1951.

Today, the two nations' chief defense and foreign policy officials meet annually in the Australia–United States Ministerial (AUSMIN) process to address

such issues of mutual concern as security developments in the Asia–Pacific region, global security and development, and bilateral security cooperation.[88] Australia also has long granted the United States access to several joint facilities including space surveillance facilities at Pine Gap, which has been characterized as "arguably the most significant American intelligence-gathering facility outside the United States," and naval communications facilities on the North West Cape of Australia.[89]

In 2011, U.S. access was expanded with the U.S. Force Posture Initiatives (USFPI), which included Marine Rotational Force–Darwin and Enhanced Air Cooperation. The rotation of as many as 2,500 U.S. Marines for a set of six-month exercises near Darwin began in 2012. The current rotation is comprised of 2,500 Marines that participate in multiple live-fire and joint exercises.[90] In the past, these forces have deployed with assets that include an MV-22 Osprey squadron, UH-1Y Venom utility and AH-1Z Viper attack helicopters, and RQ-21A Blackjack drones.

The USFPI's Enhanced Air Cooperation component began in 2017, building on preexisting schedules of activity. New activities include "fifth generation integration, aircraft maintenance integration, aeromedical evacuation (AME) integration, refueling certification, and combined technical skills and logistics training."[91] Enhanced Air Cooperation has been accompanied by the buildout of related infrastructure at Australian bases including a massive fuel storage facility in Darwin.[92] Other improvements are underway at training areas and ranges in Australia's Northern Territories.[93]

In 2021, the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom, which already enjoyed close security cooperation, inaugurated a new Australia–United Kingdom–United States initiative. A key component of this partnership is support for Australia's acquisition of "a conventionally armed, nuclear powered submarine capability at the earliest possible date, while upholding the highest non-proliferation standards."[94] Among other things, the partnership also focuses on improving cooperation in undersea robotic autonomous systems, long-range sensors, and hypersonic capabilities.[95]

On March 13, 2023, the AUKUS partners announced an arrangement under which Australia will acquire nuclear submarines, to be known as SSN-AUKUS, featuring U.K. submarine design and advanced U.S. technology. The next major milestone on this "optimum pathway" will be the arrival in 2027 of the first nuclear-powered U.S. submarine to be rotationally based in HMAS Stirling.[96]

Both Australia and the United Kingdom will deploy SSN-AUKUS, and both intend to begin domestic production before 2030. The U.K. plans to deliver its first SSN-AUKUS in the late 2030s, and Australia plans to deliver its first submarine in the early 2040s. The U.S. intends to sell three and as many as five *Virginia*-class submarines to Australia in the early 2030s. The agreement also includes increases in funding, training, port and personnel visits, rotations, and infrastructure projects.[97] Although maintaining political support for the decades-long commitments may prove challenging, the envisioned pathway should unleash a new era of AUKUS partnership and security in the Indo-Pacific.

This new cutting-edge cooperation under the USFPI and AUKUS comes on top of long-standing joint U.S.–Australia training, the most prominent example of which is Talisman Saber, a series of biannual exercises that involve U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines as well as almost two-dozen ships, multiple civilian agencies, and participants embedded from other partner countries.[98]

In April 2023, the government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese released what it described as "the most ambitious review of Defence's posture and structure since the Second World War."[99] This *Defence Strategic Review* assesses that the United States is no longer the "unipolar leader of the Indo-Pacific" and recommends that Australia adopt a strategy of denial with a focused force structure that prioritizes the "most significant military risks."[100] China's strategic intentions, demonstrated by its military buildups and provocative actions in the South China Sea and Pacific Islands, are assessed as likely to have a negative impact on Australian interests.[101] The Albanese government either agreed or agreed in principle to adopt or implement all of the review's 62 recommendations.[102]

In early August 2024, the United States and Australia announced plans to increase the rotational presence of U.S. forces in Australia by boosting maritime patrol, reconnaissance, and bomber aircraft capabilities.[103] At the same time, Australia signed a defense cooperation agreement with Indonesia to tighten intermilitary coordination and joint exercises.[104] Australia's precision-strike capabilities

and industrial-operational linkage with the United States were further bolstered early in 2025 by progress on a joint endeavor to co-manufacture Guided Multiple Launch Rocket Systems (GMLRS).[105] In addition, existing mineral refining facilities in Henderson, Australia, are being upgraded with Japanese investment to process rare earth minerals, mitigating the death grip China currently holds over the world in processing these critically important minerals for high-tech weaponry.

Singapore. The island state of Singapore is arguably America's closest non-ally partner in the Western Pacific. The agreements that support this security relationship are the 2015 U.S.–Singapore Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA), an update of a similar 2005 agreement, and the 1990 Memorandum of Understanding Regarding United States Use of Facilities in Singapore, which was renewed in 2019 for another 15 years.[106] The city-state also has ongoing defense ties to China and conducted a bilateral maritime drill in the South China Sea in May 2025.[107]

Pursuant to these agreements and other understandings, Singapore hosts U.S. naval ships and aircraft as well as Logistics Group Western Pacific, principal logistics command unit for the U.S. Seventh Fleet.[108] U.S. Navy P-8 Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft began rotational deployments to Singapore in 2015, and Littoral Combat Ships have deployed to Singapore since 2016.[109] The U.S. Air Force began rotational deployments of RQ-4 Global Hawk unmanned aircraft to Singapore in 2023.[110] Notably, the Changi Naval Base is capable of hosting U.S. aircraft carriers, which visit regularly; the USS *Carl Vinson* conducted the most recent port call in June 2025 .[111]

According to the U.S. Department of State, "[t]he United States has $8.38 billion in active government-to-government sales cases with Singapore under the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) system" and "[f]rom 2019 through 2021…authorized the permanent export of over $26.3 billion in defense articles to Singapore via Direct Commercial Sales (DCS)."[112] In addition, "more than 1,000 Singaporean military personnel participate in training, exercises, and Professional Military Education in the United States," and "Singapore has operated advanced fighter jet detachments in the continental United States for 27 years."[113]

In January 2020, it was announced that Singapore had been "formally approved to become the next customer of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, paving the way for a future sale."[114] Like others of its assets, the four F-35s were to be housed at training facilities in the U.S. and perhaps on Guam under an agreement reached in 2019.[115] In February 2024, it was reported that "Singapore's Defence Ministry plans to order eight more F-35A jets, which would bring the country's Joint Strike Fighter fleet to 20."[116]

New Zealand. New Zealand has been a U.S. ally since the 1951 ANZUS treaty. For much of the Cold War, U.S. defense ties with New Zealand were similar to those between America and Australia. In 1986, New Zealand was suspended from the ANZUS treaty for pursuing a "nuclear free zone" and barring nuclear-powered vessels from entering its 12-nautical-mile territorial sea.[117] The Kiwi government has become increasingly concerned about Chinese influence in the region, and the country's spy chief issued a warning about this influence in March 2025.[118] In February 2025, Wellington was shocked when Cook Islands, which New Zealand provides with security and financial support through a free association agreement, concluded a wide-reaching deal with China.[119]

Defense relations improved in the early 21st century as New Zealand committed forces to Afghanistan and dispatched an engineering detachment to assist the United States during the Iraq War. The 2010 Wellington Declaration and 2012 Washington Declaration, while not restoring full security ties, allowed the two nations to resume high-level defense dialogues.[120] As part of this warming of relations, New Zealand rejoined the multinational U.S.-led RIMPAC (Rim of the Pacific) naval exercise in 2012 and has participated in each iteration since then.

In 2013, Washington and Wellington announced the resumption of military-to-military cooperation, and in July 2016, the United States accepted an invitation from New Zealand to make a single port call, reportedly with no change in U.S. policy to confirm or deny the presence of nuclear weapons on the ship.[121] At the time of the visit in November 2016, both sides claimed to have satisfied their respective legal requirements.[122] Prime Minister John Key expressed confidence that the vessel was not nuclear-powered and did not possess nuclear armaments; the U.S. neither confirmed nor denied this.

The November 2016 visit occurred in a unique context, including an international naval review and a relief response to the Kaikoura earthquake.

Since then, there have been several other visits by U.S. Coast Guard vessels. In 2017, New Zealand lent one of its naval frigates to the U.S. Seventh Fleet following a deadly collision between the destroyer USS *Fitzgerald* and a Philippine container ship that killed seven American sailors.[123] In November 2021, the guided-missile destroyer USS *Howard* made a port call in New Zealand.[124]

In April and May 2024, a New Zealand Royal P-8A Poseidon conducted 11 missions to detect and deter evasions of United Nations Security Council resolutions with a particular focus on North Korea's testing of ballistic missiles.[125] In mid-summer 2024, the Royal New Zealand Navy maritime sustainment vessel arrived in Pearl Harbor to participate in RIMPAC 24.[126]

Prime Minister Christopher Luxon, elected in 2023, has ushered in a new era of responsible national security policy for New Zealand in a notable departure from the China-friendly policies of his predecessor, Jacinda Ardern. Luxon declared in a speech in August 2024 that New Zealand "can't achieve prosperity without security" and would need to increase its defense spending and work with other militaries in the region, especially traditional partners like Australia, Britain, NATO, and the United States.[127]

New Zealand is a member of the Five Eyes intelligence alliance with the U.S., Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom[128] After a period of record attrition in the New Zealand Defence Force that led to the idling of three naval vessels and early retirement of the country's P-3 Orion fleet, New Zealand is reportedly considering "the possibility of... becoming a non-nuclear partner of AUKUS" and increasing overall resources allocated to defense.[129] Luxon's 2025 Defense Capability Plan aims to increase New Zealand's defense spending to 2 percent of GDP over the next eight years with significant investments in increased strike capabilities in recognition of the fact that New Zealand faces "its most challenging and dangerous strategic environment [in] decades."[130]

Taiwan. When the United States shifted its recognition of the government of China from the Republic of China (Taiwan) to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1979, it also declared certain commitments to Taiwan's security. These commitments are embodied in the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) and the subsequent "Six Assurances."[131] In a critical move, key documents declassified late in the first Trump Administration further specified that sustained provision of weapons to Taiwan will be a function of China's threat to take military action.[132]

The TRA is an American law, not a treaty. Under the TRA, the United States maintains programs, transactions, and other relations with Taiwan through the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT). Except for the Sino–U.S. Mutual Defense Treaty, which had governed U.S. security relations with Taiwan and was terminated by President Jimmy Carter following the shift in recognition to the PRC, all other treaties and international agreements made between the Republic of China and the United States remain in force.

The TRA requires the United States "to provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character."[133] It also states that the U.S. "will make available to Taiwan such defense articles and services in such quantity as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability."[134] The U.S. has implemented these provisions of the act through sales of weapons to Taiwan.

The TRA states that it is also U.S. policy both "to consider any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means, including by boycotts or embargoes, a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States" and "to maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people on Taiwan."[135] To this end:

> The President is directed to inform the Congress promptly of any threat to the security or the social or economic system of the people on Taiwan and any danger to the interests of the United States arising therefrom. The President and the Congress shall determine, in accordance with constitutional processes, appropriate action by the United States in response to any such danger.[136]

Supplementing the TRA are the "Six Assurances" issued by President Ronald Reagan in a secret July 1982 memo and later publicly released and the subject of hearings held by the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations and the House Committee on Foreign Affairs in August 1982.[137] These assurances,

which were intended to moderate the third Sino–American communiqué, itself generally seen as one of the "Three Communiqués" that form the foundation of U.S.–PRC relations, specified that:

In negotiating the third Joint Communiqué with the PRC, the United States:

1. *has not agreed to set a date for ending arms sales to Taiwan;*
2. *has not agreed to hold prior consultations with the PRC on arms sales to Taiwan;*
3. *will not play any mediation role between Taipei and Beijing;*
4. *has not agreed to revise the Taiwan Relations Act;*
5. *has not altered its position regarding sovereignty over Taiwan;*
6. *will not exert pressure on Taiwan to negotiate with the PRC.*[138]

Although the United States sells Taiwan a variety of military equipment, provides limited training to Taiwanese military personnel, and sends observers to Taiwan's major annual exercises, it does not engage in joint exercises with Taiwan's armed forces. Some Taiwan military officers attend professional military education institutions in the United States, and there are regular high-level meetings between senior U.S. and Taiwan defense officials, both uniformed and civilian.

The United States does not maintain any military bases on Taiwan. However, in late 2021, after reports of an uptick in the number of U.S. military advisers in Taiwan, President Tsai Ing-wen acknowledged that they had been present at least since 2008.[139] In April 2024, a U.S. congressional report put the number of these advisers at 41, but media reports indicate that there could be as many as 200.[140] Most will continue to focus on training Taiwanese soldiers to use U.S.-sourced military equipment and to carry out military maneuvers with a view to defending Taiwan against a hypothetical attack by China.

In October 2024, the United States approved a $2 billion arms sale to Taiwan that featured the delivery of three National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile Systems (NASAMS) along with radar systems valued at $828 million.[141] As announced by the Pentagon's Defense Security Cooperation Agency, the sale also included coveted Advanced AMRAAM Extended Range surface-to-air missiles. In December 2025, the Trump Administration announced an $11.1 billion arms sale package to Taiwan that included HIMARS rocket systems, howitzers, Javelin anti-tank missiles, and drones.

In 2024 and 2025, China continued to intensify its military activities around the island nation with the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) and People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) constantly testing Taiwan's detection and defenses. The October 2024 Joint Sword 2024B exercise deployed 111 PLAAF aircraft that engaged in daily incursions into Taiwanese airspace and a nearly constant naval presence.[142] These gray-zone tactics make clear China's intent to desensitize the world to its constant military presence around the island and prepare for real-world combat scenarios. Taiwan responded to this increased aggression by announcing a 7.7 percent increase in its 2024 defense budget to roughly $19 billion and approximately 2.5 percent of GDP.[143]

President Lai Ching-te announced major defense increases in 2025 with Taiwan set to reach 3.32 percent of GDP by 2026 and 5 percent of GDP by 2030. President Lai announced the 5 percent increase in a speech at a Taiwanese naval base, stating that the increase "not only demonstrates our country's determination to safeguard national security and protect democracy, freedom and human rights," but also "shows our willingness to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the international community to jointly exert deterrent power and maintain peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region."[144]

Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia. In Southeast Asia, the U.S. has two major ongoing defense-related initiatives to expand its relationships and diversify the geographical spread of its forces:

- The Maritime Security Initiative, which is intended to improve the security capacity of U.S. partners, and
- The Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI), which bolsters America's military presence and makes it more accountable.

Among the most important of the bilateral partnerships in this effort are those with Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia. None of these relationships is as extensive and formal as America's relationship with Singapore, India, and U.S. treaty allies, but all are of growing significance.

Vietnam. After decades without diplomatic relations following the Vietnam War, improved bilateral relations in recent years have led to Vietnam's emergence as a nascent U.S. security partner. Relations have been strengthened by U.S. efforts to assist Vietnam in mitigating continued dangers from Vietnam War–era unexploded ordnance (UXO) as well as bilateral efforts to address other war-related issues. Since 1993, for example, "the U.S. government [has] contributed more than $230 million for UXO efforts," and "UXO assistance continues to be a foundational element of U.S.–Vietnam relations."[145]

Diplomatic relations between the United States and Vietnam were normalized in 1995. Since then, the two countries also have gradually improved their defense relationship, codified in 2011 with a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) Advancing Bilateral Defense Cooperation.[146] In 2015, the MOU was updated by the Joint Vision Statement on Defense Cooperation, which includes references to such issues as "defense technology exchange" and was implemented under a three-year 2018–2020 Plan of Action for United States–Viet Nam Defense Cooperation that was agreed upon in 2017.[147]

In 2022, the two sides updated their defense MOU, and in 2023, they upgraded the bilateral relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership that provides an "overarching framework" for relations that "have become increasingly cooperative and comprehensive, evolving into a flourishing partnership that spans political, economic, security, and people-to-people ties."[148] Nevertheless, significant limits on the U.S.–Vietnam security relationship persist, including a Vietnamese defense establishment that is very cautious in its selection of defense partners; ties between the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP); and a Vietnamese foreign policy that seeks to balance relationships with all major powers.

The most significant development with respect to security ties over the past several years has been relaxation of the U.S. ban on sales of arms to Vietnam. The U.S. lifted the embargo on maritime security–related equipment in the fall of 2014 and then ended the embargo on arms sales completely in 2016. The embargo had long served as a psychological obstacle to Vietnamese cooperation on security issues, but lifting it has not changed the nature of the articles that are likely to be sold.

Most transfers have been to the Vietnamese Coast Guard and include provision under the Excess Defense Articles (EDA) program of three decommissioned *Hamilton*-class cutters and 24 Metal Shark patrol boats as well as infrastructure support.[149] Vietnam is scheduled to take delivery of six Insitu ScanEagle unmanned aerial system (UAS) drones for its Coast Guard.[150] The U.S. is also providing T-6 turboprop trainer aircraft.[151] Agreement has yet to be reached with respect to sales of bigger-ticket items like refurbished P-3 maritime patrol aircraft, but they have been discussed.

The U.S.–Vietnam Cooperative Humanitarian and Medical Storage Initiative (CHAMSI) is designed to enhance cooperation on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief by, among other things, prepositioning related American equipment in Da Nang, Vietnam.[152] This is a sensitive issue for Vietnam and is not often referenced publicly, but it was emphasized during Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc's visit to Washington in 2017 and again during Secretary of Defense James Mattis's visit to Vietnam in 2018. In the same year, Vietnam participated in RIMPAC for the first time.

There have been three high-profile port calls to Vietnam since 2018. Early that year, the USS *Carl Vinson* and its escort ships visited Da Nang in the first port call by a U.S. aircraft carrier since the Vietnam War.[153] Another carrier, USS *Theodore Roosevelt*, visited Da Nang in March 2020, and the *USS Ronald Reagan* and two guided-missile cruiser escorts visited Da Nang in 2023.[154] These are significant signals from Vietnam about its receptivity to partnership with the U.S. military—messages underscored very subtly in Vietnam's *2019 Viet Nam National Defence* white paper.[155] The U.S., like others among Vietnam's security partners, remains officially restricted to one port call a year with an additional one to two calls on Vietnamese bases being negotiable.

Vietnam maintains close ties to China, especially economically, but China's nine-dash line claims against Vietnamese-claimed features in the South China Sea are a consistent source of dispute that

have boiled over in the past. In 2014, a state-owned Chinese oil company placed a deep-sea drilling rig in disputed waters and dispatched 80 ships (including seven military vessels) to support the rig. When Vietnam sent ships to disrupt the operation, China turned water cannons on the Vietnamese ships and rammed several of them, leaving Vietnamese sailors injured and damaging the vessels.[156] The incident caused anti-Chinese riots in Vietnam.[157]

Malaysia. The United States and Malaysia, despite occasional political differences, "have maintained steady defense cooperation since the 1990s." Examples of this cooperation have included Malaysian assistance in the reconstruction of Afghanistan and involvement in antipiracy operations "near the Malacca Strait and, as part of the international anti-piracy coalition, off the Horn of Africa" as well as "jungle warfare training at a Malaysian facility, bilateral exercises like Kris Strike, and multilateral exercises like Cobra Gold, which is held in Thailand and involves thousands of personnel from several Asian countries plus the United States."[158] The U.S. has occasionally flown P-3 and/or P-8 patrol aircraft out of Malaysian bases in Borneo.

In addition to cooperation on counterterrorism, the United States is focused on helping Malaysia to ensure maritime domain awareness. In 2020, then-Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for South and Southeast Asia Reed B. Werner summarized recent U.S. assistance in this area:

> [M]aritime domain awareness is important for Malaysia, given where it sits geographically. Since 2017, we have provided nearly US$200 million (RM853 million) in grant assistance to the Malaysian Armed Forces to enhance maritime domain awareness, and that includes ScanEagle unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), maritime surveillance upgrades, and long-range air defence radar.[159]

Malaysia has also been upgrading its fleet of fighter aircraft. In February 2023, Malaysia awarded a $920 million contract to Korea Aerospace Industries for 18 FA-50 light attack aircraft, the first of which is to be delivered in 2026.[160]

South China Sea territorial disputes continue to strain diplomatic ties between China and Malaysia. China's "2023 Standard Map," which Malaysia and other regional parties rejected, shows claims to the Luconia Shoals, which Malaysia considers to be part of its EEZ.[161] Chinese Coast Guard incursions near Malaysian oil and gas operations have likewise fomented consternation in Kuala Lumpur. Tensions were particularly elevated during a 2020 maritime incident involving a standoff with the Petronas-contracted West Capella vessel.[162] By early 2024, increased Chinese activity at Luconia Shoals had prompted the deployment of additional Malaysian naval resources.[163]

Malaysia has improved security relations with the United States and Japan in recent years partly because of concerns about China's designs on the South China Sea. In April 2024, Malaysia and Japan conducted joint drills in the South China Sea that featured the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force.[164] Nevertheless, China and Malaysia signed a five-year trade agreement during a June 2024 visit by Chinese Premier Li Qiang.[165]

Indonesia. The U.S.–Indonesia defense relationship was revived in 2005 following a period of estrangement caused by American concerns about the Indonesian government's violations of human rights. It now includes regular joint exercises, port calls, and sales of weaponry. Because of their impact on the operating environment in and around Indonesia, as well as the setting of priorities in the U.S.–Indonesia relationship, the United States has also worked closely with Indonesia's defense establishment to reform Indonesia's strategic defense planning processes.

Indonesia has an active territorial dispute with China in the South China Sea, particularly around the Natuna Islands.[166] Tensions have grown over the past several years as a result of repeated incursions by Chinese fishing vessels and coast guard ships into Indonesian waters. In October 2024, Indonesian patrol ships expelled a Chinese coast guard ship that had disrupted a survey by an Indonesian state-owned energy company.[167] As a result, Indonesian military modernization has accelerated along with long-standing and long-stalled ASEAN efforts to negotiate a code of conduct for the South China Sea with China.[168]

Indonesia's traditional policy of balancing alignment among multiple powers continues under President Prabowo Subianto, who assumed office in October 2024. In November 2024, true to its "free and active" foreign policy doctrine, Indonesia held its first bilateral naval exercise with Russia, Orruda

2024, in the Java Sea near Surabaya. The exercise involved four Russian warships and included a submarine visit.[169]

U.S.–Indonesia military cooperation is governed by the 2010 Framework Arrangement on Cooperative Activities in the Field of Defense, the 2015 Joint Statement on Comprehensive Defense Cooperation, and the 2010 Comprehensive Partnership.[170] These agreements have encompassed "more than 200 bilateral military engagements a year" and cooperation in six areas: "maritime security and domain awareness; defense procurement and joint research and development; peacekeeping operations and training; professionalization; HA/DR [Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief]; and countering transnational threats such as terrorism and piracy."[171]

In 2021, the agreements framed new progress in the relationship that included breaking ground on a new coast guard training base, inauguration of a new Strategic Dialogue, and the largest-ever U.S.–Indonesia army exercise.[172] In 2022, this exercise, Garuda Shield, involved "more than 4,000 combined forces from 14 countries."[173] As of January 2025, the U.S. "ha[d] $1.88 billion in active government-to-government sales cases with Indonesia under the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) system."[174] In February 2022, the U.S. agreed to sell Indonesia "up to 36" F-15s and related equipment and munitions worth $14 billion.[175] In 2024, it was reported that Indonesia had negotiated an agreement with Boeing to purchase 24 F-15EX jets.[176] In June 2024, the U.S. and Indonesia conducted Exercise Cooperation Afloat Readiness Training (CARAT) Indonesia, marking the 30th iteration of the exercise and commemorating 75 years of diplomatic relations.[177]

The United States and Indonesia also have signed two of the four foundational information-sharing agreements that the U.S. maintains with its closest partners: the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) and Communications Interoperability and Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA).

Afghanistan. On October 7, 2001, U.S. forces invaded Afghanistan in response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States. This was the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom to combat al-Qaeda and its Taliban supporters. The U.S., in alliance with the U.K. and anti-Taliban Afghan Northern Alliance forces, ousted the Taliban from power in December 2001. Most Taliban and al-Qaeda leaders fled across the border into Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas where they regrouped and in 2003 initiated an insurgency in Afghanistan that would endure for 20 years.

In 2018, U.S. Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad initiated talks with the Taliban in Doha, Qatar, in an attempt to find a political solution to the conflict and encourage the group to negotiate with the Afghan government.[178] In April 2021, remarking that America's "reasons for remaining in Afghanistan are becoming increasingly unclear," President Joseph Biden announced that the U.S. would be withdrawing its remaining 2,500 soldiers by September 11, 2021.[179]

As the final contingent of U.S. forces was leaving Afghanistan in August 2021, the Taliban launched a rapid offensive across the country, seizing provincial capitals and eventually the national capital, Kabul, in a matter of weeks. During the Taliban offensive, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani fled the country for the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) largely abandoned their posts.[180] Amid the chaos, a suicide bombing attack on the airport perimeter on August 26 killed 13 U.S. military personnel and nearly 200 Afghans. Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham–Khorasan (ISIS-K), the local branch of ISIS, claimed responsibility for the attack, and the Biden Administration subsequently launched drone strikes on two ISIS-K targets.[181]

The last U.S. forces were withdrawn on August 30, 2021, and the Taliban soon formed a new government comprised almost entirely of hard-line elements of the Taliban and Haqqani Network, including several individuals on the U.S. government's Specially Designated Global Terrorists list.[182] Since seizing power, the Taliban government has hunted down and executed hundreds of former government officials and members of the ANDSF. It also has cracked down on Afghanistan's free press, banned education for girls beyond sixth grade while the daughters of several Taliban leaders attend school in Pakistan and the UAE, and curtailed the rights of women and minorities. Under Taliban rule, the Afghan economy has collapsed.

The United States and most other countries have refused to offer the new Taliban government diplomatic recognition. Analysts believe al-Qaeda and ISIS-K are still operating in Afghanistan and

intend to conduct terrorist attacks abroad, including attacks against the U.S.[183] In August 2022, a U.S. drone strike killed al-Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahari, who was discovered residing in a safehouse in Kabul.[184] The U.S. government claimed the Taliban had violated its agreement with the U.S., reached at Doha, in which it pledged not to host al-Qaeda and other international terrorist groups.[185]

Most ambassadors still stay away from Kabul, but the same cannot be said for Russia and China. In July 2025, Russia became the first country to recognize the Taliban government, giving rise to discussions about potential joint investment projects.[186] In 2024, CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping accepted the Taliban ambassador's credentials, and in 2025, China's foreign minister visited the country to discuss whether Kabul might possibly join the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).[187]

The Taliban–Haqqani government has been the target of attacks, violence, and assassinations from ISIS-K. The Islamist extremist group has been competing with the Taliban–Haqqani Network alliance for territory and recruits ever since its emergence in 2015. Meanwhile, the Pakistani Taliban, allies of the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani Network, have escalated attacks against neighboring Pakistan since the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, straining relations between Islamabad and Kabul. In late 2024 and early 2025, the Taliban government itself became divided by a sharpening rift between the Haqqani Network and the Afghan Taliban leadership based in Kandahar.[188]

Pakistan. After decades of tactical collaboration during the Cold War, Pakistan and the United States developed an often troubled relationship after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. During the early stages of the war, the U.S. and NATO relied heavily on logistical supply lines running through Pakistan to resupply anti-Taliban coalition forces. For roughly the first decade of the war, approximately 80 percent of U.S. and NATO supplies traveled through Pakistani territory. Those amounts decreased progressively as the U.S. and allied troop presence decreased.

In the late 2000s, tensions emerged in the relationship when the United States alleged that Pakistan was providing a safe haven to the Taliban and its allies as they intensified their insurgency in Afghanistan. The Taliban's leadership council was located in Quetta, the capital of Pakistan's Baluchistan province. U.S.–Pakistan relations suffered an acrimonious rupture in 2011 when U.S. special forces conducted a raid on Osama bin Laden's hideout in Abbottabad less than a mile from a prominent Pakistani military academy.[189]

Since 2015, U.S. Administrations have refused to certify that Pakistan has met requirements to crack down on the Haqqani Network, an Afghan terrorist group with known links to Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Agency.[190] Relations deteriorated further in 2017 when President Trump suspended billions of dollars of U.S. military assistance to Pakistan and declared that "[w]e can no longer be silent about Pakistan's safe havens for terrorist organizations, the Taliban, and other groups that pose a threat to the region and beyond."[191]

Despite harboring and supporting a variety of known terrorist groups that operate in Afghanistan and Kashmir, Pakistan has been subject to terrorism from anti-state extremist groups, including the Pakistani Taliban (TTP). In the late 2000s and early 2010s, the TTP engaged in a bloody campaign of terrorism against the Pakistani state; from 2008–2013, approximately 2,000 civilians were killed in terrorist attacks each year. The Pakistan military launched a series of operations against these groups in 2014 and succeeded in progressively reducing terrorist violence in the years that followed.[192]

However, after the Afghan Taliban assumed power in Kabul, the number of attacks on Pakistan civilian and military targets spiked dramatically.[193] Islamabad has repeatedly accused the Taliban government in Kabul of harboring the TTP and ISIS-K—the two groups that took credit for most of these attacks—or failing to rein in their activities. Tensions reached a tipping point in April 2022 when the Taliban accused Pakistan of launching cross-border raids into Afghanistan to target these groups and causing dozens of civilian casualties in the process.[194]

The Pakistani government's peace negotiations with the TTP have produced a cycle of temporary cease-fires punctuated by cycles of violence and terrorism against civilians and Pakistani security personnel. Pakistan claims that the Taliban-led government in Kabul is either collaborating with the Pakistani Taliban or tacitly permitting them to use Afghan soil to launch attacks inside Pakistan. "With Taliban acquiescence, and at times support, TTP has intensified attacks inside Pakistan," a U.N.

Security Council Committee reported in 2024, including attacks on Chinese nationals that have strained ties between Islamabad and Beijing.[195]

Pakistan–U.S. relations improved modestly from 2018–2021 as Pakistan involved itself in bringing the Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table in Doha, but they have been notably strained since the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. President Biden reportedly refused to engage in direct communications with his Pakistani counterpart, and Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman visited Pakistan in October 2021 to discuss "the importance of holding the Taliban accountable to the commitments they have made." Days earlier, she noted that "[w]e don't see ourselves building a broad relationship with Pakistan. And we have no interest in returning to the days of hyphenated India–Pakistan."[196]

In a shocking revelation in December 2024, a senior White House official said that Pakistan was developing intercontinental ballistic missile capabilities that would allow it to "strike targets well beyond South Asia, including the United States."[197] Given that Pakistan's only real geopolitical rival—India—is already covered by its short-range and medium-range arsenal, Deputy National Security Adviser Jon Finer admitted that "it's hard for us to see Pakistan's actions as anything other than an emerging threat to the United States."[198] The revelation was paired with the announcement of unprecedented new sanctions on Pakistan's state-run ballistic missile program.[199]

In addition to a deteriorating security situation and relationship with the United States, Pakistan has been subject to paralyzing economic and political crises in recent years. Prime Minister Imran Khan was ousted from power in April 2022 after losing a no-confidence vote in parliament and was later barred from running for office for five years based on charges that he insists are politically motivated. Khan's arrest on corruption charges in May 2023 was followed by widespread protests.[200] However, by month's end, Khan was released, the protests abated, and several members of his political party defected.[201] He was arrested again in August 2023 on corruption charges and since then has remained in prison facing charges in over 100 court cases.

In 2024, Khan was sentenced to 24 years in prison for selling state gifts and leaking state secrets. Those sentences were suspended months later, but in January 2025, Khan was sentenced to 14 years in prison in a separate corruption case.[202] Former Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif cobbled together a patchwork coalition to govern the country following national elections in February 2024.

Pakistan has pursued relations with China over the past decade. The South Asian nation is one of the top recipients of Chinese BRI investment, including investment in the port of Gwadar, which could serve Chinese naval vessels.[203] Pakistan has also received substantial security assistance from China; according to one estimate, as much as 80 percent of Pakistan's weaponry used during the 2025 India–Pakistan War came from China.[204]

Pakistan's economy is teetering on the verge of collapse with skyrocketing inflation, dwindling foreign exchange reserves, and a growing and unsustainable mountain of government debt. These problems were made even worse by devastating floods in 2022 that killed thousands and affected millions. The Pakistani government is seeking billions of dollars in aid simply to meet its growing debt obligations but has found multilateral lenders like the International Monetary Fund and traditional patrons like Saudi Arabia and China increasingly unwilling to provide relief on favorable terms.

Pakistan's Nuclear Weapons Stockpile. In September 2021, the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* estimated that Pakistan "now has a nuclear weapons stockpile of approximately 165 warheads." The report added that "[w]ith several new delivery systems in development, four plutonium production reactors, and an expanding uranium enrichment infrastructure, however, Pakistan's stockpile... could grow."[205] It is therefore highly possible that approximately 200 warheads could be in Pakistan's arsenal by the end of 2025.

The possibility that terrorists could gain effective access to Pakistani nuclear weapons is contingent on a complex chain of circumstances. Concern about the safety and security of Pakistan's nuclear weapons increases when India–Pakistan tensions increase. If Pakistan were to move its nuclear assets or (worse) take steps to mate weapons with delivery systems, the likelihood of theft or infiltration by terrorists could well increase.

Increased reliance on non-strategic nuclear weapons is of particular concern because launch authorities for such weapons are typically delegated to lower-tier field commanders far from the central authority in Islamabad. This could give these

commanders the ability to launch nuclear weapons on their own authority in times of acute crisis or conflict. Another concern is that miscalculations could lead to regional nuclear war if India's leaders were to lose confidence that nuclear weapons in Pakistan are under government control or were to assume that they were under Pakistani government control after they had ceased to be. In this sense, either side could trigger a preemptive or surprise nuclear strike on the other with little to no tactical warning.

There are additional concerns that Islamist extremist groups with links to the Pakistan security establishment could exploit those links to gain access to nuclear weapons technology, facilities, and/or materials. The realization that Osama bin Laden stayed for six years within a mile of Pakistan's premier defense academy has fueled concern that al-Qaeda can operate relatively freely in parts of Pakistan. The Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI) ranked Pakistan's weapons-grade materials as 19th least secure in 2023 with only Iran's and North Korea's ranked as less secure at 21st and 22nd, respectively.[206] In its 2020 report, the NTI assessed that the "[m]ost improved among countries with materials in 2020 is Pakistan, which was credited with adopting new on-site physical protection and cybersecurity regulations, improving insider threat prevention measures, and more."[207] In 2023, however, it reported that "[e]ight countries—France, India, Iran, Israel, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, and the United Kingdom—have increased their stocks of weapons-usable nuclear materials, in some cases by thousands of kilograms per year, undermining minimization and elimination efforts and increasing the risk of theft."[208]

There is the additional (though less likely) scenario of extremists gaining access as the state collapses. Although Pakistan remains unstable because of its weak economy, regular terrorist attacks, sectarian violence, civil–military tensions, and the growing influence of religious extremist groups, a total collapse of the Pakistani state is highly improbable. The country's most powerful institution, the 550,000-strong army that has ruled for almost half of Pakistan's existence, would almost certainly intervene and reassume control if the political situation began to unravel. The potential breakup of the Pakistani state would have to be preceded by the disintegration of the army, which currently is not likely to happen.

Pakistan–India Conflict. India and Pakistan have fought four wars since partition in 1947, including conflicts in 1947, 1965, 1971, and 1999. Deadly border skirmishes across the Line of Control (LoC) in Kashmir, a disputed territory claimed in full by both India and Pakistan, are common occurrences.

With terrorist groups operating relatively freely in Pakistan and maintaining links to its military and intelligence services, there is a moderate risk that the two countries might eventually engage in another conflict. Pakistan's recent focus on incorporating tactical nuclear weapons into its warfighting doctrine has also raised concern that conflict now involves a higher risk of nuclear exchange. Early in 2019, Pakistan conducted several tests of its nuclear-capable, short-range NASR ballistic missiles.[209]

On December 25, 2015, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi made an impromptu visit to Lahore—the first visit to Pakistan by an Indian leader in 12 years—to meet with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. The visit created goodwill between the two countries and raised hope that official dialogue would soon resume. As happened frequently in the past, however, violence marred and undermined the diplomatic opening. One week after the meeting, terrorists attacked an Indian airbase at Pathankot, killing seven Indian security personnel.[210] Ever since then, a comprehensive India–Pakistan dialogue has remained frozen, although the two governments still communicate regularly through various channels.

Despite New Delhi's insistence that Pakistan take concrete, verifiable steps to crack down on terrorist groups before a comprehensive dialogue covering all outstanding issues—including the Kashmir dispute—can resume, the past few years have been marred by occasional terrorist attacks and cross-border shelling. In addition to the January 2016 attack on the Indian airbase at Pathankot, the Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) terrorist group was responsible for a February 2018 attack on an Indian army camp in Kashmir and a February 2019 attack on Indian security forces in Kashmir—the deadliest single terrorist attack in the disputed region since the eruption of an insurgency in 1989.[211]

Following the 2019 attack, India launched an even more daring cross-border raid. For the first time since the Third India–Pakistan War of 1971, the Indian air force crossed the LoC and dropped

ordnance inside Pakistan proper (as opposed to disputed Kashmir), targeting several JeM training camps in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.[212] Delhi stressed that the "non-military" operation was designed to avoid civilian casualties and was preemptive in nature because India had credible intelligence that JeM was attempting other suicide attacks in the country.

In response, Pakistan launched fighter jets to conduct their own strike on targets located on India's side of the LoC in Kashmir, prompting a dogfight that resulted in the downing of an Indian MiG-21. Pakistan released the captured MiG-21 pilot days later, ending the brief but dangerous crisis.[213] Skirmishes at the LoC continued through 2020, but by early 2021, India and Pakistan were experiencing at least a partial diplomatic thaw as both countries dealt with the global COVID-19 pandemic. That February, both countries agreed to observe a strict cease-fire along the LoC, and in March, Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, declared in a speech that "it is time to bury the past and move forward."[214]

In March 2022, India accidentally fired a cruise missile into Pakistan. The unarmed missile flew roughly 100 kilometers into Pakistan and crashed harmlessly without casualties. The Indian government blamed a "technical malfunction" during "routine maintenance."[215] Pakistan called the launch irresponsible and demanded a "joint probe to accurately establish the facts" in a response that one correspondent characterized as "measured."[216]

In January 2023, India notified Pakistan that it was seeking modification of the more than six-decade-old Indus Water Treaty, which governs water-sharing arrangements between the two countries, after Pakistan objected to the construction of an Indian dam on the Chenab river.[217] India sent another notification in September 2024 requesting that the terms of the treaty be renegotiated, but to no avail.

In a March 2025 interview, Indian Prime Minister Modi showed little appetite for a grand rapprochement with Pakistan, noting that "every noble attempt at fostering peace was met with hostility and betrayal" and urging Pakistan to "abandon the path of terrorism."[218] In April 2025, India accused Pakistan of backing the terrorists who committed the Pahalgam terrorist attack in Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir. In May 2025, in the wake of the terrorist attack, India and Pakistan engaged in a brief military conflict in which they exchanged air, missile, and drone strikes. After four days, both sides announced a cease-fire, which thus far has lasted.[219]

India. During the Cold War, U.S.–India military cooperation was minimal except for a brief period during and after the China–India border war in 1962 when the U.S. provided India with supplies, arms, and ammunition. The rapprochement was short-lived, and the U.S. suspended arms and aid to India following the second Indo–Pakistan war in 1965.

The relationship was largely characterized by mistrust in the 1970s under the Nixon Administration, and America's ties with India hit a low point during the third Indo–Pakistan war in 1971 when the United States deployed the aircraft carrier USS *Enterprise* toward the Bay of Bengal in a show of support for Pakistani forces. Months earlier, India had signed a major defense treaty with the Soviet Union. India's close defense ties to Russia and America's close defense ties to Pakistan left the two countries estranged for the duration of the Cold War.

Military ties between the United States and India began to improve dramatically under the George W. Bush Administration following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 and the signing of a 10-year defense partnership and landmark civil nuclear deal in 2005.[220] More recently, the two sides have established a robust strategic partnership based on mutual concerns about China's increasingly belligerent behavior and converging interests in countering regional terrorism and promoting a "free and open Indo-Pacific."[221] The U.S. has supplied India with more than $25 billion worth of U.S. military equipment since 2008, including C-130J and C-17 transport aircraft, P-8 maritime surveillance aircraft, Chinook airlift helicopters, Apache attack helicopters, artillery batteries, drones, and Firefinder radar.[222] The two countries also have several information-sharing and intelligence-sharing agreements in place, including one that covers commercial shipping in the Indian Ocean.[223]

Defense ties have advanced at an accelerated rate since the election of Prime Minister Modi in 2014. In 2015, the U.S. and India agreed to renew and upgrade their 10-year Defense Framework Agreement. In 2016, the two governments finalized

the text of a Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) that allows each country to access the other's military supplies and refueling capabilities through ports and military bases, and the U.S. designated India a "major defense partner," a designation unique to India that is intended to facilitate its access to American defense technology.[224] Since then, Indian and U.S. warships have begun to offer each other refueling and resupply services at sea.[225] In October 2020, U.S. P-8 maritime surveillance aircraft were refueled for the first time at an Indian military base in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands near the mouth of the Strait of Malacca.[226]

America's strategic and defense ties with India advanced in several important ways during the first Trump Administration. In 2018, India was granted STA-1 status, which eases controls on exports of advanced defense technology.[227] India is the third Asian country after Japan and South Korea to be granted STA-1 status. In the same year, India established a permanent naval attaché representative to U.S. Central Command in Bahrain, fulfilling a long-standing request from New Delhi.

In 2018, the two countries also signed the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), which will allow the U.S. to sell India encrypted communications equipment and create secure channels for communication between the Indian and U.S. militaries.[228] In 2020, the U.S. and India signed the Basic Exchange Cooperation Agreement (BECA), which creates a framework for the sharing of geospatial intelligence.[229]

Beyond these "foundational" or "enabling" military agreements, the two countries have signed an agreement on Helicopter Operations from Ships Other Than Aircraft Carriers (HOSTAC) and an Industrial Security Annex (ISA) that allows the U.S. to share classified information with private Indian defense firms.[230] The two countries also have initiated a new 2+2 defense and foreign ministers dialogue while reviving the Quad grouping, which joins India and the U.S. with Australia and Japan.[231] In 2020, the four countries held the first Quad naval exercise since 2007. When a deadly crisis erupted at the China–India border in 2020, the Trump Administration provided India with two advanced surveillance drones and cold-weather gear for Indian soldiers.

In recent years, India has made additional purchases of U.S. military hardware, including C-17 transport aircraft, Apache attack helicopters, MH-60R Seahawk multi-mission helicopters, Sig Sauer assault rifles, and M777 ultralight howitzer artillery guns.[232] It also is reportedly considering the purchase of 30 armed MQ-9 reaper drones (10 each for the three branches of its military) for $3 billion and a half-dozen highly capable P-8I maritime aircraft (to supplement the dozen currently in operation) for nearly $2 billion.[233]

New Delhi and Washington regularly hold joint annual military exercises across all services. They include the Yudh Abhyas army exercises, Red Flag air force exercises, and Malabar naval exercise, which added Japan and Australia as permanent participants in 2012 and 2020, respectively. In late 2019, India and the U.S. held their first tri-service military exercise, Tiger Triumph.[234] In February 2022, the U.S. Navy participated for the first time in the MILAN naval exercise, a multilateral exercise in the Bay of Bengal that was led by the Indian navy and involved the navies of more than a dozen countries.

At the April 2022 India–U.S. 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue in Washington, the two sides signed "a Space Situational Awareness arrangement" and "agreed to launch an inaugural Defense Artificial Intelligence Dialogue."[235] They also committed to exploring the coproduction of Air-Launched Unmanned Aerial Vehicles under the Defense Trade and Technology Initiative (DTTI). In addition, India agreed "to join the Combined Maritime Forces Task Force…to expand multilateral cooperation in the Indian Ocean," and the two sides agreed to "explore possibilities of utilizing Indian shipyards for repair and maintenance of ships of the U.S. Maritime Sealift Command to support mid-voyage repair of U.S. naval ships."[236] The U.S. Department of Defense assessed that these initiatives "will allow the U.S. and Indian militaries to work more seamlessly together across all domains of potential conflict" and "jointly meet the challenges of this century."[237]

In October 2022, the U.S. Army conducted joint exercises with the Indian army in the Himalayas roughly 50 miles from the disputed China–India border. During a visit to India earlier in 2022, "the US Army's Pacific Commanding General Charles Flynn described China's military build-up near the disputed border as 'alarming.'"[238]

In February 2023, the Biden Administration revealed that it was considering an application from General Electric for joint production of F414 jet engines for fighter aircraft that are produced in India.

The Administration committed to an "expeditious review" of the application.[239] Jet engine technology is among the United States' most advanced, valuable, and sensitive military secrets; any technology transfer arrangement that included adequate safeguards would therefore mark a qualitative evolution of the India–U.S. defense partnership to exceed even some of America's legacy treaty alliances.

In May 2024, the two sides conducted their first space defense tabletop exercise. In August 2024, they signed a Security of Supply Arrangement (SOSA), enhancing the mutual supply of defense goods and services.[240] In October 2024, India agreed to purchase 31 U.S. MQ-9B drones for all three Indian services for roughly $3.8 billion.[241] Recent years also have seen the first demonstration of the Javelin and Stryker systems in India and deployment of the first Indian Liaison Office to U.S. Special Operations Command.

During Prime Minister Modi's February 2025 visit to Washington, President Trump for the first time offered to sell India the advanced U.S. fifth-generation F-35 fighter. During that visit, the two sides announced a range of new cooperative initiatives that included an Autonomous Systems Industry Alliance (ASIA); a new Catalyzing Opportunities for Military Partnership, Accelerated Commerce and Technology for the 21st Century (COMPACT) initiative; a Transforming the Relationship Utilizing Strategic Technology (TRUST) initiative; a new India–U.S. Strategic Mineral Recovery Initiative; and a U.S.–India AI infrastructure road map. Indian and U.S. private-sector firms also announced that they jointly produce sonobuoys and would collaborate on AI-driven maritime systems capable of enhancing undersea warfare and drone-swarming capabilities. Finally, they agreed to enhance cooperation on nuclear energy including small modular reactors. Micron Technology, an American semiconductor firm, also pledged to spend more than $2.75 billion on construction of an assembly and test facility in India. In 2025, the U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration and India's space agency for the first time will jointly conduct scientific research onboard the International Space Station.

During the May 2025 India–Pakistan conflict, the Indian armed forces achieved mixed results. Indian missile strikes successfully targeted multiple Pakistani targets, the defenders of which had only limited success at intercepting them, while India's integrated air and missile defenses were able to intercept Pakistani strikes. However, Pakistan used Chinese-provided jets to down from one to three Indian jets. The United States did not directly mediate the talks but nevertheless played a critical role in talking to both sides to facilitate a cease-fire.[242]

Quality of Key Allied or Partner Armed Forces in Asia

Because Asia lacks an integrated, regional security architecture along the lines of NATO, the United States partners with most of the region's nations on a bilateral basis. This means that there is no single standard to which all of the local militaries aspire; instead, capabilities are influenced by local threat perceptions, institutional interests, physical conditions, historical factors, and budgetary considerations.

Moreover, most Asian militaries have limited combat experience, particularly experience in high-intensity air or naval combat. Some, like Malaysia, have not fought an external war since gaining independence in the mid-20th century. The Indochina wars—the most recent high-intensity conflicts—are now more than 50 years in the past. It is therefore unclear how well Asia's militaries have trained for future warfare and whether their doctrines will meet the exigencies of wartime realities.

Based on examinations of equipment, we assess that several Asian allies and friends have potential military capabilities that are both substantial and supported by robust defense industries and significant defense spending. The defense budgets of Japan, South Korea, and Australia are estimated to be among the world's 15 largest, and the three countries' military forces field some of the world's most advanced weapons, including F-35s in the militaries of all three countries; airborne early warning (AEW) platforms; Aegis-capable surface combatants and modern diesel-electric submarines; and third-generation main battle tanks. As noted, all three nations are also involved in the production of F-35 fighters.

At this point, both the Japanese and Korean militaries arguably are more capable than most European militaries, at least in terms of conventional forces. Japan's Self Defense Forces and South Korea's military field more tanks, principal surface combatants, and combat-capable aircraft than are fielded by their European counterparts.

Both South Korea and Japan are also increasingly interested in developing missile defense capabilities, including joint development and coproduction in the case of Japan. After much negotiation and indecision, South Korea deployed America's Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system on the peninsula in 2017.[243] South Korea also has the Korea Air and Missile Defense system, which is comprised of Patriot Advanced Capacity-3 (PAC-3) and indigenous Chunggung medium-range missile interceptors, and is developing a long-range missile defense system in pursuit of an indigenous missile defense capability.

Japan's Aegis-class destroyers are equipped with SM-3 missiles, and the government decided in 2017 to install the Aegis Ashore missile defense system to supplement its Patriot missile batteries.[244] In June 2020, citing the potential for the interceptor missile's first-stage booster to fall onto populated areas, Tokyo unexpectedly cancelled plans to build two Aegis Ashore missile defense sites. Other likely factors in the decision include the program's overall cost, inept handling of the site-selection process, and government unwillingness to press national objectives against local resistance.[245] Currently, Tokyo plans to build an additional two Aegis-capable ships to compensate for cancellation of the Aegis Ashore project.

India now has the world's fourth largest military budget (approximately $75 billion in 2025) and second largest military (approximately 1.5 million personnel).[246] The Indian navy is one of the few in the world to operate indigenously developed aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines; it commissioned its first indigenously built aircraft carrier in September 2022 and is now operating a refitted Russian carrier. Both conventional (non-nuclear) carriers are around 45,000 tons; a second, 65,000-ton conventional indigenous carrier is under construction and expected to enter service in the early 2030s. India also operates 17 diesel electric submarines and one nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine, the *Arihant*, and has negotiated deals for the leasing of three Russian *Akula*-class submarines for 10 years each, the first in 1988, the second in 2012, and the third in 2019.[247]

The Indian air force operates several world-class platforms, including American-built P-8 Poseidon surveillance aircraft and Apache attack helicopters, as well as C-130J and C-17 heavy transport aircraft. Its combat aircraft fleet is comprised of European, Russian, and Indian platforms with the most advanced being the Sukhoi Su-30MKI.

The Indian army deploys a large fleet of Russian-origin tanks, advanced missile defense systems like the S-400, and the U.S.-origin M777 light howitzer. India also hosts advanced ballistic and cruise missile capabilities that include indigenously developed, long-range, nuclear-capable ICBMs and the supersonic, nuclear-capable BrahMos cruise missile developed jointly with Russia.

Although its small population and physical borders limit the size of its military, Singapore fields some of the region's highest-quality forces. Its ground forces can deploy third-generation Leopard II main battle tanks, and its fleet includes four conventional submarines (to be replaced by four new, more capable submarines from Germany)[248] and six frigates and eight missile-armed corvettes. Its air force has F-15E Strike Eagles and F-16s as well as one of Southeast Asia's largest fleets of airborne early warning and control aircraft (G550-AEW aircraft) and two squadrons of aerial refuelers, one comprised of KC-130 tankers and the second of Airbus A330 Multi Role Tanker Transport aircraft, that can help to extend range or time on station.[249]

In January 2020, the U.S. Department of State cleared Singapore to purchase "four short-take-off-and-vertical-landing F-35 variants with an option for eight more of the 'B' models." Delivery is scheduled to begin in 2026.[250] In February 2024, Singapore announced plans to purchase eight F-35A fighter jets, which will bring its total F-35 fleet to 20 by the 2030s.[251]

Australia's very capable armed forces are smaller than NATO militaries but have major operational experience, having deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan as well as to help the Philippines with its southern insurgency. The Australian military deploys advanced surveillance aircraft and AWACS, advanced diesel-electric submarines, F-18 and F-35 fighter aircraft, and modern frigates and destroyers. Under the AUKUS arrangement, Australia will purchase three U.S. *Virginia*-class nuclear-powered submarines by the early 2030s, after which Australia and the U.K. will jointly develop a new class of nuclear-powered submarines to be based on U.S. designs and delivered in the late 2030s to early 2040s.[252]

At the other extreme, the Armed Forces of the Philippines are among the region's weakest military

forces. Having long focused on waging counterinsurgency campaigns while relying on the United States for its external security, the Philippines spent only 1.4 percent of GDP on its military in 2022.[253] The Philippine navy's most modern ships are three former U.S. *Hamilton*-class Coast Guard cutters. The Philippine navy has taken delivery of new South Korean–built frigates and is set to buy several other South Korean–built naval vessels.[254] The Philippines also has purchased 12 light attack fighter aircraft from South Korea and has been cleared to acquire 12 new American F-16s.[255] In January 2022, the Philippines signed a deal worth more than $374 million to acquire BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles.[256]

Though not a formal ally, Taiwan is also vitally important to U.S. interests, and its military preparedness has been a growing concern for U.S. policymakers. Taiwan has a strong professional military, but it is vastly outnumbered by China's. Taiwan's conscription program has gradually deteriorated in recent decades. Administrations from both of Taiwan's main political parties gradually decreased the length of mandatory conscription from over two years in 2000 to just four months in 2013 with a goal of eventually transitioning to all-volunteer armed forces.[257] With cross-Strait tensions surging, the government reimplemented one full year of conscription for able-bodied men starting in 2024.[258] While Washington welcomed this much-needed course correction, training of Taiwan's conscripts remains insufficient, and a "substitute service" scheme continues to allow many able-bodied young men to forego military service in favor of alternative activities that often do little to strengthen the island's security.

Taiwan also faces criticism in Washington for not spending enough on its military. Although Taiwan consistently spends more money on defense than many formal U.S. allies spend and plans to increase its spending to 3 percent of GDP in 2025, this is not perceived as enough to counter the threat from China; and while Taiwan spends a higher proportion of its total government budget on defense than is spent even by the U.S., it is still not enough to support acquisition of the equipment, technology, and talent necessary to compete with a military as large and technologically advanced as China's.

Some in Washington's policy community openly call for Taipei to spend 10 percent of its GDP on defense, but such a percentage is not possible given the island's political and social circumstances.[259] Adding to the difficulty, the arms and equipment Taiwan purchases from the U.S. are consistently delayed, and this has led to a $21.5 billion backlog as of February 2025.[260] This not only impedes Taiwan's military preparedness; it also strengthens political arguments in Taiwan against spending more on defense.[261]

The armed forces of American allies from outside the region, particularly those of France and the United Kingdom, should also be mentioned. France has overseas bases in New Caledonia and the South Pacific, locally based assets, and 4,150 personnel in the region.[262] It also conducts multiple naval deployments each year out of Metropolitan France. The U.K. is similarly active in the region and, given its unparalleled integration with U.S. forces, can employ its capability directly in pursuit of shared objectives. It has a naval logistics facility in Singapore and Royal Gurkhas stationed in Brunei and has been an integral part of a U.S.-led mission to monitor seaborne evasions.

Relationships with the People's Republic of China and Russia

China. The People's Republic of China is the U.S.'s most powerful and capable adversary. Its power, both military and economic, relative to that of the United States outstrips the threat posed by the Soviets at the height of their power. Much of what the United States does today in the Indo-Pacific is aimed at deterring and, if necessary, defeating Chinese aggression.

China enjoys a broad range of relationships in the Indo-Pacific, and in most cases, its presence in regional capitals, both diplomatic and economic, has been expanding steadily for more than two decades. China is the top trading partner for most Indo-Pacific nations, including U.S. partners and allies like Japan, South Korea, and India. (It is also America's top trading partner outside of North America.) On balance, the majority of trade by these partners and allies is with Western nations, which underscores the importance of coordination in economic statecraft.

China's economic reach was further enhanced by its Belt and Road Initiative, through which Beijing spent over $100 billion investing in infrastructure projects across the Eurasian landmass and beyond

between 2015 and 2025. The BRI has begun to fizzle out in recent years as China's slowing economy has shrunk the amount of capital available for frontier infrastructure investments and as several of China's BRI investments have petered out, proven to be unprofitable, or generated a backlash in the host country. Nonetheless, the economic and diplomatic foothold China established in many countries through the BRI has endured.

In addition to being the top trading and investment partner for many Asian nations, China is expanding its influence through technology investments. Chinese infrastructure giants like Huawei are building out telecommunications networks across Asia even as security and espionage-related concerns have limited their reach inside the West and select countries like India and Japan.

China is also a much more active diplomatic partner than are many of its Western counterparts, generally sending high-level representation to regional diplomatic gatherings to which the U.S. government sends lower-level representation—if it attends at all. For many regional capitals, China's simply "showing up" counts for a great deal. Yet Beijing's often heavy-handed diplomatic tone has worked against what otherwise would have been successes. The Chinese government also spends significant capital and energy on its courting of Asian elites, offering all-expenses-paid trips to China and lucrative financial opportunities. The large ethnic Chinese diaspora in countries like Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore offers additional linkages to Southeast Asia.

Even though China's economic and diplomatic reach is expansive and growing, its political relationships across Asia reflect a more mixed picture with security concerns about China at elevated or rising levels across much of the region. China's geopolitical relationships span a broad spectrum and include veritable Chinese client states like Cambodia and Laos; intimate defense partners like Russia, Pakistan, Iran, and North Korea; a large group of relative "neutrals" like Indonesia and Malaysia in Southeast Asia, Nepal and Bangladesh in South Asia, or the "Stans" of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan); countries with more elevated levels of friction with China over historical issues or their closeness to the U.S. like Vietnam, Singapore, Australia, South Korea, or the Pacific Islands; and countries like Japan, India, the Philippines, and the self-governing island of Taiwan that are engaged in active territorial disputes with China that cause their relations with Beijing to be fairly antagonistic.

Thus, while China enjoys broad economic relations across the Indo-Pacific and relatively positive relations with most capitals including the large number of "neutrals," it is worth noting that the handful of countries that are more openly antagonistic to Beijing, while small in number, are disproportionately large and powerful. The U.S. economy ($29.2 trillion) is still larger than China's ($18.8 trillion) in nominal GDP terms, and the disparity grows larger when partners and allies are included. China and its close strategic partners—Russia, Iran, North Korea, and Pakistan—enjoy a combined GDP of $21.8 trillion. The Quad nations, the Philippines, and Taiwan combined roughly double that figure to $42 trillion in nominal GDP. If European allies are added, the figure surpasses $60 trillion.

Russia. Russia's political and economic ties across the Indo-Pacific are far less expansive than China's. This is partly a byproduct of their disparity in size: China's economy is nearly 10 times larger than Russia's. It is also a product of geography as Russia's population centers and historical orientation historically have been Western-facing. Over 75 percent of Russia's population lives in "European Russia" west of the Urals despite its being only 25 percent of Russia's landmass.

Russia began "looking east" much more vigorously only after its 2014 invasion of Crimea and the resulting wave of Western sanctions and isolation led Moscow to conclude that its future lies in a closer strategic and energy partnership with China. Since that time, the China–Russia tactical partnership has evolved into a much deeper and broader comprehensive strategic partnership. China is now Russia's closest ally in Asia and likely its closest ally overall, save for veritable client states like Belarus.

Russia still exerts extraordinary influence over the former Soviet Republics of Central Asia—Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan—but what was once Russia's exclusive domain is now a more open playing field as China has slowly become a top economic and diplomatic partner of choice for many of these five countries. Russia's reach into South, Southeast, and East Asia is much more limited, although it does maintain robust defense ties with a number of countries

weaned onto Soviet military hardware during the Cold War. In 2024, the top three destinations for Russian arms exports were China, India, and Kazakhstan. These arms exports have shrunk substantially by volume since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, but other countries like Burma, Vietnam, and Egypt remain large importers of Russian arms.

The Russian military has also sustained a robust naval presence in the Indo-Pacific. In recent years, it has taken part in increasingly sophisticated military exercises with China, deployments of naval forces that have provocatively circumnavigated Japan and operated near sensitive undersea cables near Taiwan. Russia also has one active territorial dispute in the region: a dispute with Japan over the Kuril Islands, four islands occupied by the Soviet Union in 1945 following Japan's surrender at the end of World War II. Technically, Japan and Russia have yet to sign a peace treaty, and ongoing talks to that end were suspended after Japan imposed sanctions on Russia following its invasion of Ukraine.

U.S. Force Presence and Infrastructure: U.S. Indo-Pacific Command

Established in 1947 as U.S. Pacific Command, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) is the oldest and largest of America's unified commands. According to its website:

> USINDOPACOM protects and defends, in concert with other U.S. Government agencies, the territory of the United States, its people, and its interests. With allies and partners, USINDOPACOM is committed to enhancing stability in the Asia–Pacific region by promoting security cooperation, encouraging peaceful development, responding to contingencies, deterring aggression, and, when necessary, fighting to win. This approach is based on partnership, presence, and military readiness.[263]

USINDOPACOM's area of responsibility (AOR) "encompasses about half the earth's surface, stretching from the waters off the west coast of the U.S. to the western border of India, and from Antarctica to the North Pole." Its 38 countries represent "more than 50 percent of the world's population" and include two of the world's three largest economies and 10 of the 14 smallest as well as "the most populous nation in the world [India], the largest democracy [also India], and the largest Muslim-majority nation [Indonesia]. More than one third of Asia-Pacific nations are smaller, island nations that include the smallest republic in the world [Nauru] and the smallest nation in Asia [Maldives]."[264] By any meaningful measure, the Indo-Pacific is also the world's most militarized region, with "seven of the world's ten largest standing militaries" and "five of the world's declared nuclear nations" in addition to "five countries allied with the United States through mutual defense treaties."[265]

USINDOPACOM's 11 component commands include:[266]

- **U.S. Army Pacific.** USARPAC is the Army's component command in the Pacific. Headquartered in Hawaii and with "more than 107,000 Soldiers and Civilians," it supplies Army forces as necessary for various global contingencies. The command lists 19 subordinate units: 8th Army (South Korea); I Corps (Washington); 25th Infantry Division (Hawaii); 11th Airborne Division (Alaska); 94th Air & Missile Defense Command (Hawaii); 8th Theater Sustainment Command (Hawaii); 7th Infantry Division (Washington); 2nd Infantry Division (Washington); 5th Security Force Assistance Brigade (Washington); 1st Multi-Domain Task Force (Washington); 3rd Multi-Domain Task Force (Hawaii); 196th Infantry Brigade (Hawaii); 18th Medical Command (Hawaii); 311th Signal Command (Hawaii); U.S. Army Japan (Japan); 351st Civil Affairs Command (Hawaii); 9th Mission Support Command (Hawaii); 5th Battlefield Coordination Detachment (Hawaii); and 500th Military Intelligence Brigade (Hawaii).[267]

- **U.S. Pacific Air Forces.** With 46,000 servicemembers, PACAF is responsible for planning and conducting defensive and offensive air operations in the Asia–Pacific region.[268] It has three numbered air forces under its command: 5th Air Force (Japan); 7th Air Force (Korea); and 11th Air Force (Alaska).[269] The 5th Air Force includes the 374th Airlift Wing, 18th Wing, and 35th Fighter Wing. The wings maintain C-130 aircrews, C-12s, UH-1s, F-15s, F-16s, KC-135 refuelers, E-3 Airborne Warning and Control (AWACS) System aircraft,

and HH-60G Pave Hawk rescue helicopters. The 7th Air Force operates out of Osan Air Base and Kunsan Air Base, which host the 51st Fighter Wing and 8th Fighter Wing. The wings are made up of three squadrons that include F-16s: the 35th Fighter Squadron, 36th Fighter Squadron, and 80th Fighter Squadron. The 11th Air Force is headquartered in Joint Base Elmendorf–Richardson and is the force provider for Alaskan Command. Other forces that regularly come under PACAF command include B-52, B-1, and B-2 bombers. The 11th Air Force's 354th Fighter Wing at Eielson Air Force Base completed the integration of 54 "combat-coded" F-35A aircraft in April 2022, increasing the number of squadrons to four.[270]

- **U.S. Pacific Fleet.** PACFLT normally controls all U.S. naval forces committed to the Pacific. Composed of 11 subordinate commands and approximately 200 ships, 1,500 aircraft, and 150,000 military and civilian personnel,[271] PACFLT is organized into the Seventh Fleet, headquartered in Japan, and the Third Fleet, headquartered in California. The Seventh Fleet includes 50–70 ships and submarines, 150 aircraft, and more than 27,000 sailors and Marines, including the only American carrier strike group (CTF-70, ported at Yokosuka, Japan) and amphibious group (CTF-76, ported at Sasebo, Japan) that are home-ported abroad.[272] The Third Fleet's AOR extends from the West Coast of the United States to the International Date Line and includes the Alaskan coastline and parts of the Arctic.[273] Third Fleet component units include four carrier strike groups (CSGs). Since 2015, the conduct of Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) that challenge excessive maritime claims (a part of the Navy's mission since 1979) has assumed a higher profile because of several well-publicized operations in the South China Sea. Both the Trump and Biden Administrations have maintained a high frequency of these operations.

- **U.S. Marine Forces Pacific.** With its headquarters in Hawaii, MARFORPAC "is the largest operational command in the Marine Corps" and "comprises two-thirds of the Marine Corps' active-duty combat forces."[274] Specifically, the I Marine Expeditionary Force (I MEF) is headquartered at Camp Pendleton, California, and centered on the 1st Marine Division, 3rd Marine Air Wing, and 1st Marine Logistics Group, and the III Marine Expeditionary Force (III MEF) is headquartered on Okinawa and centered on the 3rd Marine Division, 1st Marine Air Wing, and 3rd Marine Logistics Group. The 1st Marine Division "provides fully trained units and personnel in support of Marine Rotational Force–Darwin, Marine Expeditionary Units, and the Unit Deployment Program to Okinawa, Japan."[275] The 3rd Marine Division "operates as a Stand-In Force in the first island chain to secure, seize, or defend key maritime terrain in order to deny and disrupt adversary actions in support of the Fleet, the Joint Force, and partnered and allied forces."[276]

- **U.S. Special Operations Command Pacific.** SOCPAC "is a sub-unified command of USSOCOM [U.S. Special Operations Command] under the operational control [of] U.S. Indo-Pacific Command and serves as the functional component for all special operations missions deployed throughout the Indo-Asia-Pacific region." Its "area of focus covers 36 countries and encompasses half of the Earth's surface."[277] Among the special operations forces under SOCPAC's control are Navy SEALs; Naval Special Warfare units; Army Special Forces (Green Berets); and Special Operations Aviation units in the Pacific region, including elements in Japan and South Korea. Its core activities include (among others) counterinsurgency and unconventional warfare, hostage rescue and recovery, training of foreign security forces, and support for "DOD humanitarian activities conducted outside the US and its territories to relieve or reduce human suffering, disease, hunger, or privation."[278]

- **U.S. Forces Korea.** USFK's "mission is to deter aggression and if necessary, defend the Republic of Korea to maintain stability in Northeast Asia."[279] It is responsible for organizing, training, and equipping U.S. forces on the Korean Peninsula as directed by USINDOPACOM in support of the U.S.–South Korean Combined

Forces Command (CFC) and United Nations Command (UNC). USFK's components include U.S. Eighth Army; U.S. Seventh Air Force; Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Korea (CNFK); Marine Corps Forces Korea (MARFOR-K); and Special Operations Forces Korea (SOCKOR).[280]

- **U.S. Forces Japan.** Operating with approximately 60,000 U.S. Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force, and Space Force Corps personnel, USFJ "serves to strengthen the US–Japan Alliance to help deter and, if necessary, defeat threats against Japan." It is "transforming into a Joint Force Headquarters, aiming to strengthen the alliance and enhance integrated operational capabilities."[281]

- **Joint Interagency Task Force West.** JIATF-W, "in coordination with U.S. law enforcement, interagency and partner nations, combats, disrupts and dismantles drug trafficking and transnational criminal organizations, to protect U.S. lives, interests, and regional stability in the Indo-Pacific."[282] Its "top priority is supporting law enforcement in their efforts to reduce the illicit flow of fentanyl, methamphetamine, Amphetamine-Type Stimulants and precursors intended for U.S. markets."[283]

- **U.S. Space Forces–Indo-Pacific.** USSPACEFOR-INDOPAC "enhances stability in the Indo-Pacific region by promoting interoperability and integration from planning and programming through fielding and execution to respond to contingencies, deter aggression, and maintain space superiority in pursuit of a free and open Indo-Pacific."[284] Its three commands include Combat Forces Command (CFC), Petersen Space Force Base, Colorado; Space Systems Command (SSC), Los Angeles, California; and Space Training and Readiness Command (STARCOM), Patrick Space Force Base, Florida.[285]

- **U.S. Coast Guard Pacific Area.** USCG-PACIFIC AREA has a "74 million square mile operational area" and "more than 13,000 active duty, reserve, civilian and volunteer employees" with 11 statutory missions: "preserve the global supply chain, protect our fragile marine ecosystems, ensure U.S. sovereignty in the Polar regions, combat transnational organized crime, support global humanitarian response operations and preserve the U.S. as a free and enduring nation." Its four regional commands—the 11th, 13th, 14th, and 17th Districts—cover "much of the Pacific Ocean, North America and South America."[286]

- **Center for Excellence in Disaster Management & Humanitarian Assistance.** CFE-DM "builds crisis response capacity in US, Allies and Partner militaries across the Indo-Pacific to save lives before, during and after emergencies."[287] Its Humanitarian Assistance Response Training (HART) programs prepare trainees "to respond more effectively during civilian-led humanitarian assistance and foreign disaster response missions" and to "support[], and when necessary, conduct[] humanitarian assistance before, during, and after combat operations."[288] Its Applied Research and Information Sharing (ARIS) Academic Partnership Program (APP) "endeavors to foster capacity through research into emerging issues in the sphere of civil-military coordination, preparedness and response for disaster management and humanitarian assistance (DMHA)."[289]

Key Infrastructure That Enables Expeditionary Warfighting Capabilities

Any planning for operations in the Pacific will inevitably be dominated by the "tyranny of distance." Because of the extensive distances that must be traversed, even Air Force units will take one or more days to deploy, and ships measure steaming time in weeks. A ship sailing at 20 knots, for instance, requires nearly five days to get from San Diego to Hawaii. From there, it takes seven more days to get to Guam; seven days to Yokosuka, Japan; and eight days to Okinawa—assuming that ships encounter no interference along the way.[290]

China's growing anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities, which range from an expanding fleet of modern submarines to anti-ship ballistic and cruise missiles, increase the operational risk for deployment of U.S. forces in the event of conflict. China's capabilities jeopardize American combat forces that would flow into the theater for initial combat and would continue to threaten the logistical

MAP 2

Steam Times in the Pacific

NOTE: Steam times are based on an average speed of 15 knots over the distances between the South China Sea operating area and select ports.
SOURCE: Heritage Foundation research.

heritage.org

support needed to sustain American combat power in the ensuing days, weeks, and months.

American basing structure in the Indo-Pacific region, including access to key allied facilities, is therefore both necessary and increasingly at risk.

American Facilities

Hawaii. Much as it was in the 20th century, Hawaii remains the linchpin of America's ability to support its position in the Western Pacific. If the United States cannot preserve its facilities in Hawaii, both combat power and sustainability become moot. The United States maintains air and naval bases, communications infrastructure, and logistical support on Oahu and elsewhere in the Hawaiian Islands. Hawaii is also a key site for undersea cables that carry much of the world's communications and data, as well as for satellite ground stations.

Guam. The American territory of Guam is located 4,600 miles farther west. Obtained from Spain as a result of the Spanish–American War, Guam became a key coaling station for U.S. Navy ships. It was seized by Japan in World War II, was liberated by U.S. forces in 1944, and after the war

became an unincorporated, organized territory of the United States.

Key U.S. military facilities on Guam include U.S. Naval Base Guam, which houses several attack submarines and possibly a new aircraft carrier berth, and Andersen Air Force Base, one of a handful of facilities that can house B-2 bombers. U.S. task forces can stage out of Apra Harbor, drawing weapons from the Ordnance Annex in the island's South Central Highlands. On January 26, 2023, the Marine Corps reopened Marine Corps Base Camp Blaz, which will host 5,000 Marines comprising various aviation, ground combat, combat support, logistics, and headquarters units in the coming years.[291] There is also a communications and data relay facility on the island.

Guam's facilities have improved steadily over the past 20 years. B-2 bombers, for example, began to operate from Andersen Air Force Base in March 2005.[292] These improvements have been accelerated and expanded even as China's A2/AD capabilities have raised doubts about America's ability to sustain operations in the Asian littoral. The concentration of air and naval assets as well as logistical infrastructure on Guam would make the island an attractive target in the event of conflict, and the increasing reach of Chinese and North Korean ballistic missiles only adds to this growing vulnerability.

Saipan. The U.S. military has noncombatant maritime prepositioning ships (MPS), which contain large amounts of military equipment and supplies, in strategic locations from which they can reach areas of conflict relatively quickly as associated U.S. Army or Marine Corps units located elsewhere arrive in those areas. U.S. Navy units in Saipan, Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas, support prepositioning ships that can supply Army or Marine Corps units that are deployed for contingency operations in Asia.

Allied and Other Friendly Facilities

Access to bases in Asia has long been a vital part of America's ability to support military operations in the region. This includes, in the cases of Japan and South Korea, substantial Host Nation Support to cover the cost of labor, maintenance, and repairs of platforms based in these nations. Even with the extensive aerial refueling and replenishment skills of the U.S. Air Force and U.S. Navy, it is still essential that the United States retain access to resupply and replenishment facilities, at least in peacetime. The ability of those facilities to survive and function will directly influence the course of any conflict in the Western Pacific. Moreover, a variety of support functions, including communications, intelligence, and space support, cannot be accomplished without facilities in the region.

Today, maintaining maritime domain awareness or space situational awareness would be extraordinarily difficult without access to facilities in the Asia–Pacific region. The American alliance network is therefore a matter both of political partnership and of access to key facilities on allied soil.

Six U.S. EEZs that are rich in fish and untapped natural resources are located in an arc that stretches over 1,400 miles from Wake Island to Johnston Atoll and south 1,900 miles to American Samoa. To focus resources and enable better regional coordination, the U.S. Coast Guard Pacific Area Command and U.S. Indo-Pacific Command should establish a detachment in American Samoa. Its mission would be to identify and execute needed maritime training and infrastructure projects supporting a sustained maritime security presence while synchronizing operational (e.g., the Coast Guard's Operation Blue Pacific) and capacity-building activities with regional partners.[293] This region would be of strategic importance in moving military forces and sustaining them in any Asian conflict.

Finally, the United States is granted access to a number of facilities in Asian states on a contingency or crisis basis. Thus, U.S. Air Force units transited Thailand's U-Tapao Air Base and Sattahip Naval Base during the first Gulf War and during the Iraq War, but they do not maintain a permanent presence there. Additionally, the U.S. Navy conducts hundreds of port calls throughout the region.

Diego Garcia. The American facilities on the British territory of Diego Garcia are vital to U.S. operations in the Indian Ocean and Afghanistan and provide essential support for operations in the Middle East and East Asia. The island is home to the Military Sealift Command's Maritime Prepositioning Squadron-2 (MPSRON-2), which works with Maritime Prepositioning Squadron-3 (MPSRON-3) "to deliver a strategic power-projection capability for the Marine Corps, Army and Air Force, known as the Maritime Prepositioning Force (MPF)."[294] Specifically, "MPF ships deliver a forward presence and rapid crisis response capability by

pre-positioning equipment and supplies to various locations at sea."[295]

Several elements of the U.S. global space surveillance and communications infrastructure, as well as basing facilities for the B-2 bomber, are also located on the island. More recently, critical military forces staged operations directly and in support of the successful attacks on Iran's nuclear weapons infrastructure during the June 2025 Midnight Hammer operation.

It should also be noted that the United Kingdom is seeking to transfer sovereignty of the Chagos Islands to Mauritius. This is problematic on many fronts in that Mauritius has close ties to China, which could impede the ability of the U.S. and U.K. to generate combat operations from Diego Garcia. Mauritius is also a party to the Treaty of Pelindaba, which prohibits the stationing of nuclear weapons in nations that are a party to the treaty. If the United States should wish to generate nuclear bombing missions out of Diego Garcia, it would be legally prohibited from doing so if the islands were transferred to Mauritius. Finally, according to some reporting, even if Diego Garcia was to be used as a bomber base by American or U.K. forces, the U.K. government would be required to inform Mauritius if any bombing missions generated on Diego Garcia would target a third party. This, to say the least, would undermine operational security or even mission effectiveness if the United States or the United Kingdom actually tried to use Diego Garcia as a military base.

Conclusion

The military balance in the Indo-Pacific is shifting. The unchallenged military superiority the U.S. enjoyed in the region for roughly eight decades has come to an end.

The U.S. has not had a military peer in Asia since the defeat of Japan in World War II. The Soviet Union was a military peer, but the overwhelming majority of its conventional military strength was Europe-facing; it was never more than a marginal player in the Indo-Pacific. As a result, the security order in Asia was effectively unipolar for nearly a century.

That order served Asia well. Despite being a region with unparalleled size and population—replete with numerous active territorial disputes, significant historical animosities, and the world's largest and fastest-growing powers rising quickly—Asia has enjoyed a period of remarkable peace since the 1980s.

That peace fostered a phenomenal bout of regional prosperity: The economic growth witnessed across Asia in recent decades from India to China, Korea to Japan, and throughout ASEAN has no historical precedent. Virtually every country has benefitted from the stability and prosperity delivered by this order—perhaps none more than China, which is why it is ironic that China is seeking to challenge or overturn that order.

In recent years, China has grown demonstrably more aggressive abroad and repressive at home. Under Communist Party Chairman Xi Jinping, China's designs on Taiwan, military intimidation of its neighbors, predatory economic practices, and challenges to America's position in Asia have grown increasingly brazen as Beijing has begun to close key gaps in capabilities between it and the U.S.

To be sure, America still enjoys considerable strengths and assets in the region, particularly when combined with close allies and likely participants in any conflict with China, including Japan, Australia, the Philippines, and Taiwan (as well as key partners like India and South Korea), and China has fewer reliable friends on which to depend. Moreover, Russia's ability to project force into the Western Pacific is extremely limited. The same is true of Iran, whose economy and military capabilities have been so degraded that it now struggles to project power in its own backyard. North Korea has consequential military capabilities, but its involvement in any China–U.S. conflict would almost certainly invite intervention by South Korea, which on balance would likely be a net negative for China.

Even without powerful allies, the U.S. military in many respects is still in a class of its own. It still fields an unparalleled fleet of aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines, fifth-generation fighters, missile defense systems, stealth technology, and airlift capabilities. America's missile, space, cyber, and long-range logistics capabilities are still world class. But the United States confronts large and growing challenges vis-à-vis China, not least (as noted previously) the tyranny of distance, and the most likely scenarios for a China–U.S. conflict are nearly all in the Western Pacific. As far as the security of the homeland and the American people is concerned, that is a good thing, but it also means that virtually all of the plausible conflict scenarios have battles

unfolding in China's backyard where it enjoys considerable asymmetric advantages. Moreover, how a large-scale conflict between the world's two superpowers, both of which are armed with nuclear weapons, would play out is unknown. Accordingly, any China–U.S. conflict has the potential to become a third world war—and in such a scenario, the American homeland might no longer be a sanctuary.

The reach of the U.S. military is unparalleled: It can do things in distant corners of the globe that the Chinese military could never dream of doing. Its "horizontal" reach is still generations ahead of China's. But vertically, in the Indo-Pacific, those advantages dwindle. It could take U.S. assets days or weeks to reach a battlefield that China can reinforce in a matter of hours. Close to its shores, China can lean more easily on an expansive network of land-based military bases, artificial islands, and short-range to medium-range missiles.

Nor are distance and geography the only problems confronting the United States. America's defense industrial base has been hollowed out by neglect. Its stockpiles of ammunition and fuel, as well as its sealift and airlift capabilities, may prove woefully inadequate for a protracted major-power conflict with China. The U.S. government has finally begun to take steps to revitalize its defense industrial base, but they are slow and uneven.

Moreover, it is still unclear how new technologies like drone swarms and artificial intelligence would be deployed by China and impact the battlespace. The conflict in Ukraine is offering glimpses into the future of warfare, but it is not indicative of what a major-power war between the United States and China—one likely to unfold largely in the air, at sea, and in cyberspace—would look like.

China also enjoys other advantages. Through major hacking and espionage efforts, including Salt and Volt Typhoon, Chinese agents have embedded themselves in America's financial system, telecommunications networks, and vital infrastructure. Their ability to cause economic harm, if not entire systems failures, should not be underestimated even though the United States likely has capabilities that would enable it to cause considerable damage and mischief within China if Beijing were maliciously inclined.

In sum, the military gap with China—*in China's backyard*—has narrowed significantly, and the outcome of a conflict is more uncertain than ever. On the other hand, at least for the moment, China's leadership seems to recognize and fear that uncertainty: A "coin toss" is not great odds when your survival is potentially on the line.

Perhaps the most important dynamic keeping the peace in the Indo-Pacific today is Xi Jinping's well-deserved anxiety about the outcome of a conflict with the U.S. Losing a war to the United States, especially over Taiwan, could threaten not only his rule and his life, but Communist Party rule as well. With China in the middle of the most shocking high-level purge of PLA commanders in generations, it is incumbent on Washington to ensure that war with America remains an unacceptably risky proposition for China's leaders. That will require maintaining and enhancing deterrence against an increasingly powerful, irascible, and ambitious adversary.

Deterrence is built on two foundations: capability and will. Anything that diminishes U.S. capability and will in the Indo-Pacific—or perceptions of U.S. capability and will—actually risks inviting Chinese aggression. Any perceived weakening of the U.S. commitment to the region or to its allies and close security partners actually raises the likelihood of a catastrophic conflict. At the same time, continuing to underprioritize and inadequately resource the Indo-Pacific relative to other theaters does more than heighten the risk of war: It heightens the probability of a costly defeat.

Scoring the Asia Operating Environment

As with the operating environments of Europe, the Middle East, Latin America, and Africa, we assessed the characteristics of Asia as they could be expected to facilitate or inhibit America's ability to conduct military operations to defend its vital national interests against threats. Our assessment of the operating environment utilized a five-point scale that ranges from "very poor" to "excellent" conditions and covers four regional characteristics of greatest relevance to the conduct of military operations:

Operating Environment: Asia

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

1. **Very Poor.** Significant hurdles exist for military operations. Physical infrastructure is insufficient or nonexistent, and the region is politically unstable. The U.S. military is poorly placed or absent, and alliances are nonexistent or diffuse.

2. **Unfavorable.** A challenging operating environment is marked by inadequate infrastructure, weak alliances, and recurring political instability. The U.S. military is inadequately placed in the region.

3. **Moderate.** A neutral to moderately favorable operating environment is characterized by adequate infrastructure, a moderate alliance structure, and acceptable levels of regional political stability. The U.S. military is adequately placed.

4. **Favorable.** A favorable operating environment includes good infrastructure, strong alliances, and a stable political environment. The U.S. military is well placed for future operations.

5. **Excellent.** An extremely favorable operating environment includes well-established and well-maintained infrastructure, strong and capable allies, and a stable political environment. The U.S. military is exceptionally well placed to defend U.S. interests.

The key regional characteristics consist of:

a. **Alliances.** Alliances are important for interoperability and collective defense, as allies would be more likely to lend support to U.S. military operations. Indicators that provide insight into the strength or health of an alliance include whether the U.S. trains regularly with countries in the region, has good interoperability with the forces of an ally, and shares intelligence with nations in the region.

b. **Political Stability.** Political stability brings predictability for military planners when considering such things as transit, basing, and overflight rights for U.S. military operations. The overall degree of political stability indicates whether U.S. military actions would be hindered or enabled and reflects, for example, whether transfers of power are generally peaceful and whether there have been any recent instances of political instability in the region.

c. **U.S. Military Positioning.** Having military forces based or equipment and supplies staged in a region greatly facilitates America's ability to respond to crises and presumably achieve success in critical "first battles" more quickly. Being routinely present also helps the United States to maintain familiarity with a region's characteristics and the various actors that might act to assist or thwart U.S. actions. With this in mind, we assessed whether or not the U.S. military was well positioned in the region. Again, indicators included bases, troop presence, prepositioned equipment, and recent examples of military operations (including training and humanitarian) launched from the region.

d. **Infrastructure.** Modern, reliable, and suitable infrastructure is essential to military operations. Airfields, ports, rail lines, canals, and

paved roads enable the U.S. to stage, launch, and logistically sustain combat operations. We combined expert knowledge of regions with publicly available information on critical infrastructure to arrive at our overall assessment of this metric.[296]

For Asia, we arrived at these average scores (rounded to the nearest whole number):

- Alliances: **4—Favorable.**
- Political Stability: **4—Favorable.**
- U.S. Military Positioning: **2—Unfavorable.**
- Infrastructure: **3—Moderate.**

Aggregating to a regional score of: **Moderate.**

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Europe

Jordan Embree

Europe has been the central pillar of America's alliance network since World War II. Under American leadership and through American financial, political, and military support, Europe rebuilt itself and became a bastion of freedom opposing Communist tyrants. As Americans watched the Berlin Wall crumble and the Iron Curtain fall, they rejoiced, welcoming millions more to freedom, and sought by example and material support to speed their embrace of democracy, free speech, and national sovereignty.

The transatlantic relationship has endured and grown over the past eight decades on the foundation of those shared interests. The standout historical moments of the past 80 years—from President John F. Kennedy's *Ich bin ein Berliner* address to President Ronald Reagan's demand that "Mr. Gorbachev tear down this wall" to the many North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies standing alongside America to fight terrorism after 9/11—revolve around those interests.

Yet as the 20th century faded into the 21st, this historical foundation wore thin, and the transatlantic community's unity wobbled. Cracks appeared soon after the initial unified response to 9/11 as then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld spoke of "new Europe" and "old Europe" while contrasting allied support for the U.S.-led war in Iraq in Eastern Europe with allied opposition in Western Europe.[1] Perhaps even more important, the Soviet Union's collapse lulled leaders on both sides of the Atlantic, but particularly in Europe, into thinking traditional military power unnecessary given the much-hyped "end of history" heralding the triumph of liberal values worldwide.

As a result, throughout the 2010s, most NATO countries failed to meet their defense spending promises despite repeated entreaties by American Presidents and defense officials. Germany even built the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline to funnel Russian gas to German businesses despite Moscow's record of weaponizing energy resources.[2] American lawmakers reacted forcefully against this strategic blunder, which breached a fundamental NATO principle of "keep[ing] the [Russians] out," by sanctioning companies involved with the pipeline.[3] Nord Stream 2 was finally foreclosed by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 (and subsequent sabotage).[4] In addition, Ukraine has declined to renew its gas transshipment deal with the Russian Federation during wartime,[5] thereby at least temporarily re-establishing a transatlantic energy posture that is less reliant on Russia.

Recently, NATO has trended in an even more positive direction. Consistent pressure from President Donald Trump in both of his Administrations in concert with Russia's invasion of Ukraine finally convinced European NATO members to meet their 2 percent of GDP spending target in 2025.[6] The June 2025 NATO summit in The Hague built on this initial step through a modernized minimum defense spending level of 5 percent of GDP. The spending level was divided between 3.5 percent outlays for core defense spending and an additional 1.5 percent for critical national security infrastructure. NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte credited President Trump, and President Trump again reaffirmed his commitment to Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, NATO's founding document, which "provides that if a NATO Ally is the victim of an armed attack, each and every other member of the Alliance will consider this act of violence as an armed attack against all members and will take the actions it deems necessary to assist the Ally attacked."[7]

Germany epitomizes this policy renewal through its commitment to a renewed defense role. Germany is NATO's second-largest national economy by GDP,[8] and its rearmament is critical for NATO deterrence. Germany's *Zeitenwende,* a sea change in German thinking on national security, resulted in defense spending that brought expenditures to 2 percent of GDP in 2024.[9] The coalition government under Chancellor Friedrich Merz supports continuing this rebuild and aims to reach the 3.5 percent goal by 2029, well ahead of schedule.[10] As its rearmament proceeds, Germany should focus on deterring the Russians through steps like armored deployments, air defense improvements, and deep-strike missile procurement. By so doing, Germany will help to rebalance transatlantic burden-sharing and revitalize deterrence ahead of Russia's reconstitution by taking its place as a leader in European conventional deterrence.[11]

For its part, America remains central to NATO's deterrence at the strategic and tactical levels.[12] This is not likely to change anytime soon, and support for the NATO Alliance remains high, both among Americans generally and among Members of Congress.[13] Europe still holds a special place in American esteem as the birthplace of Western civilization, as a genealogical origin point for millions of Americans, and as the modern proving ground for national sovereignty during the Cold War. On top of these connections, trade flows between Europe and the United States are nearly $1 trillion a year.[14]

Yet discord has emerged in recent years over transatlantic values. While acknowledging different political systems and historical contexts, Washington is increasingly worried by perceived moves against free speech, especially those characterized as necessary to fight disinformation. Americans deeply believe that the solution to problematic speech is not censorship but an open marketplace of ideas in which the truth will win out. However, both domestically and abroad, anti-disinformation measures have twisted from presenting facts to propping up governmental narratives. At the same time, both America and its transatlantic allies have confronted massive migratory inflows in a frontal assault on national sovereignty. These have included adversary efforts to weaponize migration to destabilize European societies.[15] To ensure that the transatlantic Alliance endures for the next 75 years, both America and its partners across the Atlantic must recommit to the fundamental values of freedom of religion, assembly, and speech and belief enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act[16] and other transatlantic statements from across the 20th century.

To revitalize transatlantic ties in the 21st century, America, Canada, and their European partners must also take stock of today's alarming threat environment. Russia's invasion of Ukraine returned active warfare to Europe and highlighted broader global fissures. First, of course, is Russia and China's no-limits partnership, which has been an invaluable source of dual-purpose goods to fuel the Russian war machine even as some limits do exist beneath the rhetorical surface.[17] Additionally, the Chinese Communist Party continues to undertake threatening military actions, such as a massive nuclear buildup, and undercut global peace and stability through regular hostile activities menacing Taiwan and Taiwanese commerce.[18]

Elsewhere, Iran's ruling elite retains an abiding hatred for the West and remains unwilling to curb its nuclear program even following devastating strikes on Iran's nuclear and command-and-control infrastructure by the United States and Israel. Faced by this recalcitrance, America and its European partners must remain wary of Iran's efforts to double down on its support for proxies across the Middle East from Hezbollah to the Houthis in ways that directly harm European commerce and economic stability.[19]

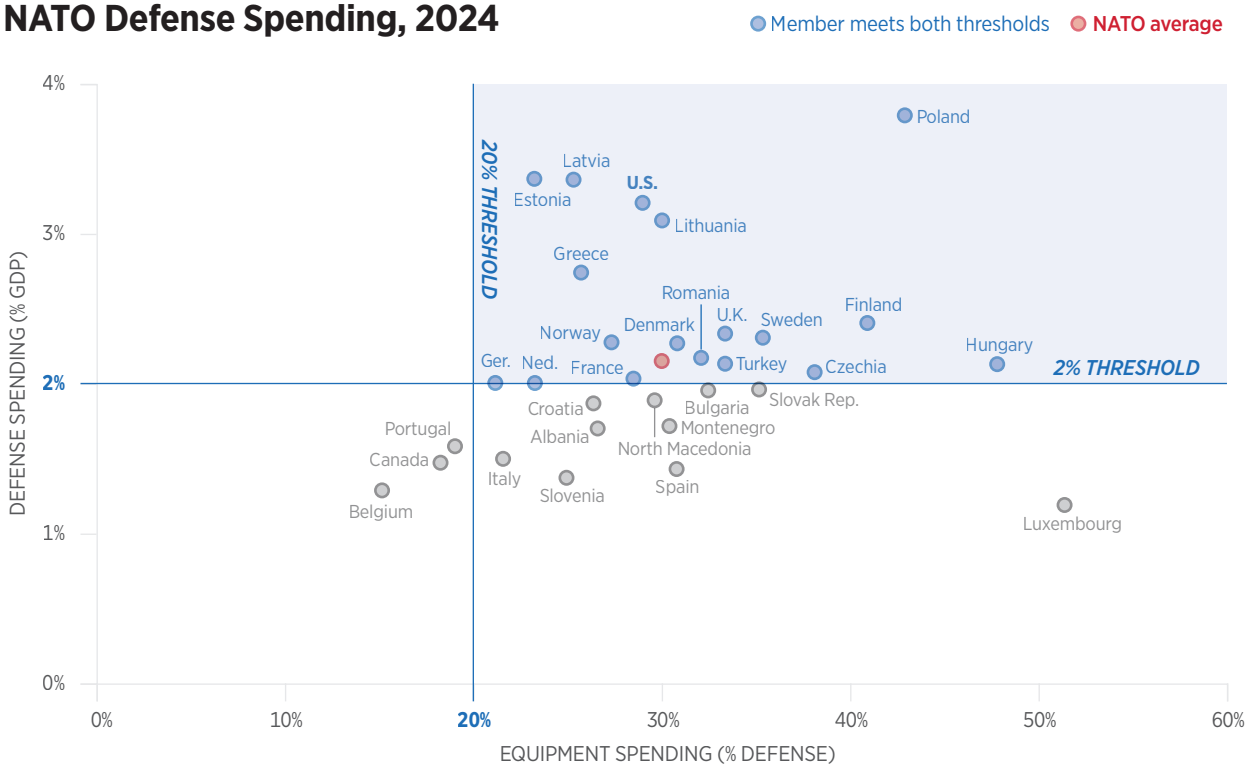
Despite these challenges, the NATO Alliance remains a force for deterrence and stability. With a formidable concentration of military power and a history of interoperability and joint operations, NATO can continue to ensure the transatlantic region's security and stability, provided that European nations fund defense capabilities and recommit themselves to upholding the defining values of the transatlantic community.

U.S. Security Alliances in Europe: NATO as Primary Security Actor

Founded in Washington, DC, on April 4, 1949, NATO has served for 77 years as the principal transatlantic security guarantor in defense of "the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law."[20] Intensive consultations across the decades have led allies to "develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack" to undergird their agreement that "an armed attack

CHART 8

NATO Defense Spending, 2024



NOTES: Figures are estimates. NATO averages exclude Iceland because it has no military. Equipment expenditures include major equipment expenditures and R&D devoted to major equipment.
SOURCE: Press release, "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014–2025)," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, cutoff date for information used June 3, 2025, https://www.nato.int/content/dam/nato/webready/documents/finance/def-exp-2025-en.pdf (accessed January 29, 2026).

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against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all."[21] Courtesy of NATO, the United States' security posture in Europe is intertwined with these allies for interoperability and planning purposes. Despite premature declarations of NATO's demise,[22] the organization is still the most effective Euro-Atlantic security institution.

NATO Spending Shortfalls Since Wales. When reviewing NATO's defense spending over the past decade, the data paint a stark picture of drastically unequal investments in collective defense. Despite the 2014 Wales Summit's commitment to spending at least 2 percent of GDP on defense, most members failed to hit this target. Although NATO members finally reached 2 percent in 2025, the average NATO member averaged just 1.59 percent over the past decade.[23] However, careful analysis reveals striking geographic disparities. While Eastern European nations—particularly Poland and the Baltic States—have prioritized defense spending in Hresponse Hto Russia's aggression, Western European countries continue to lag behind despite the clear indicators and warnings since Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea.[24] With the Ukraine war's fourth anniversary now past, NATO allies must step up and fund critical capabilities.

Overall, from 2014 to 2024, NATO allies missed the 2 percent defense spending targets by $827.91 billion (adjusted to 2024 dollars).[25] This cumulative shortfall nearly equals the United States' annual defense budget.[26] NATO's collective equipment deficit since 2014 stands at roughly $70 billion when adjusted for the 2 percent minimum. This funding

gap led to critical shortfalls in armored formations, long-range artillery, air defense, ammunition stockpiles, and logistics infrastructure—all of which are key to NATO's deterrence architecture. Encouragingly, European NATO allies are increasing their defense spending, but capability gaps remain. As NATO refines its Regional Defense Plans—the planning for how to protect Alliance territory from attack in specific regions across the Alliance in a range of contexts from full-scale war to a limited incursion—NATO allies should concentrate on expanding their capabilities to deter Russia with a focus on national advantages.[27]

Active NATO Operations. Aligned with NATO's force planning are multiple ongoing operations and initiatives in the land, air, and sea domains alongside several multinational support initiatives. The longest active NATO operation is the Kosovo Force (KFOR), which began in June 1999 pursuant to United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 following NATO air operations against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.[28] Kosovo declared its independence in 2008, but it has not been recognized by Serbia and remains the major divide in their bilateral relations. In 2023, increased tensions in Kosovo resulted in injuries to 25 KFOR soldiers;[29] the result was a temporary increase in KFOR troops that remains in place. At present, KFOR has deployed approximately 5,249 soldiers (of which 690 are American) from 33 nations to Kosovo.[30] KFOR is the third responder after the Kosovo Police and the European Union (EU) Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX).

NATO Integrated Air and Missile Defense (IAMD) provides the framework for all airspace operations split into the ongoing NATO Air Policing and NATO Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) missions. It is commanded by the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), who is always from the United States and is currently General Alexus G. Grynkewich. NATO IAMD covers the airspace of all 81 million square kilometers of the Alliance using financial support and assets from across the Alliance.[31] NATO's Allied Air Command, headquartered at Ramstein Air Force Base, oversees NATO IAMD missions and is always led by a U.S. Air Force General.[32] The current commander of NATO's Allied Air Command, U.S. Air Forces in Europe, and U.S. Air Forces in Africa (which is now a three-star position) is Lieutenant General Jason Hinds.[33]

NATO's Air Policing mission has two Combined Air Operations Centres to coordinate airspace monitoring: one at Torrejón, Spain (for southern Europe), and one in Uedem, Germany (for northern Europe).[34] NATO Air Policing houses five regional missions with varying ratios of American and other Allied forces beyond the monitoring headquarters. These missions are the Baltic States, Enhanced Air Policing on NATO's eastern flank, the Eastern Adriatic and Western Balkans, Iceland, and the Benelux countries.

Begun in 2004 to ensure airspace security for Alliance members that lacked sufficient independent forces,[35] Baltic Air Policing serves as a frontline defense and deterrence operation that frequently intercepts Russian Federation aircraft that are not following communications and safety protocols. Given the Baltic nations' position between Russia and Kaliningrad, combined with Russian tensions, NATO air forces scrambled jets more than 300 times in 2024 in support of this mission.[36] Backed by rotational air forces from NATO members based in Lithuania and Estonia, Baltic Air Policing is carried out by the Italian, French, and Dutch air forces.[37]

Enhanced Air Policing was part of NATO's 2014 Assurance Measures to boost deterrence along the eastern flank in response to Russia's claimed annexation of Crimea.[38] This included a second detachment of forces in Estonia and provided additional voluntary national detachments to support the Romanian and Bulgarian governments' national air policing missions. At the moment, Spain is the main supporter of NATO's Enhanced Air Policing mission in Romanian airspace, and Sweden deployed a Gripen fighter squadron to Poland in June 2025 to support Enhanced Air Policing there.[39] The mission in Poland received intense media attention in September 2025 after it downed Russian drones that had flown deep into Polish territory.[40]

The remaining air missions in the Eastern Adriatic and Western Balkans, Iceland, and the Benelux countries operate in a calmer environment to secure airspace and maintain interoperability. NATO's Air Policing mission over the Eastern Adriatic and the Western Balkans secures Allied airspace with minimal air assets and is covered jointly by the Italian, Greek, and Hungarian air forces.[41] Though staffed for decades by U.S. forces, the Icelandic Air Policing mission now consists of deploying fighters from NATO members for three to four weeks three

times a year.[42] Since Iceland has no military, this is the only way to ensure air surveillance. The Benelux Air Policing mission is a pooling of assets among the air forces of Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg to provide economies of scale in airspace security by pooling air assets and responsibilities.[43]

Conceived during the first George W. Bush Administration and agreed to in principle under the second Bush Administration, NATO's final permanent mission in the air is Ballistic Missile Defense, which is carried out with U.S. assets funded for deployment to bases across NATO.[44] NATO BMD relies on a combination of radar and interceptor assets including BMD-capable naval assets deployed to Rota, Spain; Aegis Ashore sites in Romania and Poland; and radar and command and control in Turkey and Germany as built out by America's European Phased Adaptive Approach.[45] NATO BMD declared initial operational capability at the 2016 Warsaw Summit and enhanced operational capability at the 2024 Washington Summit, although full operational capability remains in the uncertain future as new and existing BMD assets including national Patriot and SAMP/T batteries are networked with the system.[46] Thus, despite all of the above missions, air defense remains an area characterized by critical NATO capability gaps.

NATO has several active naval operations that are overseen by the Allied Maritime Command (MARCOM) in Northwood, United Kingdom, including Operation Baltic Sentry, Operation Sea Guardian, and maritime support in the Aegean Sea.[47] In January 2025, Operation Baltic Sentry deployed frigates and maritime patrol aircraft to the Baltic Sea in response to critical infrastructure and shipping safety concerns with forces provided primarily by littoral states.[48] Launched in November 2016 as the successor to Operation Active Endeavor, Operation Sea Guardian performs maritime security, domain awareness, and counterterrorism missions in the Mediterranean Sea. It conducts "five to six focused operations in specific areas of interest in the Mediterranean" each year with a combination of direct support assets under NATO command and associated support assets that remain under national commands.[49] Since 2016, NATO has utilized rotations of ships from Standing NATO Maritime Group 2 to provide enhanced domain awareness and support to Greece, Turkey, and Frontex (the EU's border enforcement agency) for out-of-area migration flows across the Aegean. This support provides enhanced awareness and coordination for national partners to address the humanitarian and security concerns posed by mass migration.[50] Finally, NATO maintains two Standing NATO Maritime Groups (SNMG1 and SNMG2) to provide on-call rapid reaction naval forces under NATO command to deal with unexpected evolutions of the strategic environment as well as two Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Groups (SNMCMG1 and SNMCMG2) to perform explosive ordnance disposal to secure open sea lanes.[51]

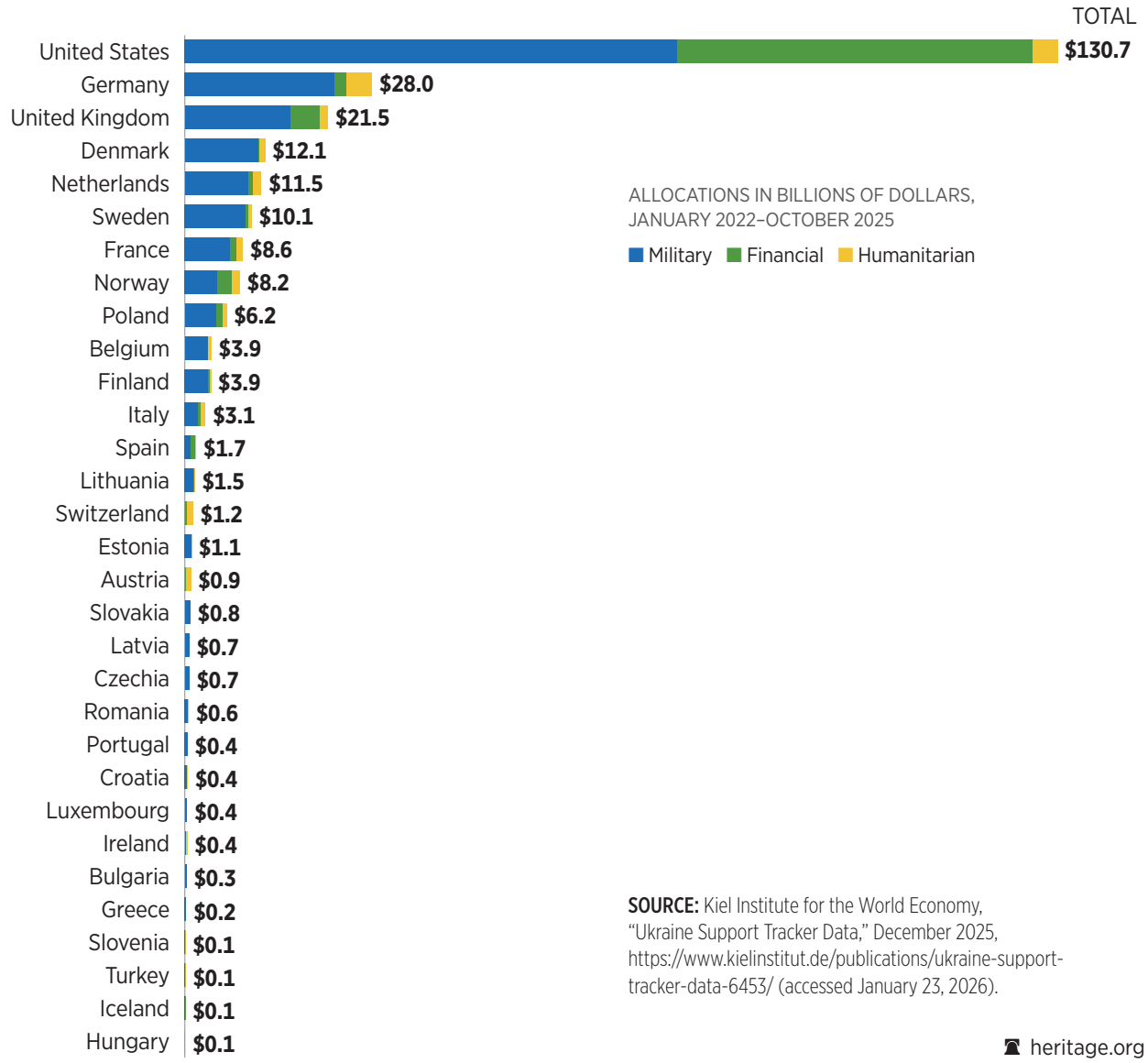
NATO's remaining ongoing operations concern out-of-area cooperation in Iraq and with the African Union (AU). NATO Mission Iraq started in October 2018 following an Iraqi government request to train Iraqi security forces. Focused initially on the military, it subsequently expanded to include Iraqi law enforcement agencies. NATO soldiers' training activities are entirely non-combat and advisory, limited to those that are requested and permitted by the Iraqi government.[52]

The NATO–AU relationship has developed over time since initial assistance requests in 2005. Their cooperation in 2025 focused on operational support, training support, and structural assistance, all underpinned by liaison work. Operational support related to strategic airlift and sealift provided to the AU's mission in Somalia; training support included access to training at NATO institutions and a mobile training delegation in Africa, upon request; structural assistance consisted of advisors provided by request to the AU on an annual basis with a recurring focus on improving the AU's African Standby Force Concept.[53]

Finally, NATO has expansive ongoing efforts to support Ukraine in its fight against Russia with a particular focus on arms provision, training, and general funding organized under the framework of the Comprehensive Assistance Package (CAP) for Ukraine.[54] Chart 9 breaks down funding to Ukraine by the United States and each European ally with a further delineation among types of aid; much of the NATO aid has been coordinated within CAP structures. While the United States has provided the largest single-nation share of support to Ukraine so far, ongoing balancing of the figures is occurring thanks to the NATO Prioritized Ukraine Requirements List (PURL) initiative launched after the June 2025 Hague Summit to establish an organized

CHART 9

U.S. and European National Support for Ukraine



SOURCE: Kiel Institute for the World Economy, "Ukraine Support Tracker Data," December 2025, https://www.kielinstitut.de/publications/ukraine-support-tracker-data-6453/ (accessed January 23, 2026).

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pathway for European allies to support Ukraine by paying the United States for delivery of prioritized weapons systems and other capabilities.[55]

European Political Shifts

Recent European elections have featured political shifts. Voters turned to the right in the June 2024 European Parliament elections as the European People's Party finished in pole position, and the European Conservatives and Reformists and other conservative party groupings gained seats. German voters continued this trend in February 2025 as the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) won elections in Germany, heralding increased defense spending.[56]

However, while political change in Europe has been a constant, not all shifts have been toward the right or even toward functional government. In the United Kingdom (U.K.), Labour's Keir Starmer beat the incumbent Conservative Party in July 2024 elections, and France's snap elections settled into a deadlocked hung parliament with a progressive

alliance of parties taking first place despite the conservative National Rally having its best night ever.[57] This result presaged the fall of multiple French governing coalitions in 2025. Broadly, there is increased seriousness about defense capabilities and spending across Europe, but electoral tumult strengthens allied politicians' incentives to play to their domestic bases, which can result in decreased alignment with Washington's defense priorities.[58] The following sections analyze the military situations of European NATO allies within regional groupings, as geography often dictates threat and capabilities priorities.

Malign Chinese Influence in Europe

Regardless of geography, American policymakers are intent on curbing malign Chinese influence in Europe, which has risen over the past decades. With economic and trade ties in the hundreds of billions of euros annually, China is now a major trading partner for many European countries—and under investigation by the EU for unfair trade practices involving a variety of goods.[59]

The United States remains Europe's premier trading partner and investor, but Chinese investments continue to emerge across the continent. Encompassing sectors as diverse as ports, telecommunications, and car manufacturing, Chinese investment has penetrated a variety of critical sectors. The attractive financing terms have swayed some allies, as the true costs are hidden at the outset. An illustrative example is Poland's port in Gdynia, where Hong Kong–based Hutchison Port Holdings controls a container terminal that Hutchison leveraged to deny the U.S. Army equipment unloading rights because of a slight protrusion into their port zone.[60] With the extensive network of port investments and stakes detailed in Map 3, this raises concerning possibilities for wider problems if a conflict were to occur in Europe. Alternatively, with reference to telecommunications and cybersecurity, recent revelations that hackers linked to the Chinese government hit more than 80 countries should inspire vigilance.[61] Yet many European countries still allow Chinese providers to service their national telecommunications networks.

While China's malign activities are often covert, some have been more overt. Recent years have seen several high-profile Chinese espionage announcements, including charges of espionage involving a Huawei executive in Poland (2019); a warning of Chinese espionage targeting sensitive industries in the Netherlands (2024); espionage charges against two men in Britain (2024); and the September 2025 trial of a former aide to a member of the German Bundestag.[62] China's crowning subversive activity, however, is its support for Russia's war in Ukraine, for which Chinese drone parts undergird Russian drone production lines and with Western officials alleging Chinese support for Russian explosives manufacturing as well.[63] This all culminated in Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's telling European officials that "Beijing can't accept Russia losing its war against Ukraine as this could allow the United States to turn its full attention to China."[64]

Nordic Allies: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. The Nordic nations are the northern bloc in NATO focused on Arctic, Baltic, and Russian border security. With Finland and Sweden now full members of the Alliance, NATO reaps the full benefit of their efforts. Finland's 2024 *Government Report on Finnish Foreign and Security Policy* lays out the case:

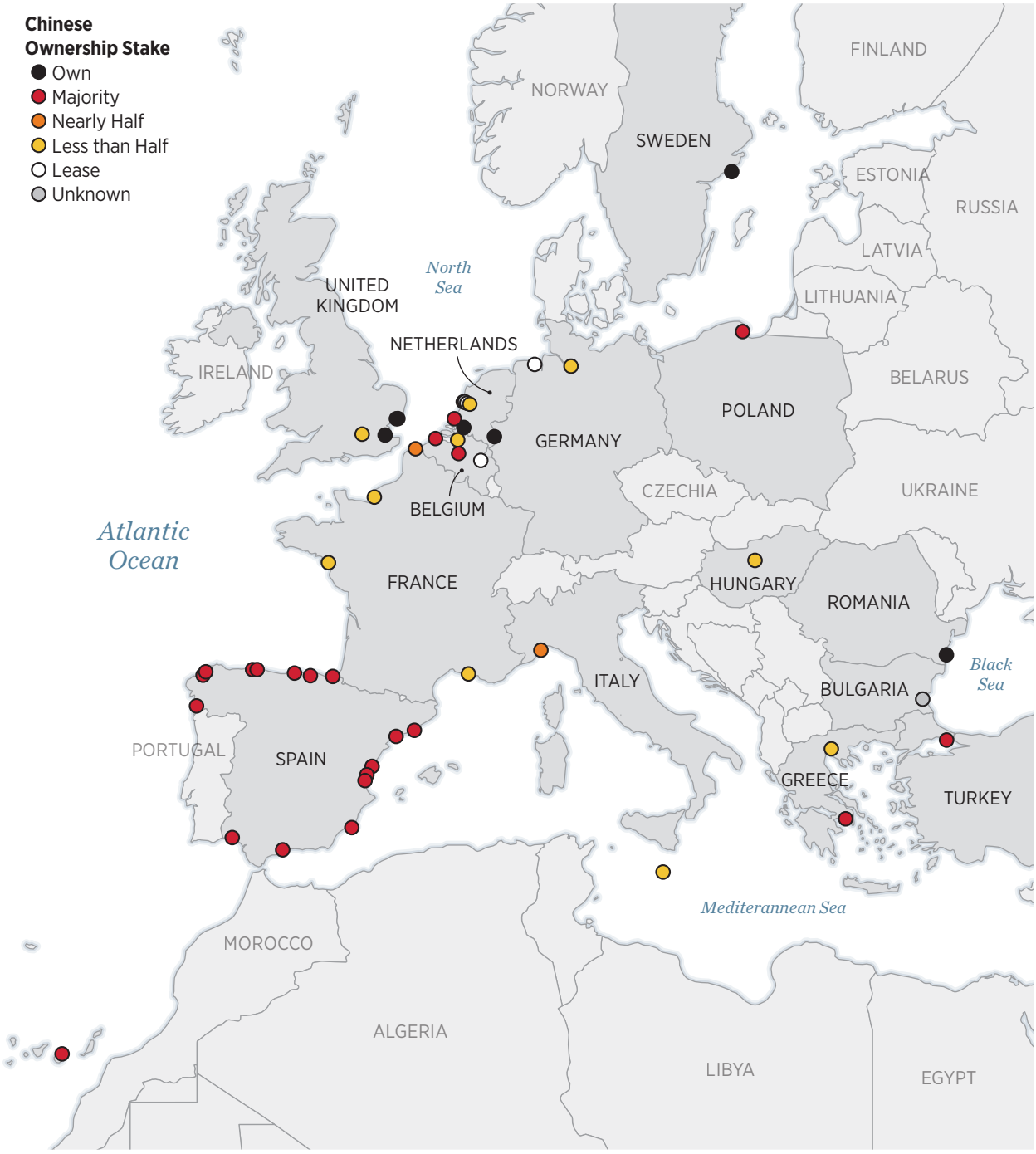
> Finland's and Sweden's NATO memberships and the increasingly close bilateral cooperation arrangements between the Nordic countries and the United States strengthens the stability and security in the Baltic Sea region and Northern Europe, reducing the risk of the use of military force in Finland's neighboring areas. The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO also helps deepen the cooperation between the Nordic and Baltic countries.[65]

From coordinated Arctic Council actions to the Baltic Defender exercise and the Joint Expeditionary Force, America's Nordic allies set the standard for Allied interoperability.[66] In the air, Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden have outlined a "Nordic Warfighting Concept for Joint Air Operations" to achieve unitary interoperability in the Nordic region.[67] On the ground, Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden all rely on BAE Systems' Combat Vehicle 90 and are pursuing joint procurement for the next generation of infantry fighting vehicles to guarantee continued interoperability.[68] Their interoperability and integration across all military domains were further enhanced by their planning, hosting, and participation in NATO's Nordic

MAP 3

Chinese Stakes in Ports in Europe

The People's Republic of China and major Chinese companies subject to their strict national security laws hold stakes in dozens of ports across Europe, ranging from minority investments to full ownership.



NOTE: Locations are approximate.
SOURCE: Heritage Foundation research.

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Response 2024 exercise in which more than 20,000 soldiers from 13 Allied nations conducted joint operations in Finland, Norway, and Sweden on land, in the air, and at sea.[69] Their extensive cooperation has been on display in Operation Baltic Sentry, conducted in response to repeated Russian and Chinese grey-zone warfare operations in the Baltic Sea.[70] Sweden is working to open a NATO base in northern Finland by 2026 to forward posture forces and joint command and control for deterrence along Finland's 830-mile border with Russia.[71]

Each nation (except Iceland) is also pursuing national efforts to strengthen its security capabilities with geographic concentrations: Denmark is recapitalizing its Arctic naval forces, Finland is securing its land border with Russia, Norway is concentrating on Arctic navigation and maritime domain awareness, and Sweden is focused on defending Gotland. Norway's effort is particularly significant, involving as it does a $13.5 billion contract signed with the U.K. to build five anti–submarine warfare (ASW) frigates.[72] Under this program, Norway intends to procure five to six new anti–submarine warfare frigates with anti-submarine helicopters integrated for full combat readiness to support its role in delivering maritime domain awareness and control in the Arctic, including the hunting of Russian submarines.[73]

Denmark. In February 2025, citing the Russian threat, the Danish government proposed a package to push its 2025 defense spending to more than 3 percent of GDP.[74] The Danish Defense Minister had announced a package of at least $1.5 billion in December 2024 to increase security assets in and around Greenland, increase staffing at Denmark's Arctic Command in Nuuk (Greenland's capital), and upgrade one of Greenland's civilian airports so that it could handle F-35 fighters.[75] This was followed in February 2025 by a political agreement focused on the Arctic and North Atlantic in Copenhagen dedicating 14 billion Danish kroner (roughly $2.2 billion) to "[c]apabilities such as three new Arctic naval vessels, further long-range drones and satellites...."[76] All of this was capped by a $4.2 billion increase in defense spending in October 2025 to secure additional capabilities for Arctic security.[77]

These three packages will enable Denmark to strengthen its protection of Greenland. All of these actions preceded Denmark's accession to the Arctic Council's chairmanship.[78] These investments were coupled with the Danish-led Arctic Light 2025 NATO exercise held in Greenland from September 9–19, 2025, with several NATO partners,[79] and the Arctic Endurance exercises that have begun in 2026.[80]

Iceland. Iceland is a founding member of NATO but does not have a military. Holding a key geographic position astride transatlantic transit routes and the Arctic, Iceland contributed 0.0624 percent of NATO's annual operating budget in 2024 per cost share arrangements, which works out to roughly €235.1 million ($254.5 million at average 2024 exchange rates) as its share of NATO's overall 2024 budget.[81] Since Iceland has no military forces, its coast guard interfaces with NATO forces operating in Iceland.[82] Iceland spent 6.7 billion Icelandic krona ($52.2 million) on its coast guard in 2024.[83]

Using its 2024 GDP figure of $32.2 billion,[84] Iceland spent roughly 0.156 percent of GDP on defense if all of the above figures are included. Not even half of the NATO target, this would make Iceland the lowest NATO defense spender if the government considered these figures defense expenditures and reported them to NATO. However, Iceland is in a critical position with respect to defense of the Atlantic Bridge line of operation and military domain awareness, so its provision of access provides value to NATO that is not captured by its low spending.[85] The U.K. leveraged this position in November 2025 when it deployed several P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft to Keflavik Air Base for patrols.[86] The U.S. seized the Russian Bella 1 oil tanker off the Icelandic coast in January 2026.[87]

Finland. Finland entered the Alliance as a model member in April 2023 and planned to spend €290 million ($334 million)—upwards of 2.5 percent of GDP—on defense in 2025.[88] With an 830-mile border with Russia and a security situation that could "deteriorate quickly...[and] drag on for years" according to Finnish Defense Minister Antti Häkkänen, Finland is committed to a modernized and expanded military. The Finnish Defense Forces have 24,000 active-duty personnel that can scale to 280,000 troops in wartime, supported by a reserve force of about 870,000 troops.[89]

Moreover, those troop levels are not just for show: Finland is taking on a leading regional role. For example, it was the first country to forcibly board an oil tanker suspected of deliberate sabotage of Baltic Sea cables, and although the tanker ship

Eagle S was eventually released, Finnish authorities detained several crew members until legal proceedings were complete.[90] Finland also has augmented security on land: closing its land border with Russia in late 2023, announcing a NATO brigade deployment and hosting Exercise Dynamic Front to practice live artillery fire command-and-control and interoperability with NATO partners in 2024, and announcing its withdrawal from the Ottawa Convention banning landmines to allow access to all necessary tools of defense.[91]

Norway. Norway hit the 2 percent NATO spending target in 2024 and planned to increase its defense spending to 2.16 percent in 2025 with funding for additional personnel, air platforms like the F-35, and officer training improvements.[92] Though now exceeding 2 percent of GDP on defense, Norway may fall short of rising targets as it aims to reach 3 percent by 2030.[93] Nevertheless, Norway announced a 50 billion Norwegian kroner (NOK) (approximately $5.1 billion) increase in its support for Ukraine for a total 2025 allocation of NOK 85 billion (approximately $8.7 billion) to buttress Ukrainian defense industry output.[94] From May 2023 to May 2025, Norway also chaired the Arctic Council, where it sought to promote Allied cooperation and sideline Russia because of the Ukraine war.[95] Unfortunately, these efforts largely failed to reduce conflict with the Russians, who accused Norway in March 2025 of militarizing the Svalbard Archipelago, a claim that Norway denied, noting its adherence to the 1920 treaty establishing Norwegian sovereignty there.[96]

Because of its border with Russia, Norway keeps a wary eye on Russia's main submarine bases, strategic bomber bases, and nuclear weapons storage sites in the Kola Peninsula, and it amended its Defense Cooperation Agreement with the United States in February 2024 to grant access to eight additional areas concentrated in the northern part of the country.[97] In furtherance of overall NATO cooperation, Norway hosted nine Allied nations for the Joint Viking 2025 Exercise in March 2025 to simulate a defense of Norway.[98] Tensions with allies, America in particular, arose in 2025. Unnamed officials challenged the security of intelligence-sharing with the United States, and a Norwegian bunker fuel supplier refused to supply a U.S. nuclear submarine, which had to turn around mid-transit.[99] Nevertheless, senior Norwegian officials publicly emphasize that their cooperation with the United States will continue.

Sweden. Sweden became a valuable addition to the NATO Alliance in March 2024 and has doubled down on its traditional seriousness about defense through a heightened military training tempo, increased capability development, and commitment to NATO integration. In October 2024, the government announced a Total Defense Bill for 2025 to 2030 that called for an increase of more than 170 billion Swedish kroner (more than $16 billion) above current military spending, which was already above 2 percent of GDP.[100] This seriousness is paralleled in the Swedish military's training, especially on the strategically vital island of Gotland in the middle of the Baltic Sea. Swedish forces run continual exercise rotations to prepare to repel an invasion and have constructed additional barracks.[101] The Swedish military has also ramped up its Arctic training program while training U.S. forces to operate in the Arctic's harsh conditions.[102]

As another part of NATO integration, Sweden has opened its Visdel Test Range, Europe's largest land proving ground, to partners. To commemorate Sweden's first anniversary as a member of NATO, American B-52H Stratofortresses escorted by Swedish JAS 39 Gripen fighter jets carried out practice drops of GBU-30 joint direct attack munitions at Visdel.[103] Additionally, Sweden has expanded the Esrange Space Center in its North as a unique launch facility for Europe and has begun to launch military communications satellites (the first was launched from California in August 2024).[104] Finally, Sweden has been a stalwart supporter of Ukraine and signed a letter of intent about cooperating on air capabilities as a first step toward a major deal for the export of Gripen fighters.[105]

Baltic Allies: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Russia presents a conventional military threat to Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania that may be greater than the one it presents to any other NATO members. Accordingly, these three allied countries commit high percentages of their GDP to national defense (all are headed to 5 percent of GDP).[106] Their prioritization of capabilities central to defense against Russian invasion and grey-zone aggression is illustrated by joint construction of the Baltic Defensive Line: a set of 600 bunkers and fortified positions along their border with Russia to shape future invasion routes.[107] Purchases of relevant capabilities,

from High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems to National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile Systems to Naval Strike Missiles, all increase the Baltic forces' ability to impose significant costs on any potential Russian invasion in order to preserve battlespace for the inflow of allied reinforcements.[108]

Finally, the recent 2025 joint public announcement by the Baltic and Polish defense ministers recommending that their nations withdraw from the Ottawa Treaty (which prohibits the production, stockpiling, and deployment of anti-personnel landmines) in order to capitalize on their Baltic Defensive Line indicates a recognition of the realities of their threat environment.[109] Since the joint statement, Lithuania's Ministry of Defense has announced a three-layer defensive scheme encompassing areas from Lithuania's border with Russia to 50 kilometers inland. It is already under construction with minefields planned for the first layer.[110]

Due to rising Russian threats and a lack of strategic depth in the Baltic States, NATO has deployed multinational battlegroups as tripwire forces to each of these three countries and Poland since 2017. Each battlegroup is led by a framework nation: The United Kingdom leads in Estonia (battlegroup total: 1,350 soldiers); Canada leads in Latvia (battlegroup total: 2,450 soldiers); and Germany leads in Lithuania (battlegroup total: 1,800 soldiers).[111] Germany is continuing to expand its forces toward final deployment of its new 45th Armored Brigade by 2027.[112]

Eastern Flank Allies: Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia. In March 2022, then-NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg announced NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) effort consisting of four new multinational NATO battlegroups deployed to Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia (in addition to the existing four in the Baltic States and Poland).[113] The United States is the framework nation in Poland; the multinational battlegroup in Bulgaria is a combined command between Bulgaria and Italy; Hungarian forces lead in Hungary with support from Croatia, Italy, and Turkey; and France leads the battlegroup in Romania.[114] Personnel rotations are constant, but "battlegroups are not identical; their sizes and compositions are tailored to specific geographic factors and threats."[115]

Bulgaria. A member of NATO since 2004, Bulgaria continues to replace outdated Soviet gear with modern NATO standard equipment to enhance its military capabilities and interoperability. This process has slowed because of spending limitations over the past decade, although Bulgaria did spend more than 2 percent of GDP on defense in 2024.[116] Significant events in 2025 included the initial delivery in April of eight F-16 fighter jets to replace aging MiG-29s with another eight F-16s scheduled to arrive by the end of 2027.[117] In September 2025, Bulgaria enhanced readiness and NATO interoperability by hosting NATO's 20th civil emergency response exercise.[118] Regular emergency response exercises help to ensure smooth coordination in disaster and other emergency response, such as the NATO response to deadly earthquakes in Turkey.[119]

Hungary. Hungary became a member of NATO in 1999 and has marked its own path within NATO over the past year by embracing economic openness to Russia and China while also approving Sweden's accession to the NATO Alliance.[120] Hungary has met the 2014 NATO Wales Summit 2 percent spending target since 2023; by contrast, "while the majority of NATO members finally reached the threshold in 2024, NATO members over the past decade averaged only 1.59 percent."[121] Given these complicating factors and Hungary's position on NATO's eastern flank, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's government sought freedom to limit Hungarian participation in all NATO actions outside the Alliance's territorial borders, which was granted in a deal whereby Hungary agreed not to block NATO support to Ukraine.[122] Despite these delineations, Budapest welcomed President Trump's re-election and coordinates closely with Washington on Russia sanctions policy as demonstrated by a January 2025 reversal of a threatened veto and a November 2025 sanctions carve-out for Hungary.[123]

Poland. Lauded by U.S. Secretary of War Pete Hegseth as a "model ally,"[124] Poland has taken the lead in Europe on securing credible deterrence capabilities in support of its NATO obligations. On track to reach 5 percent of GDP on defense spending, Poland has secured critical capabilities from American F-35 jets to South Korean K2 Tanks to increasing Polish 155mm artillery shell production. Polish defense spending has been concentrated on combat capabilities.[125] As a result, Poland has emerged as a bulwark of NATO deterrence.

Romania. Romania hit the 2 percent of GDP defense spending target for the third time in a decade

in 2025 and envisions serious additional spending as it expands the Mihail Kogălniceanu NATO military base to 3,000 hectares, which will make it the largest NATO base by 2030.[126] A key player in Black Sea security, Romania hosts an Aegis Ashore site as part of NATO's IAMD mission.[127] Romania's geography, spending, and basing assets will make it a significant player in NATO for the foreseeable future, but concerns exist because of its decision to annul a presidential election, citing Russian influence operations.[128]

Slovakia. Slovakia met the 2 percent NATO target in 2025 but has refused to commit to additional spending beyond "a slight increase of about a tenth of a percent."[129] Concerns about fiscal and strategic overextension also underpin Prime Minister Robert Fico's public opposition to Ukrainian NATO membership and to sanctions on Russia.[130] Another concern is that both Slovakia and Hungary continued to rely to a significant extent on Russian energy resources in 2025.[131] On a more positive note, Prime Minister Fico survived an assassination attempt in the summer of 2024 and has returned to health without civil unrest or government collapse.[132]

Balkan Allies: Albania, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Slovenia. All of NATO's Balkan members acceded to NATO in the 21st century after NATO interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo in the late 20th century, seeking to build trust and cooperation among historically fractious nations. The process has advanced NATO values and promoted regional cooperation, but the contributions of these nations to European security have been commensurate with their smaller relative size.

Decades of regional integration produced a Joint Declaration on Strengthening Defense Cooperation in 2025 by Croatia, Albania, and Kosovo (a non-NATO member with NATO KFOR still on the ground) that has drawn furious protests from Serbia, which still regards Kosovo as a breakaway province.[133] Croatia doubled down in August 2025 when it signed a defense agreement with Slovenia expanding their pre-existing ties to smooth joint production and exercises, which Serbia also strongly criticized.[134] The degree of implementation and the possible effects on strategic stability in the Balkans remain to be seen.

Southern Allies: Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain, and Turkey. For Southern European NATO allies, instability in the Middle East and Africa and Russian meddling in their backyard are the most pressing security threats. Nevertheless, the Mediterranean countries have not invested sufficiently in the defense capabilities needed to meet this challenge, and several have spent significant time below the prior 2 percent spending threshold. The lackluster defense spending in Italy, Portugal, Spain, and even France (which only recently reached 2 percent of GDP) stand in stark contrast to spending by their northern NATO partners

Greece. Greece's commitment to defense spending has been steady, although this has been due largely to ongoing historic tensions with neighboring Turkey. These tensions came into the open in 2024 in disputes with Italy and France over defense deals with Turkey involving the air domain.[135] These disputes led Greece to pursue technology modernization initiatives that integrate artificial intelligence (AI) and drone technology into its air defense systems; this is an Allied capability gap, but Greece's plans currently remain focused on countering Turkey.[136]

The Greek navy has increased its activities, particularly in the Red Sea, with Rear Admiral Vasileios Gryparis assuming operational command of the EU's Operation Aspides, although he is hamstrung with only a handful of rotating frigates.[137] Adding to naval force generation concerns, Greece has stuck to "balanced relations with China"[138] in discordant counterpoint to the American approach. America, for example, has blacklisted China's COSCO Shipping, which runs Greece's Piraeus Port, and COSCO Shipping has refused to invest capital in the upgrading of Piraeus Port to meet modern standards.[139] However, a recent investment agreement in Greece with the United States Development Finance Corporation signals a positive move to diversify port infrastructure for security.[140]

Another threat is Russia's aggressive and growing presence in the Mediterranean. Russia's hypersonic missile tests in the eastern Mediterranean, provision of intelligence that helps Houthi terrorists to target commercial shipping in the Red Sea, and redeployment of forces from Syria to Libya are directly compounding instability and conflict.[141] Redoubled Greek force generation and capabilities will be essential to addressing these worrying trends.

Italy. Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has one of the best relationships with President Trump among

NATO leaders,[142] but Italy seems to lack political will when it comes to spending on defense. Military leaders have declared that "our commitment to the security of the Red Sea and other crisis areas must fund support through additional funding that goes beyond the scope envisaged with the recent approval of the budget law."[143] Instead, Italian politicians have been content to commit minimal Italian troops to NATO operations and have Italy serve as host for Allied Joint Force Command Naples.[144]

Italy has been a leader in EU operations such as the anti-piracy Operation Atalanta off the Horn of Africa and Operation Irini, responsible for enforcing the United Nations arms embargo against Libya, but both operations strain under limited assets.[145] Ideally, Italian operations related to Libya can give NATO leverage to deny Russian forces a new basing foothold to replace their location in Syria. Scattered strategic commitments and insufficient defense resourcing, if continued, will complicate Article 3 commitments that lie at the heart of NATO's assurance of collective defense in the contested Mediterranean strategic environment.

Portugal. Portugal developed ties with the United States during World War II, when it granted America use of the Azores to move naval and air assets across the Atlantic, and after the war became a founding member of NATO.[146] However, it has lagged behind most other European allies by spending only 1.55 percent of GDP on defense in 2024 and reaching 2 percent only in 2025.[147] This is primarily the result of a disconnect between NATO's focus on securing the eastern flank against Russian aggression and Portugal's position on the far Western edge of Europe. However, as NATO Secretary General Rutte noted during his January 2025 visit to Portugal, NATO realizes it will need to deal with "challenges coming from the southern neighborhood," and Russian ships and aircraft still lurk nearby.[148]

Spain. Consistent with past practice, Spain spent only 1.43 percent of GDP on defense in 2024.[149] Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez has promised to accelerate defense spending—a potential boon to the Alliance as Spain is the eurozone's fourth-largest economy—but he faces political challenges from his hard-left coalition members.[150] Confronted by rising allied pressures, Spain has announced a €2.08 billion ($2.4 billion) increase in defense procurement and a €1 billion ($1.15 billion) military assistance package to Ukraine for 2025 (this helped Madrid reach 2 percent in 2025).[151] However, Spain has explicitly rejected the 5 percent defense spending target adopted at NATO's June 2025 Hague Summit in favor of social spending.[152] That lower budgets mean lower capabilities is perhaps best demonstrated in Spain's case by its decision not to buy F-35 jet fighters, instead holding out for the sixth-generation European Future Combat Air System, which will not be operational until 2045.[153]

Turkey. Turkey has been a pivotal ally for counterterrorism force projection by American and NATO forces into the Middle East but has clashed with NATO over Sweden's accession to the Alliance, cooperation with Russia, and historic grievances with Greece. In January 2024, Turkey became the final NATO ally to ratify Sweden's NATO accession, having used its leverage to force changes in Swedish anti-terrorism laws, compel extradition of wanted individuals to Turkey, and ensure new arms sales from Washington.[154] U.S.–Turkey relations have improved with a sale of the latest Block 70 F-16s, but Ankara's 2019 decision to purchase Russia's S-400 air defense system led the United States to expel Turkey from the F-35 fighter jet program.[155]

Tensions between Greece and Turkey have surged over the Greek government's plans for a Greece–Cyprus–Israel power link, which Turkey claims will violate its territorial waters.[156] Nevertheless, the fall of the Assad regime has raised the possibility of cooperation on security in Syria as Turkey seeks to establish stability on its southern border to permit the millions of Syrian refugees hosted by Ankara to return home.[157] This could also build on cooperation by Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria in the framework of a joint counter-mine task force in the Black Sea to ensure safe shipping.[158] Despite significant pitfalls, if positive momentum can be sustained (or even expanded with a possible return of Russian S-400 systems[159]), NATO cohesion could improve, and threats from the Alliance's southern flank could be reduced.

Western and Central European Allies: Belgium, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom.

Belgium. Brussels is host to NATO's headquarters, but Belgium has failed to meet NATO spending targets for more than a decade, although Prime Minister Bart De Wever and Defense Minister Theo Francken did raise Belgian defense spending to the

Wales Summit goal of 2 percent in 2025.[160] Connected to this increase, Belgium's order of 34 F-35 jet fighters was scheduled to arrive in 2025, and the government is looking at new purchases of F-35s and an anti–submarine warfare frigate.[161] The F-35s will be put to use as Belgium leads NATO's Benelux Air Policing mission. Belgium also brings financial acumen to the Alliance as host to the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications (SWIFT). SWIFT has been a critical part of coordinated Allied actions to punish Russia for aggression in Ukraine and is a keystone of Western economic leverage.[162] Belgium is also shifting to investment in European defense firms to expand the allied defense industrial base.[163]

The Czech Republic. The Czech Republic spent 2 percent of GDP on defense in 2024 and has announced plans to reach 3 percent of GDP by 2030.[164] This increased focus on national security follows an October 2023 "Defence Strategy of the Czech Republic" in which Minister of Defence Jana Černochová acknowledged "a highly deteriorated security situation" while criticizing past "political apathy and chronic underfunding."[165] The Czech Republic has a long history of successful weapons manufacturing with domestic arms makers such as Česká zbrojovka a.s. helping to modernize Czech military equipment.[166]

The government has backed its rhetoric on Ukraine with direct aid and coproduction support. The Czech ammunition initiative for Ukraine, for example, has won plaudits for delivering hundreds of thousands of 155 mm artillery rounds to Ukraine that it bought from world markets, and the initiative was extended into 2025.[167] The Czech Republic also has signed agreements with the Ukrainian defense industry to produce its NATO-standard rifles for Ukraine's soldiers in Ukraine, building up a long-term supply pipeline.[168]

France. France is a unique NATO ally with its Gaullist streak of independence, status as a secondary NATO nuclear power, and tradition of maintaining an expeditionary force. France became a nuclear power in the 1960s and today maintains a force of nuclear-capable Rafale jets to launch ASMP-A nuclear-armed cruise missiles and a fleet of three *Triomphant*-class ballistic missile submarines with a set of M-51 submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) with multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles (MIRVs).[169] France is not a member of NATO's Nuclear Planning Group, but its nuclear capabilities complicate adversary calculations, as does France's strategic ambiguity policy with respect to vital interests with European dimensions.[170]

The French military has long guarded an independent expeditionary capability but is now undergoing a transition to focus on high-intensity warfare against more equal adversaries.[171] Additionally, President Emmanuel Macron has proposed a force built from a coalition of the willing to monitor any ceasefire or peace deal in Ukraine pursuant to Washington's insistence that American troops will not deploy.[172] As part of its operational independence, the French navy retains a carrier group centered on the *Charles de Gaulle* aircraft carrier, which deploys worldwide, including to French territories in the Indo–Pacific.[173] However, despite the Red Sea's strategic importance in linking French territories, France declined to join America's Operation Prosperity Guardian, relying instead on the "lowest common denominator of agreement" represented by the purely defensive operations conducted as part of Operation Aspides, a European Union mission to accompany EU nations' vessels through the Red Sea.[174]

Germany. Germany will necessarily play a central role in deterring Russian conventional aggression against NATO allies in Europe. Its *Zeitenwende* fund and current relaxing of debt limits for defense are valuable steps to rectify massive defense underinvestment. Additionally, Germany is the second-biggest contributor of military aid to Ukraine behind the United States. Germany is set to deploy an armored brigade permanently to Lithuania; an estimated 500 of an eventual 5,000 soldiers of the 45th Armored Brigade were deployed there in 2025, and the rest were scheduled to deploy by the end of the year.[175]

Germany is leading the effort to close NATO air defense capability gaps through its Sky Shield initiative, which brings together 21 nations to procure and deploy short-range, medium-range, and long-range air defense systems to blunt missile threats from Russia as successfully demonstrated in Ukraine.[176] In 2024, Germany broke ground on Europe's first Patriot missile plant to ensure a steady supply of these critical air defense munitions.[177] The German military is also planning to purchase an updated version of the German-produced Taurus

long-range strike missiles to deepen alarmingly light precision munitions stockpiles in Europe.[178] If Germany continues to augment its defense investments, NATO security will improve in the years ahead.

Luxembourg. Among the world's smallest countries, Luxembourg has around 671,000 citizens though they are among the richest in the world at $132,800 per capita.[179] Its economic vitality and status as a NATO founding member have not translated into meeting NATO defense spending commitments: Luxembourg has spent below 2 percent of GDP on defense every year since 2014, when NATO agreed on that minimum, before hitting 2 percent in 2025.[180] Luxembourg has moved to modernize its armored vehicles for better joint operation of its 900-soldier army with Belgium, has joined the NATO SATCOM consortium to enhance secure satellite communications for the Alliance, and foresaw opportunities to strengthen NATO cybersecurity by leveraging private-sector expertise.[181]

The Netherlands. The Netherlands did not meet NATO's 2 percent of GDP defense spending guideline until 2024, but it occupies a vital place in U.S. strategy toward China through the compliance of ASML, a company that makes cutting-edge chip-manufacturing technology, with U.S. export restrictions on China.[182] The Netherlands was set to reach 2 percent in 2025, but the conservative People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) is having trouble convincing other political parties to agree to raise defense spending to 3.5 percent.[183] However, all Dutch parties that won seats in the October 2025 national election support raising defense spending to meet targets from the 2025 NATO summit in The Hague.[184] The government signed an agreement to buy four attack submarines from France to upgrade the current fleet and add cruise missile capability with Tomahawk missiles—a capability missing from the current submarine fleet but important to mission flexibility.[185] This investment in strengthening NATO defense of vital sea lanes complements the central importance of the Port of Rotterdam in NATO's defense planning for theater-level contingencies.

The United Kingdom. America has long had a special relationship with the United Kingdom. Like France, the U.K. is a secondary NATO nuclear power with a sea-based nuclear deterrent centered around the *Vanguard*-class submarine fleet with the future replacement *Dreadnought*-class submarine fleet under construction.[186] Through the Mutual Defense Agreement (MDA), which was set on an "enduring basis" in 2024, the United States works closely with the U.K. on nuclear deterrence.[187] In 2025, the U.K. and France issued the Northwood Declaration pledging joint coordination on nuclear weapons issues in an agreement between NATO's non-U.S. nuclear powers.[188]

In 2024, Prime Minister Keir Starmer initiated an independent "root and branch review of UK defence" led by former NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson "to ensure [that] Britain is secure at home and strong abroad."[189] Published on June 2, 2025, the *Strategic Defence Review* presented an extensive set of findings and recommendations stemming from an acknowledgement that "UK Armed Forces have begun the necessary process of change in response to this new reality. But progress has not been fast or radical enough."[190] Funding for recommended improvements will come from the promised rise to 2.5 percent of annual GDP spent on defense by April 2027 and an ambition to meet 3 percent of annual GDP sometime in the next parliament, although concerns remain about implementation hurdles sidelining reforms.[191]

The United Kingdom's two aircraft carriers, the Royal Navy's *HMS Queen Elizabeth* and *HMS Prince of Wales*, have faced technical and maintenance problems in recent years that have led to speculation about their potential scrapping.[192] Despite these concerns, both carriers have conducted up-tempo operations, and both were at sea in November 2024.[193] To maximize Alliance presence beyond American naval assets, the U.K. and France agreed in 2023 to coordinate aircraft carrier deployments to "protect our shared values and interests around the globe" in an example of force multiplication through allied coordination.[194] The U.K. is now Ukraine's third-ranked nation-state supporter after the U.S. and Germany with more than €14 billion (about $16.3 billion) in aid.[195] The U.K. also hosts the Allied Maritime Command (MARCOM), which oversees NATO maritime operations.[196]

There are two major concerns about the U.K.'s contribution to European security: declining force generation and an isolated defense industrial base. While a detailed breakdown of U.K. military forces and their structures is beyond the scope of this study, the difficulties in force generation, both on

the personnel side and on the technical side, are significant. Additionally, the European Union is set to place exclusionary hurdles in the way of U.K. arms manufacturers participating in the EU's largest program to expand the NATO defense industrial base in Europe.[197]

NATO Capability Gaps

European partners, finally awakening to a threatening global environment, are retooling their armed forces to deter Russia. The trend line is clear when one considers the more than 200 percent increase in arms imports from the United States from 2019 to 2023, nearly all NATO allies meeting 2 percent defense spending in 2025, and ongoing efforts across the continent to reopen shuttered production lines and build or expand production lines for such key capabilities as Patriot missiles.[198] However, without careful planning, strategic urgency could devolve into strategic panic rather than strategic success. This concern is strengthened by Supreme Allied Commander Transformation Admiral Pierre Vandier's statement indicating that "Allies are already 30% behind in delivering on existing capability targets."[199] It is therefore critical to focus on deterrence capabilities that lack sufficient bulk across the Alliance and often depend on American provision.

NATO has put significant effort into deterrence planning through implementation of the Deterrence and Defense of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA) Concept, but European NATO allies still lack numerous critical capabilities, some of which will likely not be available for years.[200] These gaps break down into several broad categories: precision-strike capabilities; integrated air-missile defense; command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR); next-generation capabilities; and logistics across domains.

Europe currently lacks American capacity in rocket artillery and precision strike. The American M270 Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS) and M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS), paired with the Guided Multiple Launch Rocket System (GMLRS) or MGM-140 Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS), have been the traditional rocket artillery solution across NATO, but many European allies are moving away from these systems.[201] As a result, the United States' next-generation long-range precision-strike missile (PrSM), designed to be fired from the MLRS and HIMARS platforms, is not interoperable with all NATO systems despite performance leads on current non-U.S. long-range missiles like Storm Shadow and Scalp, and future Anglo–French and German missiles will not be arriving until the late 2020s.[202] To assure conventional deterrence against a potential Russian foe with active production lines focused on long-range strike missiles and drones, NATO must find ways to close the gap.

NATO allies in Europe are scrambling to procure sufficient air defense assets to counter short-range, medium-range, and long-range threats, but the capabilities gap is dire; as NATO Admiral Vandier has noted, "we can't even say today that we are protecting our deployed soldiers satisfactorily."[203] America's allies in Europe are concentrating on closing this gap through efforts like the European Sky Shield Initiative (21 nations led by Germany) that is pursuing air defense capabilities at each range. Germany has already signed contracts for the short-range Skyranger 30 system, the medium-range Infra-Red Imaging System-Tail/Thrust Vector Controlled (IRIS-T SLM), and Israel's range-agnostic Arrow 3 system and is opening a Patriot missile production facility with production scheduled to begin in 2027.[204] If all of the allies remain committed to procurement of air defense assets, this gap will likely begin to close for deployed forces before 2030.

U.S. assets have traditionally been the backbone of C4ISR systems within NATO, but global demands on these assets will require European partners to increase their contributions. On a positive note, NATO allies are now fielding F-35 Lightning II fifth-generation fighter aircraft with an expectation of more than 400 fighters across Europe by 2030, and the platforms' initial test runs in Europe by U.S. squadrons have sent very positive signals about the significant increase in aerial ISR capabilities that they provide.[205] Starlink has provided essential satellite communications and command-and-control (C2) capabilities to Ukraine in addition to supporting internet and communication access for civilian users independent of local power grids.[206]

Europe's dependence is similar, as no European capability can replace Starlink's communications infrastructure, although several systems from companies like Eutelsat, SES, and Hispasat offer satellite connectivity, and the EU is developing the

satellite constellation Infrastructure for Resilience, Interconnectivity and Security by Satellite (IRIS2) for government and military use with initial operational capability planned for 2031.[207] In the larger view, Europe is looking to expand its space-based capabilities through new spaceports from Portugal's Azores to Sweden's Esrange.[208] However, European competitors lag far behind American companies in the development of their rocket launch programs. A paradigmatic example occurred in March 2025 when a rocket, partially funded by NATO's Innovation Fund, blasted off from Norway's Andøya Space Center only to crash into the sea 30 seconds later.[209] It is therefore imperative that Allied collaboration be improved and enhanced European satellite intelligence capabilities be secured.[210]

"NATO has not changed for 30 years," Admiral Vandier has complained, and this is reflected in delayed adoption of technology with incentives slanted in favor of legacy platforms, a dynamic that delays artificial intelligence and drone integration.[211] Russia has surged drone production to around 1.4 million units a year since invading Ukraine and has integrated them into battlefield strategy, and Ukraine's unmanned systems commander, Colonel Vadym Sukharevskyi, has warned that NATO nations are not ready for the challenges of mass and AI integration posed by Russian drone tactics and production.[212] The United States has worked to increase its drone production, but concerns about effectiveness and production quantities persist.[213] With respect to effectiveness, in another frontier technology, the United States maintains a lead relative to its European partners on the development of AI models and quantum computing on the technological frontier.[214]

Finally, even if substantial gains are achieved in the above capabilities, as Senator Sam Nunn (D–GA) once observed, "at some point numbers do count,"[215] and European NATO allies face alarming shortfalls in strategic airlift and infrastructure to move forces and assets to the Alliance's borders. However, outstanding orders among Alliance members to procure A400M Transport Aircraft and A330 Multi-Role Tanker Transport planes will lend greater strategic airlift capacity.[216]

With respect to military mobility over ground infrastructure, the picture is significantly worse. Emblematic of the physical issues are the bureaucratic issues: The European Court of Auditors, for example, found that granting authorization to move forces across national borders would take up to 45 days for the majority of countries.[217] The "narrow roads, insufficient rail capacity, mismatched rail gauges, [and] limited data" that characterize Europe's underfunded physical transport networks are another major issue.[218]

U.S. Military Presence in Europe

U.S. military forces have access to many bases across Europe. With more than 20 American military bases on allied territory and numerous bilateral military access agreements in place, pure military access is not a problem for American forces in the European theater. Recent history, from the Gulf War to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to the withdrawal of U.S. and coalition forces from Afghanistan, demonstrates the value of access to military basing in Europe.[219] This supporting foundation is strengthened by prepositioned stocks of U.S. military assets in U.S. European Command (EUCOM) to safeguard deterrence credibility with Army, Air Force, and Marine stocks present in theater.[220] These stocks would come into play primarily after the initiation of hostilities with U.S. military forces already deployed to Europe engaging in initial combat activities.

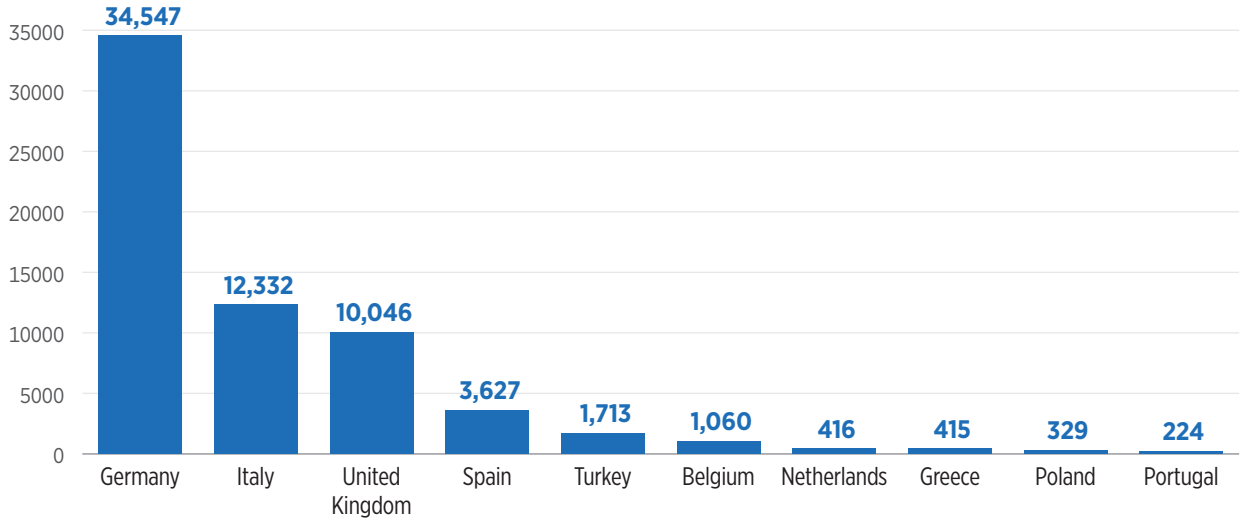
As of September 2025, the United States had just over 67,500 military personnel deployed to EUCOM countries with 67,847 active-duty and 1,742 National Guard and Reserve personnel.[221] Supplementing these permanently deployed forces since 2014 has been a steady flow of Operation Atlantic Resolve rotational forces to reassure European allies and build interoperability following Russia's seizure of Crimea.[222] Deployed sequentially in continuous replacement of the prior force, these military personnel span the branches and have been stationed primarily in Poland, although they have exercised and trained across NATO's eastern flank as well as in Germany.[223]

Critical U.S. Military Installations in Europe. American bases support EUCOM operations across the continent in addition to U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), but permanent forces are concentrated mostly in Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, Spain, and Belgium.

Germany. Germany hosts numerous American military facilities, notably Ramstein Air Base; U.S. Army Garrison (USAG) Bavaria; USAG Stuttgart;

CHART 10

U.S. Troops in Europe, by Country



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Defense, Defense Manpower Data Center, "Military and Civilian Personnel by Service/Agency by State/Country (Updated Quarterly)," March 2025, https://dwp.dmdc.osd.mil/dwp/app/dod-data-reports/workforce-reports (accessed January 21, 2026).

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and USAG Rheinland-Pfalz (particularly Landstuhl). Ramstein Air Base is a linchpin for the American presence in EUCOM as the U.S. Air Force's European headquarters hosting critical airlift resources run by the 86th Airlift Wing, including C-21, C-37, and C-130J aircraft backed by the 521st Air Mobility Operations Wing's provision of command and control, maintenance, and air transportation services across the theater.[224]

USAG Bavaria hosts thousands of U.S. troops, but its operational impact is channeled through three subordinate facilities: the Grafenwoehr Training Area, Joint Multinational Readiness Center (JMRC), and NATO School. Run by the 7th Army Training Command, the Grafenwoehr Training Area enables live, virtual, and constructive training across the full suite of capabilities from small arms to close air support and is the largest U.S. Army permanent training area in Europe.[225] Also under 7th Army Training Command, the JMRC, located near Hohenfels, integrates multinational participation into every rotation of U.S. forces and can train groups as large as a Brigade Task Force across a 163 square km training ground where key NATO units have trained.[226] The NATO School falls within USAG Bavaria's remit and has been the key operational training facility for NATO since 1953, enhancing Alliance interoperability and cohesion.[227]

USAG Stuttgart houses two combatant commands across its five installations and also serves as the primary hub for military cargo in theater.[228] Headquartered at USAG Stuttgart's Patch Barracks, EUCOM is the combatant command for U.S. military forces in Europe who "protect and defend the U.S. and its NATO Allies and partners through deterrence, peacekeeping and military operations."[229] Headquartered at USAG Stuttgart's Kelley Barracks, AFRICOM is the combatant command for U.S. military forces in Africa and oversees a partner-focused strategy across an area of responsibility "of 53 African states, more than 800 ethnic groups, over 1,000 languages, vast natural resources, a land mass of 11.2 million square miles (three-and-a-half times the size of the U.S.), and nearly 19,000 miles of coastland."[230] Stuttgart Army Airfield in Filderstadt houses EUCOM's and AFRICOM's aviation arms and serves as the primary platform for military cargo, making it central to any in-theater operations.[231]

USAG Rheinland-Pfalz provides support services for U.S. forces in Europe, but its critical subordinate entity is the Landstuhl Regional Medical Center.[232] The only U.S. medical center in Europe, Landstuhl Regional Medical Center marked 70 years of successful operation in 2023 with a 99 percent survival rate for "wounded, injured and ill" troops.[233] Landstuhl, the only verified Level II Trauma Center outside America, is the evacuation and treatment center for four combatant commands across three continents and has treated thousands of beneficiaries a month with no ready alternative.[234] The critical operations occurring at these various facilities demonstrate why Germany has the highest U.S. troop deployments in EUCOM.

Italy. Italy hosts several U.S. military facilities, notably Naval Support Activity Naples and Naval Air Station (NAS) Sigonella. The Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa (NAVEUR-NAVAF), is headquartered at Naval Support Activity Naples, a crucial American military installation where the U.S. Navy Sixth Fleet is based.[235] U.S. Sixth Fleet operates "hundreds of ships, submarines and aircraft" alongside additional NAVEUR-NAVAF forces across an area of responsibility that "covers more than 20 million square nautical miles of ocean, touches three continents and encompasses more than 67 percent of the Earth's coastline, 30 percent of its landmass, and nearly 30 percent of the world's population."[236] These operations include highly complex joint exercise carrier deployments in the Mediterranean Sea.[237] Nicknamed the "Hub of the Med," NAS Sigonella is a core pillar for U.S. operations across the European, African, and Central combatant commands with growing demands that make it a "strategic center of the Mediterranean and Near East."[238] The Iranian threat and ongoing military activity around the Red Sea ensure that NAS Sigonella will remain important to U.S. defense and deterrence.

The United Kingdom. The United Kingdom hosts significant U.S. military presence at several facilities, notably Royal Air Force (RAF) Alconbury, RAF Croughton, and RAF Lakenheath. RAF Alconbury has a history of intelligence activity, including Air Force imagery intelligence (IMINT) units with ties to the U.K.'s Joint Aerial Reconnaissance Intelligence Centre (JARIC), but has faced repeated efforts to close the base and consolidate forces.[239] Following analysis in the early 2020s, the United States chose to retain forces at RAF Alconbury and "develop a master plan for long-term Joint Intelligence Analysis Center (JIAC) mission support" with intelligence and communications provisions worldwide and military support work across Europe, Africa, and the Middle East.[240]

RAF Croughton is the headquarters of the 422nd Air Base Group, which "delivers worldwide communications" with public recognition that those communications include "approximately a third of all U.S. military communications in Europe."[241] RAF Lakenheath hosts the U.S. Air Force's 48th Fighter Wing, which includes two F-15E Strike Eagle squadrons and two F-35 squadrons set to reach full operational capability in 2025.[242] Contracts have been awarded to build the facilities necessary to store U.S. nuclear weapons at RAF Lakenheath, a mission it last held during the Cold War[243] and one that would improve the security of NATO's strategic deterrent through diversity of positioning. These diverse missions support essential elements of American power protection and adversary deterrence in Europe.

Spain. Spain hosts two U.S. bases, the primary one being Naval Station Rota, which oversees critical naval radar ships dedicated to NATO's IAMD mission. Naval Station Rota is the headquarters of the Commander of Naval Activities Spain, who coordinates U.S. Navy activities across Spain and Portugal under NAVEUR-NAVAF direction from Naples.[244] Naval Station Rota provides cargo, fuel, and logistics support from the largest weapons and fuel facilities in Europe to units transiting the region in support of U.S. and NATO operations.[245] Four U.S. Navy *Arleigh Burke*–class destroyers equipped with Aegis Baseline 9 Ballistic Missile Defense systems are homeported in Rota as "a component of EUCOM's regional missile defense strategies."[246] Through these activities, U.S. forces based at Naval Station Rota undergird EUCOM operations across the theater.

Belgium. The central U.S. military facility that Belgium hosts is U.S. Army Garrison Benelux–Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE), which is the headquarters of NATO Allied Command Operations.[247] SHAPE is the headquarters of the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) and his staff, who are responsible for all NATO operations including training and concepts and doctrine.[248] Traditionally, SACEUR has been dual-hatted as EUCOM Commander, and therefore

a U.S. military officer, and runs military planning, "including the identification of forces required for the mission," and "makes recommendations to NATO's political and military authorities on any military matter that may affect his ability to carry out his responsibilities."[249] These sweeping responsibilities and the integration with EUCOM forces make SACEUR a vital position for U.S. national interests and advocacy of increased allied contributions.[250]

U.S. Unique Capability Backing in Europe

Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD). American capabilities are essential to the functioning of NATO BMD.[251] The Alliance's BMD systems include the NATO BMD command center (hosted at Ramstein Air Base); BMD radar at Kürecik (U.S. radar); Aegis Ashore sites at Deveselu Air Base and Redzikowo military base (Aegis Ashore is a U.S.-provided system with American military operators); four BMD-capable Aegis ships at Rota (all U.S. ships); and additional air and missile defense systems and ships (including Patriot systems of U.S. design, manufacture, and provision).[252] Provision of these systems cost the United States approximately $2.3 billion from 2011 to 2023.[253] NATO BMD is a critical capability in view of the threat posed by Iran's ballistic missile program and nuclear enrichment efforts, but it features more limited allied buy-in than might be expected given its role in protecting European allies.

U.S. Nuclear Umbrella and Extended Deterrence. NATO has declared that "[a]s long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance."[254] Three nuclear weapons states (France, the U.K., and the United States) are members of NATO, but the principal responsibility for the Alliance's nuclear deterrent falls to the United States because of its larger nuclear stockpile, willingness and capability to deploy nuclear weapons forward, and history of countering the Kremlin's nuclear designs in Europe.[255] The NATO Nuclear Planning Group (NNPG) coordinates the Alliance's nuclear deterrence missions and oversees the nuclear-sharing mission, which is divided into three separate but interconnected segments: storage of U.S. B-61 thermonuclear gravity bombs, hosting of Dual-Capable Aircraft (DCA) equipped to carry out a nuclear strike with B-61s, and the Conventional Support for Nuclear Operations (CSNO) mission (formerly SNOWCAT).[256]

The U.S. distributes tactical nuclear weapons at various bases throughout Europe. Poland has expressed a desire to join the NATO nuclear mission by hosting American nuclear weapons, which some U.S. experts think could strengthen NATO's nuclear posture.[257] However, no decision has been publicly announced.

Several U.S. allies that employ DCA are equipped to carry out a strike with B-61 nuclear bombs.[258] On June 24, 2025, the United Kingdom announced that it will purchase 12 F-35As and join NATO's DCA mission, building on the U.K.'s current submarine-only nuclear deterrent.[259] However, Turkey's purchase of a Russian S-400 air defense system led the U.S. to exclude it from the F-35 program, so Turkey will have no access to the most cutting-edge DCA platform. Notably, Poland has already received the first of 32 F-35 jet fighters that are on order, which would allow a smoother entry into nuclear-sharing arrangements.[260] The rollout of the fifth-generation F-35 is welcome news for nuclear deterrence in Europe, but the technical sufficiency of older platforms that still serve as the primary DCA fleet, including F-15s, F-16s, and Tornados, remains a matter of concern, especially because of life-cycle maintenance and air defense vulnerability issues.[261]

Conventional Support for Nuclear Operations, broadened from SNOWCAT to include a variety of support domains, is carried out by seven allies: the Czech Republic, Denmark, Greece, Hungary, Norway, Poland, and Romania.[262] Further details of this mission are not public because of its sensitivity and the no-acceptable-failure nature of its task, but it is possible that, in view of recent U.S.–Swedish escort missions displaying bilateral cooperation in the air, Sweden could join as a new ally.[263]

Ultimately, however, NATO's nuclear deterrent is dependent on America's provision of extended deterrence. It is settled U.S. Air Force doctrine that, "[r]egardless of how they are used, the employment of nuclear weapons yields effects at the strategic level," and "only the President can authorize strategic attack employing nuclear weapons."[264] With specific reference to NATO, Air Force doctrine is clear: "The sole authority to transfer US nuclear weapons for NATO employment remains with the US President."[265] This doctrine is reinforced by NATO structures and secured operationally by two requirements: The North Atlantic Council would have to

vote in favor of employing the B-61 bombs, provided by America, in a nuclear strike, and such a mission would be within the purview of the Supreme Allied Commander Europe, who is always a U.S. military officer partly for this reason.[266] Technically, all U.S. nuclear weapons are secured through Permissive Action Links (PALs) with redundant coded switch systems that render the weapons unusable without permissions provided by the U.S. President through nuclear command and control.[267]

Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR). ISR is a multifaceted combination of numerous information sources that is used to provide a comprehensive battlefield picture and is most often carried out in the military domain through a mix of crewed and uncrewed aircraft coupled with satellite platforms. The United States dominates the provision of ISR within the Alliance. "[T]he bulk of the ISR employed [in Ukraine]," for example, "has been provided by the United States."[268]

NATO continues to depend on American ISR operations because of past low investment by European partners. Non-U.S. NATO countries, for example, have only 11 signals intelligence (SIGINT) aircraft in service, while the U.S. Air Force has an inventory of 17 "big wing" SIGINT aircraft. This reliance is further demonstrated by the NATO ISR Force's reliance on variants of U.S. company Northrop Grumman's Global Hawk unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), American UAVs being the only low-observable variants within NATO.[269] Capping this capabilities gap is the military satellite constellations gap with 246 acknowledged U.S. military satellites in the sky compared to 49 for European NATO members as of May 2023.[270] European efforts are underway with European companies under contract to develop and procure comparable systems to shoulder part of the ISR burden, but those capabilities will not begin to arrive until later in this decade.

Strategic Air: Transport and Tanker Aircraft. NATO has affirmed the value of "strategic airlift capabilities that enable forces to be quickly deployed to wherever they are needed."[271] However, American assets play an outsized role in backstopping this central capability. As of 2025, the United States maintained an active fleet of 605 tanker aircraft (75 percent of worldwide share) and 918 transport aircraft (21 percent of worldwide share) for strategic air purposes.[272] NATO allies also possess tanker and transport aircraft, but the quantity possessed by the NATO ally with the second-highest number (France) is far lower: 16 tanker aircraft and 119 transport aircraft, and non-U.S. NATO allies account for less than 50 percent of the top 10 rankings in both categories.[273] Given current and projected requirements, the total fleet remains too small even though NATO's Support and Procurement Agency (NSPA) in June 2025 "announced the order of two additional Airbus A330 Multi Role Tanker Transport (MRTT) aircraft, bringing the total number in the multinational MRTT fleet (MMF) to 12."[274]

Long-Range Strike. With deeper missile stockpiles and more varied options, American long-range strike capabilities are currently the backbone of NATO capabilities as allies rush to catch up.[275] The tip of the spear in this area is the Army's 2nd Multi-Domain Task Force (MDTF). Activated in Wiesbaden, Germany, in 2021, the 2nd MDTF will start to deploy long-range fires capabilities in 2026 with an eye toward future permanent stationing of capabilities that include SM-6, Tomahawk, and hypersonic weapons.[276] Unfortunately, European NATO allies do not have access to similar national capabilities to reinforce the MDTF deployment's deterrent effect; the "bulk of the current European arsenal is provided by limited numbers of air-launched cruise missiles with maximum ranges of about 500 kilometers," and these allies so far are only signing letters of intent to develop a long-range strike missile, indicating a likely years-long gap.[277]

Conclusion

Overall, Europe is a well-developed operating environment for countering Russian forces, but Russia's security pressure on the continent casts light, directly and indirectly, on the need to close transatlantic capability gaps. Despite those gaps, however, the positive growth trajectory in defense spending should translate into enhanced military capabilities across domains. The next year will witness an effort—an effort without Cold War precedent—to craft a deterrence plan from the strategic level to the tactical level with resilient, redundant strategic enablers as the United States repostures its forces to confront problems in multiple theaters. For now, Russian forces are bogged down in Ukraine, and Ukraine's fight, supported by NATO's Prioritized Ukraine Requirements List (PURL) with Europeans taking the lead,[278] provides time to build and deploy credible forces in NATO territory.

NATO's seriousness about the threat is demonstrated by the swift creation and deployment of multinational force constructs in Operation Baltic Sentry and Operation Eastern Sentry, which has led to decreased Russian grey-zone aggression in those sub-regions. Nevertheless, when confronted by force, Moscow has continually pivoted into new hybrid warfare approaches whether it is in the cyber domain, in the air with drones and jamming, or through more traditional direct covert actions such as sabotage.[279] Simultaneously, American forces across the continent retain smooth access validated by NATO exercises from the north to the south with recently expanded access to Sweden's and Finland's territory now that the two countries are members of the Alliance.

European political divisions, from Spain's refusal to hike defense spending to EU efforts to develop independent capabilities against, rather than in concert with, U.S. efforts, do weaken deterrence credibility. Additionally, a cycle of frequent government collapses with inconclusive snap election results in many sharply divided societies has been repeated in recent years. This cycle, with its conflicting or absent political signals and budgeting delays, limits progress and coherence in rebuilding derelict military forces and defense industrial bases. By contrast, conservative governments with a transatlantic orientation have seen additional victories since publication of the *2024 Index*.

Scoring the European Operating Environment

Various considerations must be taken into account in assessing the regions within which the United States may have to conduct military operations to defend its vital national interests. Our assessment of the operating environment utilized a five-point scale ranging from "very poor" to "excellent" conditions and covering four regional characteristics of greatest relevance to the conduct of military operations:

1. **Very Poor.** Significant hurdles exist for military operations. Physical infrastructure is insufficient or nonexistent, and the region is politically unstable. The U.S. military is poorly placed or absent, and alliances are nonexistent or diffuse.

2. **Unfavorable.** A challenging operating environment for military operations is marked by inadequate infrastructure, weak alliances, and recurring political instability. The U.S. military is inadequately placed in the region.

3. **Moderate.** A neutral to moderately favorable operating environment is characterized by adequate infrastructure, a moderate alliance structure, and acceptable levels of regional political stability. The U.S. military is adequately placed.

4. **Favorable.** A favorable operating environment includes good infrastructure, strong alliances, and a stable political environment. The U.S. military is well placed in the region for future operations.

5. **Excellent.** An extremely favorable operating environment includes well-established and well-maintained infrastructure; strong, capable allies; and a stable political environment. The U.S. military is exceptionally well placed to defend U.S. interests.

The key regional characteristics consist of:

a. **Alliances.** Alliances are important for interoperability and collective defense, as allies are more likely to lend support to U.S. military operations. Various indicators provide insight into the strength or health of an alliance. These include whether the U.S. trains regularly with countries in the region, has good interoperability with the forces of an ally, and shares intelligence with nations in the region.

b. **Political Stability.** Political stability brings predictability for military planners when considering such indicators as transit, basing, and overflight rights for U.S. military operations. The overall degree of political stability indicates whether U.S. military actions would be hindered or enabled and considers such questions as whether transfers of power are

Operating Environment: Europe

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

generally peaceful and whether there have been any recent instances of political instability in the region.

c. **U.S. Military Positioning.** Having military forces based or equipment and supplies staged in a region greatly enhances the ability of the United States to respond to crises and presumably achieve success in critical "first battles" more quickly. Being routinely present in a region also helps the U.S. to maintain familiarity with its characteristics and the various actors that might try to assist or thwart U.S. actions. With this in mind, we assessed whether the U.S. military was well positioned in the region. Again, indicators included bases, troop presence, prepositioned equipment, and recent examples of military operations (including training and humanitarian) launched from the region.

d. **Infrastructure.** Modern, reliable, and suitable infrastructure is essential to military operations. Airfields, ports, rail lines, canals, and paved roads enable the United States to stage, launch operations from, and logistically sustain combat operations. We combined expert knowledge of regions with publicly available information on critical infrastructure to arrive at our overall assessment of this metric.

For Europe, we arrived at these average scores (rounded to the nearest whole number):

- Alliances: **5—Excellent.**
- Political Stability: **5—Excellent.**
- U.S. Military Positioning: **4—Favorable.**
- Infrastructure: **4—Favorable.**
- Aggregating to a regional score of: **Excellent.**

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Middle East

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Regional Overview

The Middle East has long been an important focus of U.S. foreign and security policy. U.S. security relationships in this strategically important region at the intersection of Europe, Asia, and Africa are built on pragmatism, shared security concerns, and economic interests that include large sales of U.S. arms that enhance the ability of countries in the region to defend themselves. The United States also has a long-term interest that derives from the region's importance as the world's primary source of oil and gas and, increasingly, its role as a transit point for international trade between Asian and European markets.

The region is home to a wide array of cultures, religions, and ethnic groups: Arabs, Jews, Kurds, Persians, and Turks among others. It also is home to the three Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as well as many smaller religions like the Bahá'í, Druze, Yazidi, and Zoroastrian faiths. The Middle East contains many predominantly Muslim countries as well as the world's only Jewish state.

The Middle East is deeply sectarian, characterized by long-standing divisions that in some cases are centuries old. Contemporary conflicts, however, have more to do with modern radical ideologies constantly vying for power and the fact that today's borders often do not reflect cultural, ethnic, or religious realities. Instead, they are often the results of decisions by Great Britain, France, and other powers during and soon after World War I as they dismantled the Ottoman Empire.[1]

However, viewing the Middle East's current geopolitics through the lens of a Sunni–Shia conflict does not reveal the full picture. For example, it does not explain why Iran—a Shia theocracy—is a primary benefactor of Hamas—a Sunni organization. Cultural and historical division between Arabs and Persians has reinforced the Sunni–Shia split. The mutual distrust between many Sunni Arab powers and Iran, the Persian Shia power, compounded by clashing national and ideological interests, has fueled instability in such countries as Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. Sunni terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) have exploited sectarian and ethnic tensions to gain support by posing as champions of Sunni Arabs against Syria's Alawite-dominated regime and other non-Sunni governments and movements.

Regional demographic trends also play an important and often destabilizing role. The Middle East's population is one of the youngest and most rapidly growing in the world. The West would view this as a favorable dynamic, but in the Middle East, these "youth bulges" are demographic tsunamis that have overwhelmed many countries' inadequate political, economic, and educational infrastructures. The lack of access to education, jobs, and meaningful political participation further fuels discontent. Because more than half of its inhabitants are under 30 years old, this demographic bulge will continue to undermine political stability across the Middle East.[2]

Since 2010, the political situation in the Middle East has been fraught with uncertainty. The Arab Spring uprisings of 2010–2012 eroded the foundations of many authoritarian regimes, erased borders, and destabilized many of the region's countries,[3] but the popular uprisings in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen did not usher in a new era of democracy and liberal rule as many in the West had hoped. At best, they made slow progress toward democratic reform; at worst, they added to political instability, exacerbated economic problems, and contributed to the rise of Islamist extremism.

Contributing to this instability are the expansionist ambitions of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Using the breathing space and funding afforded by the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), for example, Iran exploited Shia–Sunni tensions to increase its influence on embattled regimes and undermine adversaries in Sunni-led states. In May 2018, the Trump Administration left the JCPOA after European allies failed to address many of its serious flaws, including its sunset clauses, and imposed a crippling economic sanctions program in a "maximum pressure campaign" with more than 1,500 sanctions that targeted individuals and entities that were doing business with Iran.[4] The sanctions were meant to force changes in Iran's behavior, particularly with regard to its support for terrorist organizations and refusal to renounce a nascent nuclear weapons program.[5]

However, the Biden Administration sought to resurrect the JCPOA when it came into office. On February 18, 2021, the Biden Administration rescinded its predecessor's restoration of U.N. sanctions on Iran, and in April, it began indirect talks with Iran that were brokered by the European Union. This corresponded with the lifting of sanctions designations on several entities and individuals several times over the course of the negotiations—largely fruitless efforts meant to inject momentum.[6] Unacceptable Iranian demands for non-nuclear sanctions relief, including the lifting of U.S. terrorist sanctions on the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and a guarantee that the International Atomic Energy Agency's investigation of Iran's nuclear activities would be ended, led to the suspension of negotiations in September 2022.[7]

Despite Iran's insistence, the Biden Administration did refuse to lift the terrorist designations of the IRGC.[8] Anti-regime protests in Iran, sparked by the 2022 murder of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini by the morality police, and Iran's supplying of missiles and drones to Russia have made further negotiations politically difficult.[9] The Biden Administration's inability to maintain economic pressure while engaged in negotiations meant that the regime could press ahead with its nuclear ambitions cost-free. The net result was that Iran was advancing to "one- to two-weeks away" from breakout according to then-Secretary of State Antony Blinken in the summer of 2024.[10]

Iran's threat to regional political stability and security also comes in the unconventional empire it has built through sub-state entities like Hamas in the Palestinian territories, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Mahdi movement and other Shia militias in Iraq, and the Houthi insurgents in Yemen. The Iranian Quds Force, the special-operations wing of the IRGC, has orchestrated the formation, arming, training, and operations of these sub-state entities as well as other surrogate militias. These Iran-backed militias have carried out terrorist campaigns against U.S. forces and allies in the region for many years.

It is in pursuit of Iran's "ring of fire" strategy—encircling Israel with non-state terrorist groups that force the Jewish state into an extended war of attrition through persistent low-level border conflicts and instability—that Hamas launched an invasion of Israel on October 7, 2023. However, in seeking to disrupt the normalization process between Israel and the Arab states (especially Saudi Arabia[11]) and to fulfill its stated objective to destroy the Jewish state, Hamas succeeded in triggering the greatest regional geopolitical realignment since 1979 when Israel and Egypt signed a peace treaty and the Islamic Republic overthrew the shah of Iran.

Hamas's surprise attack on the Jewish holiday of Simchat Torah echoed Egypt's attack on Yom Kippur in 1973. The terrorist organization succeeded in slaughtering more than 1,200 Israelis, wounding thousands more, and taking more than 250 back into Gaza as hostages. Among the casualties were 34 Americans killed, dozens wounded, and 15 captured.[12]

Hamas envisioned its "Operation al-Aqsa Flood" as the long-awaited, multifront attack that would see Israel significantly defeated if not destroyed. On October 8, Hezbollah began to launch attacks against Israel from its position in Lebanon. Iran-aligned Shia militias in Iraq also joined the fight against Israel; the first claimed attacks by the so-called Islamic Resistance in Iraq were launched in November 2023.[13] The Houthis in Yemen would soon launch ballistic missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) against Israel and attack commercial and naval ships in the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, disrupting international commercial shipping lanes.

However, as of October 2025, Israel had emerged in a much stronger military position. It had significantly degraded Hamas's fighting capability in

Gaza and was working to destroy it. The Israeli Air Force decapitated Hezbollah's leadership, including by killing longtime Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, and the Lebanese group's fighting force was severely debilitated by aerial assaults that destroyed most of its long-range missiles, a ground operation into southern Lebanon, and a highly targeted operation against individual fighters using pagers and walkie-talkies that wounded or killed thousands of fighters simultaneously, taking them off the battlefield.

In addition, working with the United States, Israel has conducted numerous airstrikes against the Houthis and their infrastructure in response to continued missile and UAV attacks launched from Yemen, some of which have penetrated Israeli air defenses. In December 2024, the Assad regime fell in Syria—a significant blow to Iran's regional hegemony as it severed its land bridge to Hezbollah and therefore Tehran's ability to resupply and rearm the crown jewel of its regional proxy network.

Most consequentially, Israel—along with the United States—conducted an offensive campaign against Iran's nuclear, military, and regime infrastructure during the Twelve-Day War in June 2025. This campaign followed numerous attacks and counterattacks between the Islamic Republic and the Jewish state in 2024. In April 2024, Iran launched a combined salvo of hundreds of UAVs, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles in the first direct attack between the two countries. The United States led and coordinated a multinational response that saw air-to-air and surface-to-air interceptions; of the more than 300 projectiles launched, about 99 percent were intercepted by Israeli and partner nations' air defenses.[14] In October 2024, Iran launched a second attack of nearly 200 ballistic missiles; in response, Israel conducted an overnight aerial assault that succeeded in destroying Iran's air defense systems and undeclared nuclear sites.

On June 13, Israel initiated Operation Rising Lion, an aerial assault targeting Iran's nuclear infrastructure including enrichment facilities, ballistic missile production sites, stockpiles and launching pads, air and missile defense batteries, nuclear scientists, and other regime targets.[15] Within days, Israel had achieved air supremacy over western Iran, including Tehran.[16] Iran responded by launching overnight barrages of ballistic missiles and UAVs at military and civilian targets in Israel. Many of these missiles were intercepted by Israel's multitiered aerial defense system, including Arrow 3, Arrow 2, David's Sling, and Iron Dome. Israeli fighter aircraft intercepted more than 99 percent of UAVs launched both from Iran and by the Houthis in Yemen.[17] Two Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) batteries that the U.S. had previously prepositioned in Israel also engaged Iran's missiles.[18]

Israel's successful campaign paved the way for the United States to launch Operation Midnight Hammer on June 21, in which seven B-2 bombers flew from Missouri to Iran to drop 14 GBU-57 Massive Ordnance Penetrator (MOP) "bunker buster" bombs on Fordow and Natanz and a submarine in the region launched two dozen land attack cruise missiles against Isfahan.[19] This was the first direct attack by the United States on Iran and the first operational use of the MOP. In a face-saving measure, Iran launched a limited missile strike on the U.S. Air Force's Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar; all of the projectiles were intercepted.[20]

Although Operations Rising Lion and Midnight Hammer struck a decisive blow to Iran's prestige and capabilities, the Islamic Republic remains a potent force in the region, not least because it retains the ability to rebuild its nuclear program, its ballistic missile arsenal, and its relationship with its regional proxies.

With its enemies on nearly every front defeated or deterred, Israel has refocused its efforts on defeating Hamas in Gaza and recovering the hostages. To apply more pressure on Hamas to release hostages, Israel declared that it would target Hamas's leadership outside Gaza. This was clearly a threat to the remaining Hamas leaders living in Doha, Qatar. In early September, Israel launched an airstrike against this leadership, targeting members while they deliberated over the newest U.S. offer.[21] The strike proved unsuccessful, but it demonstrated Israel's determination to hunt down those responsible for the October 7 attack. Qatar condemned the attack, and the Arab states, including those party to the Abraham Accords, made it known that they considered Israel's actions to be destabilizing.[22]

As this book was being prepared, the war against Hamas in Gaza officially ended, but the future of the enclave remains uncertain. On October 13, 2025, the U.S. convened a "Summit for Peace" in Egypt after successfully brokering a ceasefire deal between Israel and Hamas.[23] On January 26, 2026, the final

hostage was returned to Israel, bringing to a close the longest war in Israel's history.[24]

Over the two years since Hamas's attack, Israel had succeeded in turning the deadliest day for the Jewish people since the Holocaust into the greatest demonstration of its military strength and rollback of Iran's regional capabilities.

Nevertheless, the Houthi rebels in Yemen continue to threaten international commerce from their position on the southwest coast of Yemen. For over a year, the United States engaged in sporadic attacks against Houthi infrastructure. In March 2025, after its return to the White House, the Trump Administration committed to a new offensive against Houthi leadership and its capabilities, notably holding its chief patron—Iran—responsible for the group's actions. However, following a two-month campaign, the United States ceased operations against the Iranian proxy.[25] The Houthis continued to launch occasional missiles toward Israel and joined Iran in the Twelve-Day War.

Elsewhere in the region, Tehran has deepened its ties with Kabul following the Biden Administration's disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, which paved the way for a Taliban takeover. Iran has used the Afghan border city of Herat to project its influence into Afghanistan, which includes using it to provide arms to the Taliban both before its takeover and in the run-up to the U.S. withdrawal.[26] The fall of Afghanistan also has opened the door for a revival of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Rebuilding the group will take time, but al-Qaeda remains a long-term threat to American interests and citizens as well as to the American homeland.[27]

The most significant blow to Iran's regional ambitions is the fall of the Assad regime in Syria. In November 2024, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), formerly known as the al-Qaeda–affiliated Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and before that as the al-Nusra Front, launched a rapid offensive south from its position in Homs to capture Damascus. Neither Assad's forces nor Russia's nor Iran's IRGC provided a defense of the Assad family, who fled to Moscow where they currently reside in exile.

This concludes one chapter in the Syrian civil war that began in 2011 and saw more than half a million people killed and created a major humanitarian crisis. As of June 2025, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 6.5 million internally displaced people and an additional 4.3 million Syrian refugees were still registered in neighboring Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt.[28] The large refugee populations created by this civil war could become a source of recruits for terrorist groups. Portions of this population are already returning home to Syria.

However, the next chapter in the Syrian civil war has begun as various state and sub-state actors vie for control of the country. HTS controls Damascus and many other major cities, but the Alawites who supported the Assad regime maintain resistance along the coast as Turkey encroaches upon the northern territory and Syrian Kurds attempt to establish their own autonomous zones in the northeast. The Islamic State, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and before that as al-Qaeda in Iraq, retains control in some portions of eastern Syria and western Iraq. Druze factions in southern Syria have sought protection from Israel, which organized the first crossing of Druze leaders into Israeli territory to visit Druze religious sites and communities in the Jewish state.[29]

Assad's fall also disrupts Iran's trafficking in Captagon, a psychostimulant that has become the most in-demand narcotic in the region. Under Assad, Syria was a hub for the drug's production and trafficking.[30] The more than $10 billion Captagon trade bankrolled the regime, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq, and this has sparked a regional drug war that especially affects Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and other countries in the Persian Gulf.[31] If violence were to break out among rival drug cartels, the effects on the operating environment for U.S. forces could be significant.

Despite the October 7 attack, the resulting war, and regional turmoil, the Abraham Accords are holding. Signed in 2020, these U.S.-brokered agreements normalizing relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan have created new opportunities for trade, investment, and defense cooperation.[32] To strengthen the Accords, the United States, Egypt, the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Israel established the Negev Forum, a new framework for regional cooperation with six working groups: Clean Energy, Education and Coexistence, Food and Water Security, Health, Regional Security, and Tourism.[33] These efforts are

important milestones in the diplomatic march toward a broader Arab–Israeli peace.[34]

While the Hamas attack and Iran's war against Israel were designed to disrupt the normalization process, the bilateral ties between Accords members remain strong. From 2023 to 2024, trade between Israel and the UAE, Morocco, and Bahrain increased 10 percent, 40 percent, and 843 percent, respectively, totaling over $3.45 billion.[35] Bringing Saudi Arabia into the Accords remains a primary objective and is often considered a question of "when," not "if."

Ultimately, the Abraham Accords reflect a recognition by their member states that bilateral and multilateral trade and commercial, economic, and security ties are a net asset, particularly in the face of shared regional threats. The COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's war on Ukraine, and the October 7 attack and its effects have undermined national economies and shaken political systems. Moreover, regional economic growth remains low: According to the World Bank, the Middle East and North Africa region grew at 5.8 percent in 2022, 3 percent in 2023, 2.2 percent in 2024, and between 2.6 percent and 2.8 percent in 2025.[36] At the same time, there is still the potential for the region's financial and logistics hubs to grow along some of the world's busiest transcontinental trade routes. In the Persian Gulf in particular, the UAE emirates of Dubai and Abu Dhabi, along with Qatar, are competing to become the region's top financial center.

As the region's geopolitical and commercial environments change, the United States maintains strong military security and diplomatic ties with several Middle Eastern nations. Throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries, the United States has weathered upheaval and conflict to pursue its national security interests, partly because of its relationships with Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and the six members of the GCC: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. These ties are often primarily bilateral. Because the historical and political circumstances that led to the creation of NATO in Europe have been largely absent in the Middle East, the region lacks a similarly strong collective security organization.

In 2017, the Trump Administration proposed the idea of a multilateral Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA) with its Arab partners.[37] The initial U.S. concept, which included security and economic cooperation as well as conflict resolution and deconfliction, generated considerable enthusiasm, but the project was sidelined by the Biden Administration. President Trump's return to the White House in January 2025 suggests that MESA could feature in the Administration's approach to the region, particularly as it looks to expand the Abraham Accords framework.

In April 2022, shortly after the previous month's Negev summit, the United States established the 34-nation Combined Task Force 153 (one of five task forces operated by the Combined Maritime Forces) "to enhance international maritime security and capacity-building efforts in the Red Sea, Bab al-Mandeb and Gulf of Aden."[38] Then, over the spring and summer of 2022, the United States organized regional discussions about air-defense cooperation.[39] Building on these agreements, the UAE hosted Negev Forum partners for talks on regional cooperation in 2023.[40] Traditionally, however, Middle Eastern countries have preferred to maintain bilateral relationships with the United States and generally have shunned multilateral arrangements because of the lack of trust among Arab states.

This lack of trust manifested itself in June 2017 when Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, and several other Muslim-majority countries cut or downgraded diplomatic ties with Qatar after Doha was accused of supporting terrorism in the region.[41] These nations severed all commercial land, air, and sea travel with Qatar and expelled Qatari diplomats and citizens. In January 2021, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt agreed to restore ties with Qatar during the 41st GCC summit. Per the agreement, Saudi Arabia and its GCC allies lifted the economic and diplomatic blockade of Qatar, reopening their airspace, land, and sea borders. This diplomatic détente paves the way for full reconciliation in the GCC and, at least potentially, a more united front in the Gulf.[42]

Military training is an important part of these relationships. Exercises involving the United States are intended principally to ensure close and effective coordination with key regional partners, demonstrate an enduring U.S. security commitment to regional allies, and train Arab armed forces so that they can assume a larger share of responsibility for regional security.

Important Alliances and Bilateral Relations in the Middle East

Israel. America's most important bilateral relationship in the Middle East is with Israel. Both countries are democracies, value free-market economies, and believe in human rights at a time when many Middle Eastern countries reject those values. With support from the United States, Israel has developed one of the world's most sophisticated air and missile defense capabilities.[43] No significant progress on peace negotiations with the Palestinians or on stabilizing Israel's volatile neighborhood is possible without a strong and effective Israeli–American partnership.

Ties between the United States and Israel reached a historic low during the Biden Administration. Before October 7, that Administration actively distanced itself from the Abraham Accords framework and refunded the U.N. Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), for which the Trump Administration had ended U.S. taxpayer funding in 2019 because of the agency's role in perpetuating the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. During the war, the Biden Administration applied public pressure to Israel over its operational conduct in Gaza and Lebanon and privately withheld critical munitions and supplies that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) needed to prosecute the war.[44]

The Trump Administration's return to the White House has brought renewed support for Israel, including release of the munitions the Biden Administration withheld and approval of additional sales of munitions and other capabilities that Israel requires.[45]

Saudi Arabia. After Israel, the deepest U.S. military relationship is with the Gulf States, including Saudi Arabia, which serves as de facto leader of the GCC. The Saudis enjoy huge influence across the Muslim world, and approximately 2 million Muslims participate in the annual Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. Riyadh has been a key partner in efforts to counter the influence of Iran. The United States is also the largest provider of arms to Saudi Arabia and has regularly, if not controversially, sold munitions to resupply stockpiles expended in the Saudi-led campaign against the Houthis in Yemen.

America's relationship with Saudi Arabia is based on pragmatism and is important for both security and economic reasons. Under the Biden Administration, bilateral relations deteriorated significantly as President Biden seemed intent on turning Saudi Arabia into a pariah state because of the October 2018 murder of Saudi dissident journalist Jamal Ahmad Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Turkey. The Administration also turned a blind eye to Houthi aggression on the Arabian Peninsula. For example, the Biden Administration lifted the Trump Administration's designation of the Houthi Ansar Allah (Supporters of God) movement as a terrorist organization. This persisted despite Houthi drone and ballistic missile attacks against military and civilian targets in Saudi Arabia and the UAE and then against international commercial shipping vessels and U.S. naval ships. Finally, the relationship suffered over oil production disputes, with the Biden Administration threatening "consequences" for Saudi Arabia after OPEC+ cut production in 2022 (although it never followed through on that threat).[46]

With the return of the Trump Administration, the United States and Saudi Arabia are now on friendlier terms. Within two days of taking office, President Trump redesignated the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization.[47] In addition, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has vowed to invest at least $1.3 trillion in the United States over four years.[48]

Gulf Cooperation Council. The GCC's member countries—the UAE, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, and Kuwait—are located in an oil-rich region close to the Arab–Persian fault line and are therefore strategically important to the United States. The root of Arab–Iranian tensions in the Gulf is Iran's ideological drive to export its Islamist revolution and overthrow the traditional rulers of the Arab kingdoms.

This ideological clash has further amplified long-standing sectarian tensions between Shia Islam and Sunni Islam. Tehran has sought to radicalize Shia Arab minority groups for the purpose of undermining Sunni Arab regimes in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Yemen, and Bahrain. It also sought to incite revolts by the Shia majorities in Iraq against Saddam Hussein's regime and in Bahrain against the Sunni al-Khalifa dynasty.

GCC member countries often have difficulty agreeing on a common policy with respect to matters of security. This reflects both the organization's intergovernmental nature and its members'

desire to place national interests above those of the GCC. The 2017 dispute with Qatar illustrates this difficulty.

Another source of disagreement involves the question of how best to deal with Iran. The UAE, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia, all of which once opposed the Iran nuclear deal, have restored diplomatic relations with Tehran—the UAE and Kuwait in 2022 and Saudi Arabia in a deal brokered by China in March 2023.[49] Bahrain still maintains a hawkish view of the threat from Iran. Oman prides itself on its regional neutrality, and Qatar shares natural gas fields with Iran, so it is perhaps not surprising that both countries view Iran's activities in the region as less of a threat and maintain cordial relations with Tehran.

Egypt. Egypt is another important U.S. military ally. As one of six Arab countries that maintain diplomatic relations with Israel, and as one that borders on both Israel and the Gaza Strip, Egypt is closely enmeshed in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Though its regional political, diplomatic, and military influence has shrunk over the decades, Egypt remains a leading power.

Relations between the United States and Egypt have been difficult since the 2011 downfall of President Hosni Mubarak after 30 years in power. The Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi was elected president in 2012 and used the Islamist-dominated parliament to pass a constitution that advanced an Islamist agenda. Morsi's authoritarian rule, combined with rising popular dissatisfaction with falling living standards, rampant crime, and high unemployment, led to a massive wave of protests in June 2013 that prompted a military coup in July. The leader of the coup, Field Marshal Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, pledged to restore democracy and was elected president in 2014—and won re-election in 2018 and 2023 in elections that many considered to be neither free nor fair.

Sisi's government faces major political, economic, and security challenges, although the government's tight control of internal security and Egypt's ban on anti-government demonstrations have limited popular protests. By mid-2023, Egypt was on the brink of economic collapse because of soaring bread prices and high rates of inflation. The Houthis' disruption of commercial shipping in the Red Sea beginning in the fall and winter of 2023 cost Cairo an estimated $7 billion in transit revenue.[50]

The post–October 7 war has elevated Egypt's importance to the United States. Egypt has played an instrumental role as a mediator, along with Qatar, between Hamas and Israel in negotiations for the release of the hostages. However, Cairo has also used its position as a country bordering on Gaza to prevent the outflow of refugees into the Sinai Peninsula, thereby exacerbating the humanitarian cost of the war.

Why the Region Matters

The United States maintains four key national security interests in the Middle East:

- Ensuring the flow of energy out of the region;
- Ensuring the flow of commerce through the region;
- Limiting, if not preventing, nuclear proliferation; and
- Ensuring that the region does not become a launching pad for terrorism directed against the U.S. homeland.

The Middle East is a critical component of the global energy economy. It accounts for 31 percent of global oil production, 18 percent of gas production, 48 percent of proven oil reserves, and 40 percent of proven gas reserves.[51] In 2023, the Middle East's daily oil flow constituted approximately 20 percent of global petroleum consumption.[52] Though the United States is the world's largest producer and consumer of oil, it imports relatively little of its oil from the Middle East. But because oil is a fungible commodity, the U.S. economy remains vulnerable to sudden spikes in world oil prices.

The Biden Administration's decision in 2021 to shutter some existing energy production and refuse permission for new exploration made the United States more sensitive to Middle East–based volatility in the energy market. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 caused the price of oil to jump to more than $139 a barrel while gas prices doubled—the highest levels for both in almost 14 years.[53] The price of oil gradually fell to below $100 a barrel until Hamas's October 7 attack, which pushed it back up to the $100 mark.

Regional conflict has caused the price to fluctuate from a low of just over $73 in December 2023 to

a high of over $91 in April 2024 as the market reacted to the volatility of the regional conflict.[54] However, significant shocks to the global energy market have not materialized. Even during the Twelve-Day War with direct engagement between the United States and Iran, the global energy markets saw only a 10 percent spike in the price of oil, which jumped from $68 to $75.[55]

Yet because many U.S. allies depend on Middle East oil and gas, there is also a second-order effect for the United States if supply from the Middle East is reduced or compromised. For example, as of December 16, 2025, Japan was the world's fifth largest economy, and as of November 18, 2025, it was the world's second largest importer of liquefied natural gas (LNG), surpassed only by China.[56] The United States might not have to depend on Middle East oil or LNG, but the economic consequences arising from a major disruption of supplies would ripple across the globe. Thus, tensions and instabilities continue to affect global energy markets and directly affect U.S. national security and economic interests.

Moreover, the region's significance is not limited to energy. Before November 2023, approximately 12 percent of global trade and 30 percent of global container traffic traversed the Suez Canal, transporting more than $1 trillion worth of goods each year. The Houthis disrupted international shipping lanes by harassing and attacking commercial and military vessels in the area after joining Hamas's war against Israel in November 2023. As a result, ships had to reroute around the Cape of Good Hope, which in turn led to higher shipping costs, insurance premiums, global food and oil prices, and more.[57] The total cost has been estimated at nearly $200 billion.[58]

Nuclear proliferation also presents a significant threat to regional stability, to America's partners and allies, and potentially to the U.S. homeland. Iran's pursuit of nuclear capabilities presents a danger not only by itself, but also because Tehran will have a nuclear umbrella to pursue its regional ambitions, notably support for terrorist organizations and ballistic missile development. With nuclear power, Iran will have delivery options: It can place a nuclear warhead on its ballistic missiles and launch a salvo against Israel, needing only one to make it through Israel's formidable but not impenetrable missile defense system, or smuggle it to a proxy or proxies in the region, thereby making it harder to trace and easier to evade accountability.

A nuclear-armed Iran is also sure to trigger a nuclear arms race throughout the region. Through the Abraham Accords framework, the United States provided the UAE with the materials, equipment, and know-how for a civil nuclear program; it is believed that any agreement with Saudi Arabia for normalization with Israel will also entail a nuclear component. However, these countries would likely seek a military component to these programs if their enemy across the Persian Gulf developed the same.

As the al-Qaeda attacks of late 20th century, culminating in 9/11, made clear, terrorism emanating from the Middle East can target American military and civilian assets in the region or at home. It was largely the significant U.S. presence in the region after 9/11 and robust security measures at home that prevented any similar attack in the nearly quarter-century since then. However, the threat remains real as long as the Iranian regime pursues its stated policy of "Death to America" and jihadist organizations have territory to govern and the financial and other means to launch attacks. Given the millions of illegal aliens who streamed across the open southern border into the American interior under the Biden Administration, the potential for a lone wolf or organized attack that originated in the Middle East obviously remains high.

Finally, instability in the Middle East has a destabilizing impact on the West. The refugees of the Syrian civil war are transforming Europe. Having taken advantage of lax European immigration laws and European nations' unwillingness and inability to assimilate this large and culturally alien population, the refugees are contributing to the explosion of antisemitism across the continent and to the Islamization of Western society and institutions.

Threats to the U.S. Homeland

No power in the Middle East currently has the capacity to attack the U.S. homeland directly with conventional means. However, the U.S. homeland is still under threat from state and non-state actors that seek to roll back American influence in the region and in the global order more generally.

Iran is chief among these threats and has deployed a variety of means to target the U.S. homeland. Through information, financial, or psychological operations, it actively supports anti-American organizations in an effort to disrupt American society. As the Director of National Intelligence

revealed in July 2024, Iran is "seeking to stoke discord and undermine confidence in our democratic institutions" by "opportunistically tak[ing] advantage of ongoing protests regarding the war in Gaza." Specifically, "[w]e have observed actors tied to Iran's government posing as activists online, seeking to encourage protests, and even providing financial support to protestors."[59]

The regime also has a history of conducting assassination operations on American soil. In 2011, two individuals tied to the IRGC were arrested for plotting to assassinate the Saudi ambassador.[60] In 2024, an Iranian asset attempted to assassinate then-presidential candidate Donald Trump.[61]

Iran also conducts cyberattacks against the United States. Following Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel, a water utility facility in Pennsylvania came under attack by hackers affiliated with the IRGC.[62] In 2024, the U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned companies and individuals for conducting malicious cyber activity on behalf of the IRGC.[63] Following Operation Midnight Hammer in late June 2025, hospitals, water dams, and power plants across the United States were on high alert because of possible Iranian retaliation.[64]

Iran uses these asymmetric means because it currently lacks the ability to reach the United States by conventional means. However, it is systematically developing the ballistic missile technology that might enable it to reach the U.S. homeland. Its arsenal includes short-range and medium-range ballistic missiles with a maximum range of about 2,000 kilometers (km), putting Southeastern and Central Europe within striking distance.[65]

Reaching the U.S. East Coast would require developing an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) with a range of more than 10,000 km. Iran's military does not currently possess this capability, but the regime's civilian space program is developing multistage rockets to launch satellites. A July 2024 U.S. intelligence report notes that Iran's Simorgh rocket, with its second stage for space deployment, "probably would shorten the timeline to produce an intercontinental ballistic missile, if it decided to develop one, because the systems use similar technologies."[66]

Finally, as 9/11 demonstrated, the U.S. homeland is under perennial threat from terrorist organizations, some of which are funded or otherwise supported by Iran.

Quality of Key Allied or Partner Armed Forces in the Middle East

The quality and capabilities of the region's armed forces are mixed. Some countries spend billions of dollars each year on advanced Western military hardware; others spend very little. Saudi Arabia's military budget is by far the region's largest, and Saudi Arabia spent the most in 2023 (the most recent year for which data are available) at 7.1 percent of GDP (Lebanon is noted to have spent 8.9 percent of its gross domestic product on defense, but this is based on estimates and a less reliable figure).[67] This is followed by Oman (5.4 percent); Israel (5.3 percent); and Jordan and Kuwait (both at 4.9 percent).

Different security factors drive the degree to which Middle Eastern countries fund, train, and arm their militaries. For Israel, which fought and defeated numerous Arab nation-state coalitions throughout its first few decades of independence, the chief potential threat to its existence is now an Iranian regime that has called for Israel to be "wiped off the map" and has developed a network of terrorist organizations on Israel's borders to implement this objective.[68] States and non-state actors in the region have invested in asymmetric and unconventional capabilities to offset Israel's military superiority.[69] For the Gulf States, the main driver of defense policy is the Iranian military threat combined with internal security challenges; for Iraq, it is the internal threat posed by Iran-backed militias and Islamic State terrorists.

Israel. The Israel Defense Forces is considered the most capable military force in the Middle East, and its operations against enemies in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Iran since October 7, 2023, have reinforced this assessment. Iran and Arab countries have spent billions of dollars in an effort to catch up with Israel's capabilities, but U.S. support preserves Israel's qualitative military edge (QME). Iran is steadily improving its missile capabilities and, the U.N. conventional arms embargo having expired in October 2020, now has access to the global arms trade.[70] In response, Arab countries are upgrading their weapons capabilities while establishing officer training programs to improve military effectiveness.[71]

Israel funds its military sector heavily and has a strong national industrial capacity that is supported by significant funding from the United States. Combined, these factors give Israel a regional advantage

despite limitations of manpower and size. In particular, the IDF has focused on maintaining its superiority in missile defense, intelligence collection, precision weapons, and cyber technologies.[72] The Israelis regard their cyber capabilities as especially important and use cyber technologies for numerous purposes that include defending Israeli cyberspace, gathering intelligence, and carrying out attacks.[73]

An early lesson from Hamas's October 7 attack is the need to avoid overreliance on technology and underreliance on the basic tactic of having soldiers man border positions. Israel invested three years and more than $1 billion in a high-tech border fence along Gaza that was intended to function as an alert to prevent infiltration into Israel.[74] At the same time, the IDF had been cutting required service times for male conscripts (service time remains shorter for female conscripts than it is for their male counterparts) and limiting soldiers' operational deployments to border posts.[75] The results were catastrophic.

In recent decades, this reliance on technology has seen Israel invest heavily in its air force. Following its initial 2010 agreement with the United States to procure 20 F-35I Adir stealth fighters, Israel expanded its order numerous times to a now-expected total fleet of 75 aircraft. As of March 2025, the Israeli Air Force (IAF) had received 42 of these fifth-generation fighters with the most recently delivered three arriving at Nevatim Airbase on March 16, 2025.[76] Deliveries for the third squadron are expected to begin in 2027.

Israel's F-35I has been actively utilized in various operations including strikes in Syria, Lebanon, and Gaza. Notably, during the 2023 conflict, an Israeli F-35I achieved the first operational shootdown of a cruise missile launched toward Israel by the Houthis. To further enhance its aerial capabilities, Israel secured a $6.75 billion agreement with the United States in February 2025 for the procurement of GPS-guided munitions with deliveries set to begin later the same year.[77]

In December 2021, Israel also signed a $3 billion deal with the United States to buy 12 Lockheed Martin–Sikorsky CH-53K helicopters and two Boeing KC-46 refueling planes to replace the Sikorsky CH-53 Yas'ur heavy-lift aircraft that have been in use since the late 1960s. As of March 2025, Sikorsky had initiated the integration of Israeli-specific systems into the CH-53K helicopters with deliveries expected to commence in 2028.[78] Initial delivery of the KC-46A tankers was delayed from their anticipated May 2025 delivery date because of structural cracks. These advanced aircraft are intended to enhance Israel's operational readiness, particularly in potential conflicts with Iran.[79]

Israel maintains its qualitative superiority in medium-range and long-range missile capabilities and fields effective missile defense systems that include Iron Dome, David's Sling, and Arrow, all of which have benefitted from U.S. financial and technical support.[80] Designed to intercept long-range ballistic missiles, Arrow 3 was first used in October 2023 to intercept ballistic missiles that the Houthis fired from Yemen.[81] It then featured prominently in Iran's combined missile and drone attack against Israel in April 2024.[82] As mentioned, all three systems were used during the Twelve-Day War between Israel and Iran in June 2025.

Israel also has a nuclear weapons capability (which it does not publicly acknowledge) that increases its strength relative to other powers in the region and has helped to deter adversaries as the gap in conventional capabilities has been reduced.

Gulf Cooperation Council. The GCC countries possess the region's most technologically advanced and best-equipped armed forces, second only to Israel's. Historically, revenues from oil and gas exports have enabled substantial investments in defense. Despite fluctuations in oil prices, these nations have sustained or increased their military expenditures to address ongoing regional security challenges. For instance, Saudi Arabia's defense budget for 2025 is $78 billion, up from $75.8 billion in 2024, and accounts for 21 percent of total government spending and 7.1 percent of GDP. Similarly, the overall defense market in the GCC is projected to grow by more than 5.51 percent.[83] While the GCC may not have the region's most effective armed forces, these investments have enabled GCC nations to acquire advanced defense hardware, predominantly from the United States, Britain, and France.

The GCC's most capable military force is Saudi Arabia's with an estimated 257,000 active-duty personnel—including 130,000 National Guardsmen—and about 25,000 in reserve.[84] The Royal Saudi Land Forces operate a large fleet of main battle tanks, including approximately 600 U.S.-made M1A2 Abrams. The Royal Saudi Air Force consists of more than 700 aircraft, including more than 440

combat-capable fighters, primarily American F-15 variants and British-made Eurofighter Typhoons and Tornado aircraft.[85]

In recent years, GCC countries have invested in long-range firepower and precision-strike capabilities. In October 2024, the UAE purchased $1.2 billion worth of advanced Guided Multiple Launch Rocket Systems (GMLRS) and Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS) from the United States.[86] In March 2025, to strengthen defenses against Houthi drone attacks, Saudi Arabia purchased 2,000 Advanced Precision Kill Weapon Systems (APKWS) valued at $100 million. This follows Riyadh's October 2024 acquisition of more than 2,000 Hellfire missiles.[87] These acquisitions reflect a broader GCC effort to modernize arsenals with U.S.-made systems that improve both offensive and defensive precision-strike capabilities.

Nonetheless, air power remains a strong suit of most GCC members. Oman, for example, operates F-16s and Typhoons. Bahrain has enhanced its air force with the acquisition of 16 F-16 Block 70 aircraft from the United States; the first three jets were delivered in March 2024, and the remaining deliveries are ongoing.[88] Qatar operates French-made Mirage fighters and has expanded its fleet with the purchase of 24 Eurofighter Typhoons from the United Kingdom, deliveries of which commenced late in 2023. Additionally, Qatar has expressed its intention to acquire an additional 12 Typhoons to further strengthen its air capabilities and deepen defense ties with the U.K. These advancements underscore the GCC's commitment to maintaining advanced and capable air forces amid evolving regional security dynamics.[89]

After first considering acquisition of the F-35 from the United States, the UAE went with France's Rafale fighter jet. In November 2020, the U.S. Department of State had notified Congress that it had approved the sale of a $23.4 billion defense package of F-35A Joint Strike Fighters, armed drones, munitions, and associated equipment to the UAE.[90] After a temporary freeze on arms sales by the Biden Administration, the sale moved forward in April 2021. However, by December 2021, the UAE suspended discussions over the F-35 acquisition, citing technical requirements, operational restrictions, and cost-benefit considerations.[91] In September 2024, a senior Emirati official stated that the UAE did not plan to resume negotiations with the United States over the F-35; the UAE instead received its first French Rafale fighter jets in January 2025.[92]

Despite their Western-supplied platforms and hardware, Middle Eastern countries have shown a willingness to use their military capabilities only under certain limited circumstances. The navies of GCC member countries, for example, rarely deploy beyond their exclusive economic zones (EEZs), but they increasingly have been working together to address common regional threats. Kuwait, Bahrain, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar have participated in and, in some cases, have commanded Combined Task Force (CTF) 152, formed in 2004 to maintain maritime security in the Persian Gulf.[93] Egypt commands CTF 153, a 34-nation naval partnership established in 2022 "to enhance international maritime security and capacity-building efforts in the Red Sea, Bab Al-Mandeb and Gulf of Aden."[94] In January 2025, the United States and GCC countries launched Exercise Eagle Resolve 2025 in Qatar, a combined joint all-domain exercise aimed at enhancing interoperability and readiness across land, air, sea, space, and cyberspace domains.[95] Additionally, the GCC's Peninsula Shield Forces have evolved into a symbol of collective Gulf security that reflects a unified commitment to safeguarding regional stability.

In April 2024, a coordinated multinational defense operation showcased exceptional joint interoperability among the United States, Israel, Jordan, the United Kingdom, and France in response to Iran's large-scale UAV and missile assault on Israel.[96] The United States played a pivotal role with American aircraft and naval assets intercepting more than 80 Iranian projectiles before they reached Israeli airspace. The United Kingdom contributed by deploying Royal Air Force (RAF) Typhoon fighters from bases in Cyprus and Romania, successfully shooting down multiple UAVs. France provided radar coverage and, at Jordan's request, actively intercepted Iranian drones. Jordan, situated along the flight path of the incoming threats, intercepted numerous drones and missiles violating its airspace, demonstrating its commitment to regional security. This collective defense effort, codenamed Iron Shield, resulted in the interception of approximately 99 percent of the 300 projectiles launched by Iran in April 2024 toward Israel, underscoring the effectiveness of international military cooperation in countering complex threats.[97]

Egypt. Egypt maintains the region's largest Arab military force with 438,500 active personnel and 479,000 reserve personnel.[98] It possesses a fully operational military with an army, air force, air defense, navy, and special operations forces. Historically reliant on Soviet military technology until 1979, Egypt has since significantly upgraded its army and air force with U.S. weapons, equipment, and aircraft.[99] Egypt's naval capabilities have grown with the opening of a naval base at Ras Gargoub in July 2021 and commissioning of four German-made Type 209/1400 submarines and two Italian-built FREMM frigates, all of which has significantly strengthened its maritime operational capacity.[100]

Egypt continues to confront persistent terrorist activity in the Sinai Peninsula with groups such as the Islamic State's Sinai Province (IS-SP) conducting attacks against security forces and civilians. To address these threats, the Egyptian military has intensified operations, including raids and airstrikes targeting terrorist hideouts in such areas as Bir al-Abed, Rafah, and Sheikh Zuweid.[101] Following Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel, Cairo closed the Rafah Border Crossing to prevent the infiltration of militants and maintain national security.[102] The crossing remained closed during the ensuing conflict as Egypt expressed its concerns about potential mass displacement of Palestinians into the Sinai.[103]

Jordan. The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is a close U.S. ally with small but capable armed forces. Jordan's principal security threats continue to include terrorism, political unrest, the burden of regional refugees, and the growing Captagon drug trade spilling over from Syria and Iraq. Jordan faces few conventional threats from neighboring states, but its internal security has been strained by the presence of Islamist terrorists, some of whom are fighters returning from conflicts in Syria and Iraq. The 2023 Gaza conflict further heightened tensions as Jordan experienced several terrorist incidents and tightened border controls in response to regional instability.[104] The illicit Captagon trade has prompted Jordan and Syria to coordinate more closely on border security operations to curb smuggling and militant infiltration.[105] As a result, Jordan's armed forces remain focused on internal stability, counterterrorism, and securing the kingdom's northern and eastern borders.

Jordan maintains a robust conventional military capability relative to its size. The Jordanian Armed Forces comprise approximately 100,000 active-duty soldiers and 65,000 reservists.[106] The Royal Jordanian Army operates a diverse fleet of main battle tanks, including 402 British-made Al-Hussein tanks (Challenger 1); 288 M60A1/A3 tanks; and 274 Khalid tanks (Chieftain).[107] The Royal Jordanian Air Force's backbone consists of 43 F-16A/B Fighting Falcons with an additional 12 advanced F-16C/D Block 70 aircraft due for delivery. Jordan's special operations forces are highly capable and benefit from extensive training and cooperation with U.S. and U.K. military programs.[108] Jordanian forces have participated in international missions including deployments in Afghanistan and various United Nations peacekeeping operations.

Iraq. Iraq's military remains hindered by deeply rooted politicization and corruption that emerged after the 2011 U.S. withdrawal. Successive governments have continued to appoint officers based on political loyalty, often favoring Shiite personnel over Sunni, Kurdish, and Christian counterparts.[109] This favoritism has contributed to dysfunction and has enabled corruption that includes the widespread use of "ghost soldiers" to divert military funds.[110] Efforts to reform the system, such as anti-corruption committees, have faced setbacks or have been disbanded. Integration of the Popular Mobilization Forces into Iraq's security forces has raised additional concerns about accountability and sectarian influence, especially following the passage of a controversial 2025 amnesty law affecting those convicted of attacks on U.S. troops.[111]

Iraq's armed forces have shown improvement in capabilities and morale, but concerns about Baghdad's ability to maintain operational effectiveness amid the ongoing U.S. drawdown and redeployment of forces persist. Issues such as the promotion of unqualified military leaders, inadequate logistical support due to corruption, limited operational mobility, and deficiencies in intelligence, reconnaissance, medical support, and air force capabilities persist. These factors historically have undermined operational performance as exemplified by the 2014 collapse of multiple divisions during the Islamic State's offensive, which led to the fall of Mosul.[112] In response, the United States and its allies initiated extensive training programs that culminated in Mosul's liberation on July 9, 2017.[113] Despite these efforts, however, recent assessments indicate that the Iraqi military's capabilities remain constrained,

particularly in high-end conventional operations, due to a lack of artillery and air power.

The presence of Iranian-aligned militias in Iraq remains a significant obstacle to force unity. Following the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel, some of these militias participated in strikes against Israel, escalating regional tensions.[114] Notably, on January 28, 2024, the Islamic Resistance in Iraq—a coalition of Iranian-backed groups—claimed responsibility for an attack on a U.S. outpost in Jordan that resulted in the deaths of three American servicemembers.[115] In response, the United States launched retaliatory airstrikes targeting militia positions in Iraq and Syria. These developments underscore the ongoing challenges that militia groups pose to Iraq's internal security and regional stability. The planned drawdown of U.S.-led coalition forces by 2026 could further affect Iraq's security landscape, underscoring the need for continued reforms within its armed forces.[116]

Relationships with the People's Republic of China and Russia

China. China has expanded its trade and security relations with many Middle Eastern nations in the past decade. Beijing knows that the region is a vital source of energy fueling its economic growth and military, both of which depend heavily on external resources.

China is the largest consumer of Middle Eastern oil, and its trade with the region has more than tripled in the past 20 years.[117] Imports currently constitute nearly 70 percent of China's overall oil consumption, and the Gulf region accounts for 46 percent of those imports.[118] China's oil imports will continue to grow to an estimated 80 percent of its total consumption by 2030.[119]

The PRC's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is designed in part to ensure access to the resources required to sustain China's economy and military. It would be a grave strategic error to abandon the Middle East and its petrochemical resources, which sustain the global economy, to Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party. Through the BRI, China has strengthened infrastructure, trade, and technology ties, which include its Digital Silk Road projects focused on digital connectivity that have involved deployment of next-generation 5G networks in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Egypt by Huawei and ZTE.[120]

In recent years, China and Iran have come into greater strategic alignment. Throughout the Biden Administration, despite sanctions on Iranian oil exports that it maintained from the Trump Administration, four of every five barrels that Iran exported went to China at a total cost to China of more than $140 billion.[121] This has allowed Iran to maintain and expand its regional influence. In 2021, China and Iran signed a comprehensive strategic partnership agreement that promised significant Chinese investment in energy, transportation, and telecommunications as well as long-term oil and gas contracts.[122] China also mediated the 2023 détente between Saudi Arabia and Iran and hosted Arab leaders in Beijing in May 2024 to discuss the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.[123]

China's regional military presence remains limited but is growing. Beijing's first permanent overseas base is in Djibouti, situated near the Bab al-Mandeb Strait across from Yemen. The base, which can house 10,000 troops and has been used by Chinese marines to stage live-fire exercises featuring armored combat vehicles and artillery, is strategically located near commercial shipping lanes passing from the Gulf of Aden to the Red Sea. In March 2025, China participated in the Marine Security Belt 2025 exercise with Iran and Russia. This was the fifth year that these joint naval drills, which are focused on strengthening cooperation among the participating naval forces, had been conducted.[124]

Russia. Russia historically has had limited presence and influence in the Middle East. This changed in 2015 when the Obama Administration proposed a military cooperation partnership between Russia and Syria, which helped to stabilize the Assad regime during the civil war.[125] In addition to its naval base in Tartus, established in 1971, Russia would build an air base in the coastal province of Latakia. However, the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 forced Russia to abandon the naval base.[126]

Despite losing its foothold in Syria, Russia has developed close ties with Iran in recent years as both countries look to support those countering the United States and the West. In November 2022, Moscow and Tehran reached an agreement to manufacture Iranian drones—which have proven highly effective in Russia's war against Ukraine—in Russia.[127] In January 2025, the two countries signed a comprehensive strategic partnership agreement

that covers trade, military cooperation, science, education, and more.[128] It includes helping Russia to manufacture Iranian UAVs; nine months later, a Russian Shahed drone was shot down in Romania.[129]

U.S. Force Presence and Infrastructure

Before 1980, the limited U.S. military presence in the Middle East consisted chiefly of a small naval force that had been based in Bahrain since 1958. Washington had pursued a "twin pillar" strategy that relied on prerevolutionary Iran and Saudi Arabia to take the lead in defending the Persian Gulf from the Soviet Union and its client regimes in Iraq, Syria, and South Yemen.[130] In 1979, however, the Iranian revolution demolished one pillar, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that December increased the Soviet threat to the Gulf.

In January 1980, proclaiming in a commitment known as the Carter Doctrine that the United States would take military action to defend oil-rich Persian Gulf states from external aggression, President Jimmy Carter ordered the creation of the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force, the precursor to U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), which was established in January 1983.[131]

Until the late 1980s, according to CENTCOM, America's "regional strategy still largely focused on the potential threat of a massive Soviet invasion of Iran."[132] After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Saddam Hussein's Iraqi regime became the chief threat to regional stability. Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990, and the United States responded in January 1991 by leading an international coalition of more than 30 nations to expel Saddam's forces from Kuwait. CENTCOM commanded the U.S. contribution of more than 532,000 military personnel to the coalition's armed forces, which totaled at least 737,000.[133] This marked the peak U.S. force deployment in the Middle East.

Confrontations with Iraq continued throughout the 1990s as Baghdad continued to violate the 1991 Gulf War ceasefire. Baghdad's failure to cooperate with U.N. arms inspectors to verify the destruction of its weapons of mass destruction and its links to terrorism led to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. During the initial invasion, U.S. forces numbered nearly 192,000, joined by military personnel from coalition forces.[134] Apart from the "surge" in 2007 when President George W. Bush deployed an additional 30,000 personnel, the number of American combat forces in Iraq fluctuated between 100,000 and 150,000.[135]

In December 2011, the U.S. officially completed its withdrawal of troops from Iraq, leaving only 150 personnel attached to the U.S. embassy in Baghdad.[136] Later, following Islamic State territorial gains, the United States redeployed thousands of troops to the country to assist Iraqi forces against the Islamic State and help to build Iraqi capabilities.

In 2021, the Biden Administration brought America's combat mission in Iraq to a close and transitioned U.S. forces to an advisory role. U.S. force levels in Iraq declined from 5,200 in 2020 to 2,500 in January 2021.[137] CENTCOM Commander General Frank McKenzie stated that "[a]s we look into the future, any force level adjustment in Iraq is going to be made as a result of consultations with the government of Iraq."[138] In September 2024, the United States announced an agreement with Iraq under which the U.S.-led coalition fighting the Islamic State would end and U.S. troops would leave their bases sometime in 2025.[139] By September 2025, U.S. forces were beginning to withdraw from parts of the country, leaving a planned residual force in the autonomous Kurdistan Region until September 2026.[140]

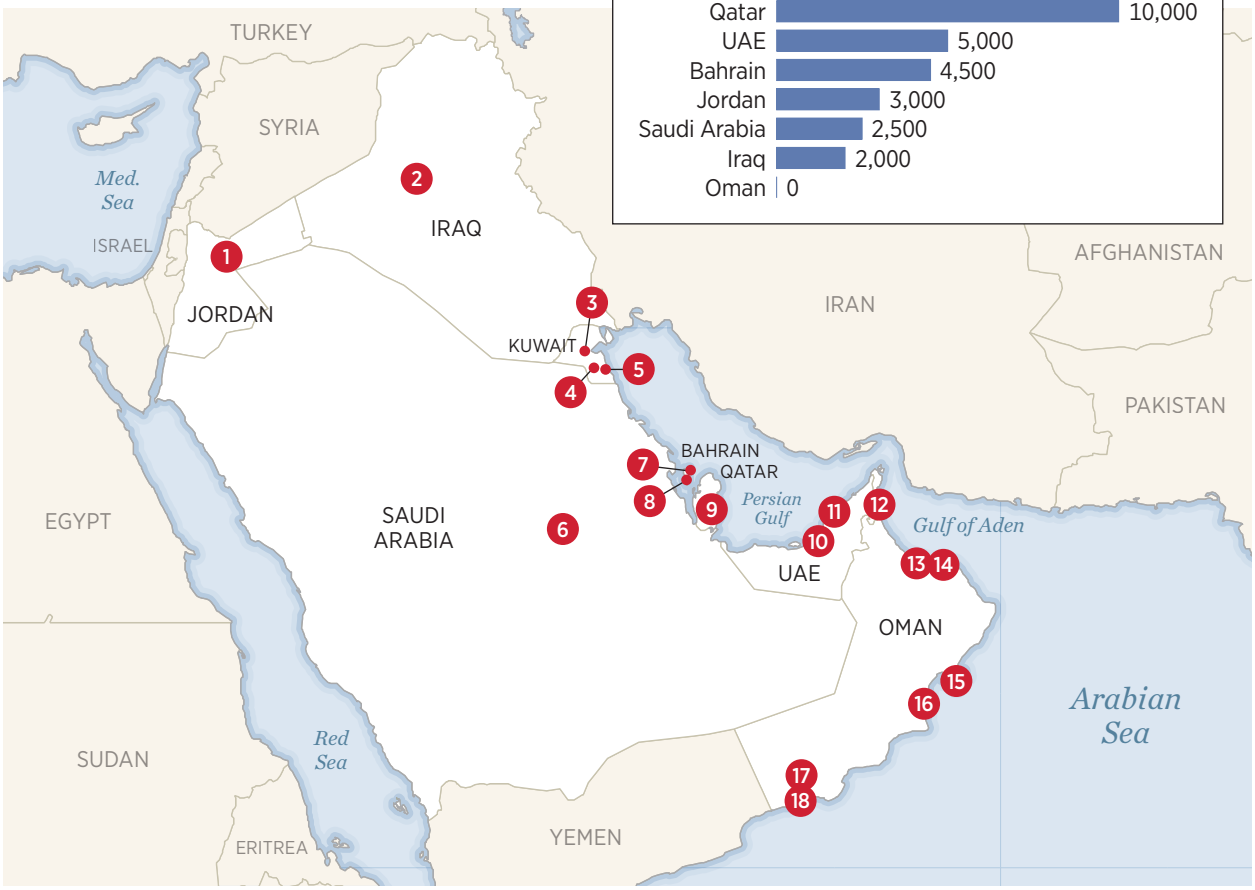
The United States continues to maintain a limited number of forces in other locations in the Middle East, primarily in GCC countries. In 2019, rising naval tensions in the Persian Gulf prompted the additional deployments of troops, Patriot missile batteries, and combat aircraft to the Gulf to deter Iran, but most were later withdrawn.[141] In August 2022, it was reported that the U.S. State Department had "approved more than $5 billion in arms deals for key Middle East partners, including $3.05 billion in Patriot missiles for Saudi Arabia" to defend itself "against persistent Houthi cross-border unmanned aerial system and ballistic missile attacks on civilian sites and critical infrastructure" and "$2.25 billion in THAAD systems for the United Arab Emirates."[142]

In the wake of the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel, the Biden Administration sent two aircraft carrier strike groups to deter Hezbollah or Iran from joining Hamas.[143] Throughout 2024, the United States maintained two strike groups in the region to deter Houthi attacks and respond to Iran's ballistic missile strikes on Israel. In December 2023, the United States formed Operation Prosperity Guardian, a multinational coalition formed to address

MAP 4

U.S. Access to Bases and Facilities in the Middle East

COUNTRY	U.S. TROOPS
Kuwait	10,000
Qatar	10,000
UAE	5,000
Bahrain	4,500
Jordan	3,000
Saudi Arabia	2,500
Iraq	2,000
Oman	0



JORDAN
1. Muwaffaq Salti Airbase

IRAQ
2. al-Asad Air Base

KUWAIT
3. Ali al-Salem Air Base
4. Ahmad al-Jabir Air Base
5. Camp Arifjan

SAUDI ARABIA
6. Eskan Village Air Base

BAHRAIN
7. Khalifa bin Salman Port
8. Shaykh Isa Air Base

QATAR
9. Al Udeid Air Base

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES
10. Al-Dhafra Air Base
11. Jebel Ali Port
12. Fujairah Naval Base

OMAN
13. Musnanah Air Base
14. Muscat International Airport
15. RAFO Masirah
16. Al Duqm Port
17. RAFO Thumrait
18. Salalah Port

SOURCES: "Chapter Six: Middle East and North Africa," in International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2025:* The Annual Assessment of Global Military Capabilities and Defence Economics (London: Routledge, 2025), and Heritage Foundation research.

heritage.org

the Houthi threat to international shipping lanes in the southern Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, and deployed four destroyers under Combined Task Force 153.[144] In April 2025, two new carrier strike groups remained in the CENTCOM area of responsibility (AOR) with B-2 and B-52 bombers sent to the region as well.

By June 2025, CENTCOM had deployed an estimated 40,000 U.S. troops to 21 countries within its AOR.[145] Although the exact disposition of U.S. forces is hard to determine because of the fluctuating nature of U.S. military operations in the region,[146] information gleaned from open sources reveals the following:

- **Kuwait.** More than 13,500 U.S. personnel are based in Kuwait and spread among Camp Arifjan, Ahmad al-Jabir Air Base, and Ali al-Salem Air Base. A large depot of prepositioned equipment and a squadron of fighters and Patriot missile systems are also deployed to Kuwait.[147] In February 2025, the U.S. State Department approved a potential $1 billion Foreign Military Sale to Kuwait for design and construction services intended to enhance military infrastructure such as maritime and land facilities at the Mohammed Al Ahmed Naval Base.[148]

- **United Arab Emirates.** More than 5,000 U.S. personnel are deployed at Jebel Ali Port, Al Dhafra Air Base, and naval facilities at Fujairah. Jebel Ali Port is the U.S. Navy's busiest port of call for aircraft carriers.[149] U.S. Air Force personnel who are stationed in the UAE use Al Dhafra Air Base to operate fighters, UAVs, refueling aircraft, and surveillance aircraft; it is the busiest U.S. base in the world for surveillance flights.[150] In addition, the United States has regularly deployed F-22 Raptor combat aircraft to Al Dhafra and in April 2021 deployed the F-35 combat aircraft because of escalating tensions with Iran. Patriot and THAAD missile systems have been deployed for air and missile defense.[151]

- **Oman.** In 1980, Oman became the first Gulf State to welcome a U.S. military base. While the number of U.S. military personnel in Oman has fallen to a few hundred, mostly from the U.S. Air Force, the country provides important access in the form of over 5,000 aircraft overflights, 600 aircraft landings, and 80 port calls annually.[152] The U.S.–Oman Strategic Framework Agreement, signed in March 2019, remains foundational, granting U.S. forces access to Omani ports such as Al Duqm, with its capacity to accommodate U.S. carriers that enhances strategic flexibility, and Salalah.[153]

- **Bahrain.** More than 9,000 U.S. military personnel are based in Bahrain. Naval Support Activity Bahrain remains the headquarters for U.S. Naval Forces Central Command in Manama and for the U.S. Fifth Fleet, overseeing operations across the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, and the Arabian Sea.[154] A significant number of U.S. Air Force personnel operate out of Shaykh Isa Air Base where F-16s, F/A-18s, and P-8 surveillance aircraft are stationed. U.S. Patriot missile systems also are deployed to Bahrain. The deep-water port of Khalifa bin Salman is one of the few Gulf facilities that can accommodate U.S. aircraft carriers. In 2021, Bahrain became an operational hub for the use of new artificial intelligence technology to direct unmanned surface vessels and unmanned underwater vehicles in the CENTCOM AOR.[155]

- **Saudi Arabia.** In June 2021, President Biden reported to Congress that approximately 2,700 U.S. military personnel were deployed in Saudi Arabia "to protect United States forces and interests in the region against hostile action by Iran or Iran-backed groups." The President confirmed that these troops, "operating in coordination with the Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, provide air and missile defense capabilities and support the operation of United States fighter aircraft."[156] The six-decade-old United States Military Training Mission to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the four-decade-old Office of the Program Manager of the Saudi Arabian National Guard Modernization Program, and the Office of the Program Manager–Facilities Security Force are based in Eskan Village Air Base approximately 13 miles south of the capital city of Riyadh.[157]

- **Qatar.** The number of U.S. personnel, mainly from the U.S. Air Force, deployed in Qatar "has

ranged from about 8,000 to over 10,000."[158] The U.S. operates its Combined Air Operations Center at Al Udeid Air Base, which is one of the world's most important U.S. air bases. The base continues to host the Combined Air and Space Operations Center and serves as the forward headquarters of CENTCOM. Al Udeid supports heavy bombers, tankers, transports, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) aircraft and houses prepositioned U.S. equipment as well as Patriot missile systems.[159] In January 2024, the U.S. and Qatar agreed to extend the American military presence at Al Udeid for another 10 years.[160] In January 2025, Space Forces Central (SPACECENT) broke ground on a new campus at Al Udeid to strengthen space operations integration.[161]

- **Jordan.** Although there are no permanent U.S. military bases in Jordan, the United States maintains a significant military presence there with approximately 3,813 U.S. military personnel deployed to support counterterrorism efforts and bolster Jordan's security.[162] According to CENTCOM, "Jordan remains one of U.S. Central Command's strongest and most reliable partners in the Levant sub-region."[163] The U.S. and Jordan share a robust defense partnership formalized by a Defense Cooperation Agreement that facilitates joint military exercises, training programs, and defense-related collaborations.[164] Jordanian air bases continue to play a crucial role in U.S. operations, particularly for ISR missions in Syria and Iraq.

CENTCOM "directs and enables military operations and activities with allies and partners to increase regional security and stability in support of enduring U.S. interests."[165] Execution of this mission is supported by four service component commands—U.S. Naval Forces Middle East (NAVCENT); U.S. Army Forces Middle East (ARCENT); U.S. Air Forces Middle East (AFCENT); and U.S. Marine Forces Middle East (MARCENT)—and one subordinate unified command, U.S. Special Operations Command Middle East (SOCCENT).

- **U.S. Naval Forces Central Command.** NAVCENT is CENTCOM maritime component. With its forward headquarters in Bahrain, it is responsible for commanding the afloat units that rotationally deploy or surge from the United States in addition to other ships that are based in the Gulf for longer periods. NAVCENT conducts persistent maritime operations to advance U.S. interests, deter and counter disruptive countries, defeat violent extremism, and strengthen partner nations' maritime capabilities in order to promote a secure maritime environment in an area that encompasses approximately 2.5 million square miles of water.

- **U.S. Army Forces Central Command.** ARCENT is CENTCOM's land component. Based in Kuwait, it is responsible for land operations in an area that totals 4.6 million square miles (1.5 times larger than the continental United States).

- **U.S. Air Forces Central Command.** AFCENT is CENTCOM's air component. Based in Qatar, it is responsible for air operations and for working with the air forces of partner countries in the region. It also manages an extensive supply-and-equipment prepositioning program at several regional sites.

- **U.S. Marine Forces Central Command**. MARCENT is CENTCOM's designated Marine Corps service component. Based in Bahrain, it is responsible for all Marine Corps forces in the region.

- **U.S. Special Operations Command Central**. SOCCENT is a subordinate unified command under CENTCOM. Based in Qatar, it is responsible for planning special operations throughout the CENTCOM region, planning and conducting peacetime joint/combined special operations training exercises, and orchestrating command and control of peacetime and wartime special operations.

In addition to the American military presence in the region, two NATO allies—the United Kingdom and France—play an important role.

The U.K.'s presence in the Middle East is a legacy of British imperial rule. The U.K. has maintained close ties with many countries that it once ruled and

has conducted military operations in the region for decades. As of 2024, approximately 410 British service personnel were permanently based throughout the region.[166] This number fluctuates with the arrival of visiting warships.

The British presence in the region is dominated by the Royal Navy. Permanently based naval assets include four mine hunters and one Royal Fleet Auxiliary supply ship. In general, "UK armed forces are involved in three major military operations in the wider Middle East region" including "Operation Kipion, a long-standing maritime security mission in the Arabian/Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean." In addition, frigates or destroyers in the Gulf or Arabian Sea are generally performing maritime security duties, and (although such matters are not the subject of public discussion) U.K. attack submarines also operate in the area.[167] In April 2018, as a sign of its long-term maritime presence in the region, the U.K. opened a base in Bahrain—its first overseas military base in the Middle East in more than four decades.[168] The U.K. has made a multimillion-dollar investment in modernization of the Duqm Port complex in Oman to accommodate its new *Queen Elizabeth*–class aircraft carriers.[169]

The U.K. also has a small RAF presence in the region, mainly in the UAE and Oman. A short drive from Dubai, Al-Minhad Air Base is home to a small contingent of U.K. personnel, and small RAF detachments in Oman support U.K. and coalition operations in the region. The U.K.'s Sovereign Base Areas of Akrotiri and Dhekelia in Cyprus have supported U.S. military and intelligence operations in the past and are expected to continue to do so.

Finally, the British presence in the region is not limited to soldiers, ships, and planes. A British-run staff college operates in Qatar, and Kuwait chose the U.K. to help it to run its own equivalent of the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst.[170] The U.K. also plays a very active role in training the Saudi Arabian and Jordanian militaries.

The French presence in the Gulf is smaller than the U.K.'s but still significant. France opened a military base in Abu Dhabi in 2009, its first in the Gulf and the first foreign military installation built in 50 years.[171] The French have 700 personnel based in the UAE along with seven Rafale jets and an armored battlegroup in addition to military operations in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar.[172] French ships have access to the Zayed Port in Abu Dhabi, which is big enough to handle every ship in the French Navy except the aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle*.

Military support from the U.K. and France has been particularly important in Operation Inherent Resolve, a U.S.-led joint task force that was formed to combat the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. As of May 2021, France had between 600 and 650 troops stationed in the UAE; 600 stationed in Jordan, Syria, and Iraq; and 650 stationed in Lebanon.[173] The U.K. temporarily redeployed troops back to the U.K. because of COVID-19 but announced in February 2021 that 500 troops would be sent back along with an additional 3,500 troops to boost its counterterrorism training mission in Iraq.[174] The additional troops will help both to prevent the Islamic State from returning and to manage threats from Iran-backed militias more effectively.

Another important actor in Middle East security is the small East African country of Djibouti. Djibouti sits on the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, through which an estimated 6.2 million barrels of oil a day transited in 2018 (the most recent year for which U.S. Energy Administration data are available) and which is a choke point on the route to the Suez Canal.[175] An increasing number of countries recognize Djibouti's value as a base from which to project maritime power and launch counterterrorism operations. The country is home to Camp Lemonnier, which can hold as many as 4,000 personnel and is the only permanent U.S. military base in Africa.[176] France, Italy, and Japan also have presences of varying strength in Djibouti.[177]

Key Infrastructure That Enables Expeditionary Warfighting Capabilities

The Middle East is a critical geographic area. Two-thirds of the world's population lives within an eight-hour flight from the Gulf region, making it accessible from most other regions of the globe. The Middle East also contains some of the world's most critical maritime choke points, including the Suez Canal and the Strait of Hormuz.

Although infrastructure is not as developed in the Middle East as it is in North America or Europe, during a decades-long presence, the U.S. has developed systems that enable it to move large numbers of matériel and personnel into and out of the region. According to the Department of War, at the height of U.S. combat operations in Iraq during the Second Gulf War, the U.S. presence included 165,000

servicemembers and 505 bases. Moving personnel and equipment out of the country was "the largest logistical drawdown since World War II" and included redeployment of "the 60,000 troops who remained in Iraq at the time and more than 1 million pieces of equipment ahead of their deadline."[178]

The condition of the region's roads varies from country to country. Virtually all roads in Israel, Jordan, and the UAE are paved. Other nations—for example, Oman (29,685 km paved, 30,545 unpaved); Yemen (6,200 km paved, 65,100 km unpaved); and Saudi Arabia (47,529 km paved, 173,843 km unpaved)—have poor paved road coverage.[179] Rail coverage is also poor. China's BRI has targeted ports, roads, and railway development in Syria, Iraq, Egypt, and many other countries, and the result could be improved transportation conditions across the region at the expense of U.S. interests.[180]

The United States has access to several airfields in the region. The primary air hub for U.S. forces is Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar. Other airfields include Ali Al Salem Air Base in Kuwait; Al Dhafra and Al Minhad in the UAE; Isa in Bahrain; Eskan Village Air Base in Saudi Arabia; and Muscat, Thumrait, Masirah Island, and the commercial airport at Seeb in Oman. In the past, the United States has used major airfields in Iraq, including Baghdad International Airport and Balad Air Base, as well as Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia.

The fact that a particular air base is available to the United States today, however, does not necessarily mean that it will be available for a particular operation in the future. For example, because of their more cordial relations with Iran, Qatar and Oman probably would not allow the United States to use air bases in their territory for strikes against Iran unless they were first attacked themselves.

The United States also has access to ports in the region, the most important of which may be the deep-water port of Khalifa bin Salman in Bahrain and naval facilities at Fujairah in the UAE.[181] The UAE's commercial port of Jebel Ali is open for visits from U.S. warships and the prepositioning of equipment for operations in theater.[182]

In March 2019, "Oman and the United States signed a 'Strategic Framework Agreement' that expands the U.S.–Oman facilities access agreements by allowing U.S. forces to use the ports of Al Duqm, which is large enough to handle U.S. aircraft carriers, and Salalah."[183] The location of these ports outside the Strait of Hormuz makes them particularly useful. Approximately 90 percent of the world's trade travels by sea, and some of the busiest and most important shipping lanes are located in the Middle East. Tens of thousands of cargo ships travel through the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait each year. However, the Houthis demonstrated how vulnerable this shipping lane is when they began to attack commercial and naval vessels in the fall of 2023.

Given the high volume of maritime traffic in the region, no U.S. military operation can be undertaken without consideration of the opportunity and risk that these shipping lanes offer to America and her allies. The major shipping routes include:

- **The Suez Canal.** In 2023, more than 26,000 ships transited the Suez Canal, accounting for 12 percent of global trade, but tensions in the Red Sea late in 2023 caused transits to fall by nearly 50 percent to 13,200 in 2024.[184] The Trump Administration's campaign against the Houthis in the spring of 2025 could cause traffic to rebound, but considering that the canal itself is 120 miles long but only 670 feet wide, 13,200 transits is still an impressive amount of traffic. The Suez Canal is important to Europe because it provides access to oil from the Middle East. It also serves as an important strategic asset for the United States, as it is used routinely by the U.S. Navy to move surface combatants between the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea. Thanks to a bilateral arrangement between Egypt and the United States, the U.S. Navy enjoys priority access to the canal.[185]

  The journey through the Suez Canal's narrow waterway is no easy task for large surface combatants; the canal was not constructed with the aim of accommodating 100,000-ton aircraft carriers. For this reason, different types of security protocols are followed to ensure the security of larger vessels, including the provision of air support by the Egyptian military.[186] These security protocols, however, are not foolproof. In April 2021, the Suez Canal was closed for more than 11 days after a container ship ran aground, blocking the waterway and creating a 360-ship traffic jam that disrupted almost 13 percent of global maritime traffic.

This crisis proves that ever-larger container ships transiting strategic choke points are prone to accidents that can lead to massive disruptions of both global maritime trade and U.S. maritime security.[187]

- **Strait of Hormuz.** According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, the Strait of Hormuz, which links the Persian Gulf with the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman, "is the world's most important oil chokepoint because of the large volumes of oil that flow through the strait."[188] In 2024, its daily oil flow averaged "around 20.3 million barrels" per day, the equivalent of "[o]ne fifth of global oil supply."[189]

  Given the extreme narrowness of the passage and its proximity to Iran, shipping routes through the Strait of Hormuz are particularly vulnerable to disruption. Since 2021, Iran has harassed, attacked, and interfered with over a dozen internationally flagged merchant ships according to the White House and the Pentagon. In April 2024, IRGC naval special forces seized a container ship.[190] Iran had previously seized two foreign-flagged oil tankers in the spring of 2023.[191] In response, U.S. Navy warships stationed in the Persian Gulf increased their patrols.[192] The U.S. needs a naval presence and port access to countries that border the Strait of Hormuz to maintain awareness of Iran's illicit drug and weapons smuggling.[193]

- **Bab el-Mandeb Strait.** The Bab el-Mandeb Strait is a strategic waterway located between the Horn of Africa and Yemen that links the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean. Exports from the Persian Gulf and Asia that are destined for Western markets must pass through the strait en route to the Suez Canal. Because the Bab el-Mandeb Strait is 18 miles wide at its narrowest point, passage is limited to two channels for inbound and outbound shipments.[194]

- **Maritime Prepositioning of Equipment and Supplies.** The U.S. military has deployed noncombatant maritime prepositioning ships (MPS) containing large amounts of military equipment and supplies in strategic locations from which they can reach areas of conflict relatively quickly as associated U.S. Army or Marine Corps units located elsewhere arrive in the area. The British Indian Ocean Territory of Diego Garcia, an island atoll, hosts the U.S. Naval Support Facility Diego Garcia, which supports prepositioning ships that can supply Army or Marine Corps units deployed for contingency operations in the Middle East.

Conclusion

The Middle East region remains a key focus for U.S. military planners. Once considered relatively stable because of the ironfisted rule of authoritarian regimes, the area is now highly unstable and a breeding ground for terrorism and the return of regional powers vying for territory and influence.

Overall, regional security has deteriorated in recent years. Hamas's October 7, 2023, attack on Israel led to the greatest change in the operating environment in a generation. In response to the attack, Israel has effectively destroyed or significantly degraded terrorist organizations and terrorist armies in three locations—Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Houthis in Yemen—while defending itself against two unprecedented direct ballistic missile attacks on its soil from Iran. In striking back against the Islamic Republic, Israel and the United States dealt a significant blow to Tehran's ability to defend its territory, produce ballistic missiles, and advance its nuclear program. This culminated in the Twelve-Day War with Israel destroying much of Iran's ballistic missile infrastructure and the United States delivering a decisive blow to the regime's nuclear facilities. Yet Tehran appears to be undeterred in its ambition to dominate the region and acquire nuclear capabilities.

Many of the region's borders created after World War I are under significant stress. The fall of the Assad regime has created a power vacuum in Syria that the HTS-led transitional government of Ahmed al-Sharaa (previously known by his *nom de guerre* Abu Mohammad al-Julani) is attempting to navigate, while regional players use the moment to encroach on Syrian territory in a bid to seize territory (Turkey) or establish a forward-deployed defensive position (Israel). Though its caliphate was defeated, ISIS survives in Syria and continues to threaten the integrity of that country and the security of its borders.

In Lebanon, the pummeling of Hezbollah by the Israelis after the Iranian proxy joined Hamas in its

war against Israel has created an opportunity for the Lebanese army to reassert control of the country's southern territory. As this book was being prepared, HTS was battling with Hezbollah on the Syrian–Lebanese border. It remains to be seen whether the new government in Damascus will prevent Iran from using Syria as a land bridge to resupply Hezbollah, which could well significantly reduce the Lebanese terrorist group's capabilities. Under the direction of the new administration in Syria, Syrian forces have claimed success in anti-smuggling operations. For example, Syrian forces have captured several wanted individuals, have seized large quantities of weapons and narcotics, and claim to have established control of several villages in an effort to combat Hezbollah's smuggling operations.[195]

Elsewhere, Yemen's civil war persists, and the Houthis have used their territorial control and Iranian supply lines to launch attacks against Israel, American naval ships, and international commercial vessels. Despite numerous Israeli and American airstrikes targeting the group's infrastructure, weapons, and leadership, Iran's proxy appears to be undeterred.

Iran also exercises significant influence over Iraq. Baghdad has restored its territorial integrity since the defeat of the Islamic State, but the political situation and future relations between Iraq and the United States will remain difficult as long as Iran retains control of powerful Shia militias that it uses to intimidate Iraqi political leaders.[196]

Though the regional dispute with Qatar has been resolved, the Gulf country has played a unique role in the post–October 7 war, using its position as host to Hamas's leadership outside of Gaza and close relations with both the United States and Iran to serve as a mediator in negotiations over the return of the more than 250 hostages Hamas captured in its attack.[197]

Egypt, though stable for the moment, faces its own security challenges. Cairo has prevented refugees from Gaza from entering the Sinai Peninsula largely because of concerns about the spread of Hamas and other terrorist elements into Egypt and to prevent the Palestinian people from relocating to a third country, which is seen as an abrogation of the Palestinian claim to territory in any negotiated deal with Israel. As this book was being prepared, Egypt had sent armored battalions and other forces into Sinai, violating the 1979 Camp David Accords with Israel.[198]

Jordan also faces threats to its stability. About half of its population is Palestinian, and the Hashemite Kingdom has been unable to stem the flow of weapons smuggled to Palestinian terrorist groups in Judea and Samaria. Amman has engaged with the new government in Damascus and resumed flights between the countries, but much of the borderland remains ungoverned, giving the Islamic State the opportunity to reestablish territory. This area was also the site of an Iranian-aligned proxy group in Iraq's missile strike against an American outpost that killed three servicemembers in January 2024.[199]

In response to recent regional upheaval, the U.S. military continues to demonstrate its capacity to surge troops, warships, and supplies to the region in defense of American interests and support of American allies and partners. Decades of military operations in the Middle East have created tried-and-tested procedures for operating across the theater. Personal links between allied armed forces are also present. Joint training exercises improve interoperability, and U.S. military educational courses that are regularly attended by officers (and often royals) from the Middle East give the U.S. an opportunity to influence some of the region's future leaders. Maintaining a sustainable presence in the region will require leveraging the capabilities of U.S. allies and partners to ensure that vital shared national security interests—energy, trade, nuclear nonproliferation, and countering terrorism—are secured.

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 benefit from cooperation with partners and allies in the Middle East when shared interests are threatened.

Scoring the Middle East Operating Environment

As noted at the beginning of this section, there are several regional characteristics that affect the ability of the U.S. to conduct military operations to defend its vital national interests against threats

in the Middle East. This assessment of the operating environment uses a five-point scale that ranges from "very poor" to "excellent" conditions and covers four regional characteristics that are of greatest relevance to the conduct of military operations:

1. **Very poor.** Significant hurdles exist for military operations. Physical infrastructure is insufficient or nonexistent, and the region is politically unstable. The U.S. military is poorly placed or absent, and alliances are nonexistent or diffuse.

2. **Unfavorable.** A challenging operating environment for military operations is marked by inadequate infrastructure, weak alliances, and recurring political instability. The U.S. military is inadequately placed in the region.

3. **Moderate.** A neutral to moderately favorable operating environment is characterized by adequate infrastructure, a moderate alliance structure, and acceptable levels of regional political stability. The U.S. military is adequately placed.

4. **Favorable.** A favorable operating environment includes adequate infrastructure, strong alliances, and a stable political environment. The U.S. military is well placed for future operations.

5. **Excellent.** An extremely favorable operating environment includes well-established and well-maintained infrastructure, strong and capable allies, and a stable political environment. The U.S. military is well placed to defend U.S. interests.

The key regional characteristics consist of:

a. **Alliances/Partnerships.** Alliances are important for interoperability and collective defense, as allies are more likely to lend support to U.S. military operations. Indicators that provide insight into the strength or health of an alliance include whether the United States trains regularly with countries in the region, has good interoperability with the forces of an ally, and shares intelligence with nations in the region.

b. **Political stability.** Political stability brings predictability for military planners when considering such components as transit, basing, and overflight rights for U.S. military operations. The overall degree of political stability indicates whether U.S. military actions would be hindered or enabled and reflects, for example, whether transfers of power are generally peaceful and whether there have been any recent instances of political instability in the region.

c. **U.S. military positioning.** Being able to base military forces or to stage equipment and supplies in a region greatly facilitates the ability of the United States to respond to crises and presumably to achieve success in critical "first battles" more quickly. Being routinely present in a region also helps the United States to remain familiar with its characteristics and the various actors that might either support or try to thwart U.S. actions. With this in mind, we assessed whether the U.S. military was well positioned in the region. Again, indicators included bases, troop presence, prepositioned equipment, and recent examples of military operations (including training and humanitarian) launched from the region.

d. **Infrastructure.** Modern, reliable, and suitable infrastructure is essential to military operations. Airfields, ports, rail lines, canals, and paved roads enable the United States to stage, launch, and logistically sustain combat operations. We combined expert knowledge of regions with publicly available information on critical infrastructure to arrive at our overall assessment of this metric.

The U.S. enjoys strong military-to-military relationships with many countries in the Middle East, but few can provide the necessary capabilities to defend themselves in the event of a credible threat from a nation-state or terrorist organization, Israel being the lone exception. The multinational response from Middle Eastern and European partners to defend Israel against Iran's April 2024 UAV and missile attack demonstrates the ability of the United States to coordinate military action among Middle Eastern and European countries with assets in-region in response to a common threat.

Operating Environment: Middle East

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

Although destabilizing in the near term, the near-destruction of Hamas in the Gaza Strip, crippling of Hezbollah in Lebanon, and fall of the Assad regime in Syria create long-term opportunities for new, favorable political dynamics to emerge. The U.S. presence is significantly diminished since the height of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, but its response in the immediate aftermath of the October 7, 2023, attack and subsequent operations against the Houthis and Iran demonstrate the U.S. military's ability to respond rapidly to a wide range of crises across the region.

Finally, the region's natural chokepoints—the Suez Canal, Bab al-Mandeb Strait, and Strait of Hormuz, among others—will always pose a risk to free movement within and through the region. In addition, the poor infrastructure within many countries can limit ground-based operations. Yet the U.S. maintains a robust network of air, naval, and ground bases that enable it to launch and logistically sustain combat operations.

Overall, the U.S. has developed an extensive network of bases in the Middle East and has acquired substantial operational experience in combatting regional threats. At the same time, however, many of America's allies are hobbled by political instability, economic problems, internal security threats, and mushrooming transnational threats. With these considerations in mind the overall score for the region is "moderate," and we arrived at these average scores for the Middle East (rounded to the nearest whole number):

- Alliances/Partnerships: **3—Moderate.**
- Political Stability: **2—Unfavorable.**
- U.S. Military Positioning: **4—Favorable.**
- Infrastructure: **3—Moderate.**

Aggregating to a regional score of: **Moderate.**

Endnotes

1. For example, during a 1916 meeting in Downing Street, Sir Mark Sykes, Britain's lead negotiator with the French on dividing the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East, pointed to the map and told the Prime Minister that for Britain's sphere of influence in the Middle East, "I should like to draw a line from the e in Acre [modern-day Israel] to the last k in Kirkuk [modern-day Iraq]." See James Barr, *A Line in the Sand: Britain, France, and the Struggle That Shaped the Middle East* (London: Simon & Schuster U.K., 2011), pp. 7–20. See also Margaret McMillan, *Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2003).
2. Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, "Young People in MENA: Coming of Age in a Context of Structural Challenges and Global Trends," Chapter 1 in *Youth at the Centre of Government Action: A Review of the Middle East and North Africa*, OECD Public Governance Review (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2022). pp. 1–20, https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/youth-at-the-centre-of-government-action_bcc2dd08-en.html (accessed December 20, 2025).
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Africa

Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for National Security

Introduction

Africa is a region of great promise—but also of many challenges. Points of interest to America include Africa's proximity to choke points between the Mediterranean and Red Seas and considerable natural resources. Moreover, the United States has some role in mitigating threats emanating from the region, to include terrorism, extremism, outbreaks of disease, and migration crises that can affect American security and safety. U.S. military forces on the continent must operate within an expansive, diverse, and challenging environment that includes unresolved legacy issues and rapidly increasing threats driven by political, societal, and ideological concerns.

The American perception of Africa is often one of a continent made up of similar countries. The reality is very different: more than 50 unique countries with varying geography, histories, governance and tribalism, economics, global alliances, and humanitarian and development obstacles. Historically, much of the U.S. approach to Africa has centered on specific security responses, foreign aid, and development assistance. Chief factors in Africa's security profile currently include China's 20-year rise on the continent, Russia's aggressive expansion into key regions through military cooperation, France's declining reputation in Francophone Africa, civil conflict and disruption of governance, and the spread of terrorism. Supply chain and shipping interests and potential growth in relations with reliable partners like Morocco, Ghana, and Kenya suggest areas for operational expansion, and such common threats as terrorism and disease crises can create a meeting point for like-minded actors on the continent.

Regional Overview

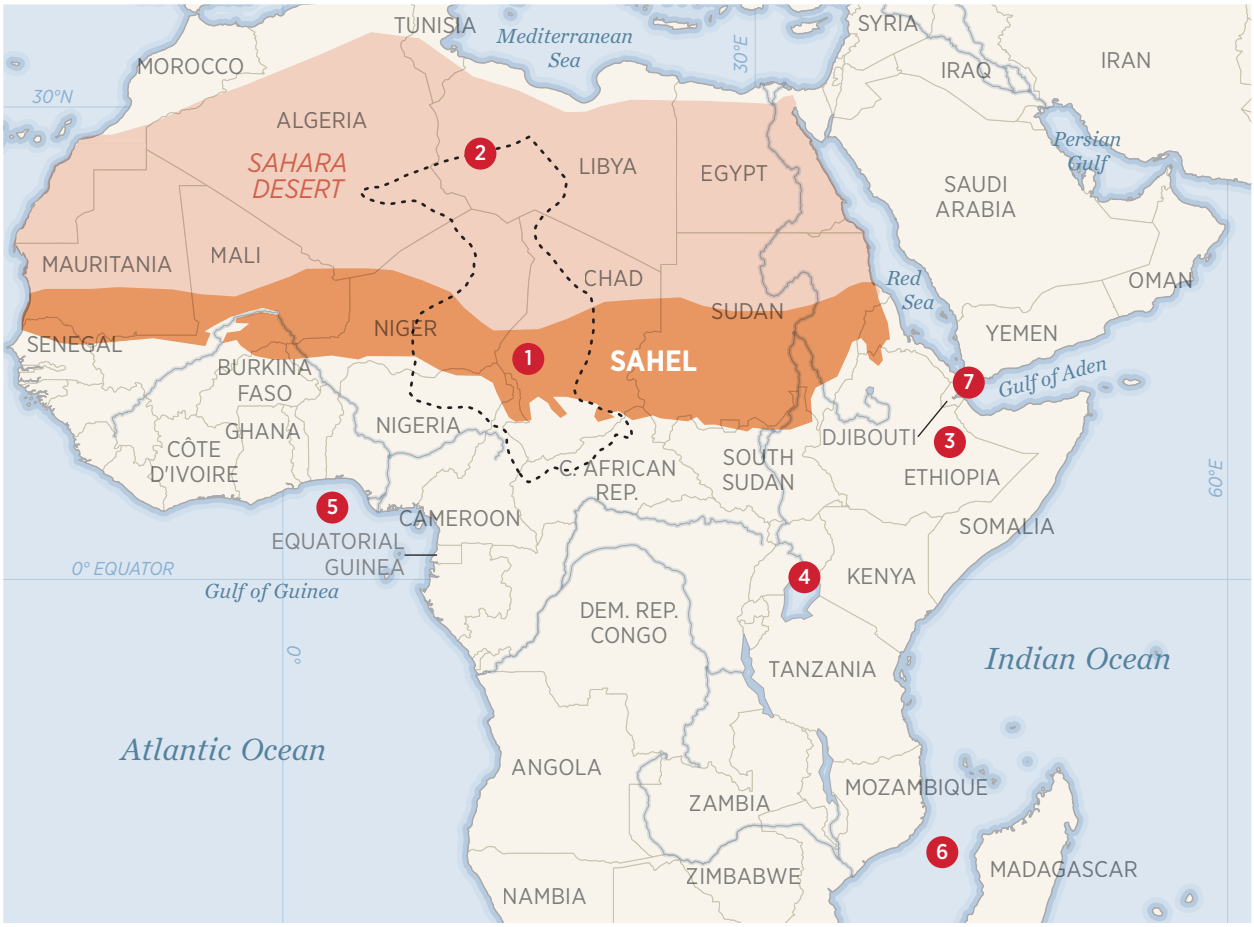
Africa is vast: Its geography includes the world's largest desert and second largest rainforest, expansive mountain ranges, semi-arid lands, and critical locations among the world's most traveled seas and straits. With much of the continent still pursuing an industrialized economy, environmental factors further hinder operational readiness and mobility. For example, low-lying regions near the Nile and Congo Rivers are prone to flooding, drought creates significant food and water shortages in the Horn of Africa, and a recent El Niño phenomenon exacerbated storms and flooding in East Africa, straining limited infrastructure and resources.[1]

These environmental conditions are met by inconsistent infrastructure and development with poor transportation, communication, and energy access or continuity experienced throughout much of the continent. Regions can be extremely isolated from one another because of natural geographies and unreliable or nonexistent infrastructure.

The disparity in industrialization is present in every region of the continent, and although significant progress has been made, development gains are country-specific, and much of the continent remains seriously challenged. Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, Morocco, and Egypt are examples of countries that are working to attract and accommodate foreign direct investment and that now enjoy modern road networks, high-speed rail systems, well-developed ports, internet access, and reliable and diversified energy portfolios as part of rapidly modernizing industrial economies. However, many other countries, including nations across the Sahel region, the Horn of Africa, and Central Africa, struggle to maintain any durable growth and are in zones of constant conflict.

MAP 5

Key Areas in Africa



1 **Sahel**
From the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea, the Sahel serves as an arid border between North and sub-Sahara Africa and includes Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, and Sudan.

2 **Lake Chad Basin**
Extending the Sahel into West and Central Africa, the semi-arid basin region includes Chad, Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, and the Central African Republic.

3 **Horn of Africa**
East Africa peninsula along the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, and Indian Ocean, including Sudan, Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, and Ethiopia

4 **Great Lakes Region**
Rift Valley lake region of Lake Tanganyika, Lake Victoria, Lake Kivu, Lake Edward, and Lake Albert and including Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, northeastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, and northwestern Kenya and Tanzania.

5 **Gulf of Guinea**
Atlantic Ocean tropic gulf stretching from Liberia to Gabon.

6 **Mozambique Channel**
An approximately 1,000-mile Indian Ocean channel located between Mozambique and Madagascar.

7 **Red Sea, Bab el-Mandeb Strait, and Gulf of Aden**
Critical waters between the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula.

SOURCE: Heritage Foundation research.

heritage.org

These infrastructure gaps leave countries with unreliable power, poor transportation options, and limited access to telecommunications networks, all of which not only affect security and mobility conditions, but also hamper prospects for the economic growth and social development that could help to avert future disruption.

Politically, several African states benefit from strong, mutually beneficial ties with the U.S.—stable working relationships with security, commercial, and other goals. Conversely, the continent presents many volatile and problematic situations, including countries that are under unstable government or uncooperative rule, are the targets of unrelenting terrorist attacks, face uncontrollable humanitarian challenges, and enable adversaries' expansion on the continent, chiefly in support of Chinese and Russian interests.

In the security sphere (although results remain mixed), Morocco, Egypt, Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Uganda either partner with or have recently participated with the U.S. in counterterrorism and other military training and peacekeeping cooperation. Among the more successful examples, Kenya hosts several U.S. military operations and partners within the Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa (CJTF–HOA), which works to counter violent extremism by the al-Qaeda–aligned al-Shabaab and execute maritime security operations. Morocco is a member of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS and remains a reliable partner in counterterrorism operations in North Africa and the Sahel—an increasingly valuable relationship with the recent loss of the U.S. capabilities in Niger and, to a lesser degree, Chad.

Conversely, the United States faces a multitude of conventional and other threats to its interests throughout the continent. Nigeria has been working for years to isolate violence by Boko Haram jihadist insurgents, based primarily in the north and northeastern provinces, and also more recently by ISIS–West Africa as well as to mitigate religious violence against Christians by other Islamic herders and other groups. South Sudan remains unable to achieve lasting stability and has sunk into a civil war, renewing a major humanitarian crisis. The Central African Republic (CAR) is under duress from rebel groups operating from remote regions. Zimbabwe's regime and economic instability have created a roadblock to U.S. engagement.

The following countries and regions merit the strongest U.S. attention both because of their real and potential impact on U.S. interests and because of their possible bearing on U.S. military capabilities.

The Sahel. Stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea, the Sahel serves as an arid border between North and sub-Saharan Africa. The region has seen a complete undoing of its governance structures in just over four years: Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, and Sudan represent a sequence of coups d'états and conflicts by military juntas and other paramilitary groups, often under the influence of Russian support, insurgency pressure, or both. Resentment has been directed especially at the region's colonial history with the French, who have been expelled summarily from several countries following coups.

This change finds U.S. interests, partners, and the people of the region imperiled. For the United States, this disruption directly impacts its leadership role in containing terrorism and extremism threats. With the fall of Niger's government, the U.S. was forced to withdraw more than 1,000 military personnel and vacate Niger Airbases 101 and 201 in Niamey and Agadez in July and August 2024, respectively.[2] This represents a more than $100 million loss of investment in the airbases, which had served as a launch point for counterterrorism cooperation since 2019. This asset is now under Nigerian control, which is heavily influenced by Russia. Moscow's engagement is found elsewhere as well including in Chad, where a small contingent of approximately 100 U.S. military personnel conducting training exercises were required to depart the country in May 2024.[3] The U.S. absence and the disruption of governance also enable greater terrorism and extremism: Al-Qaeda and ISIS affiliates are flourishing, pressing new ruling regimes, and working to recruit, stage attacks, and expand territorial control. As these new regimes attempt to establish order, civilian populations face increased violence, displacement, and disruption of basic services, further exacerbating the humanitarian crises that are common to the Sahel.

Additionally, the Sahel's current regimes appear to be less inclined to cooperate with international partners, particularly traditional leaders like the United States and France, or with such African alliances as the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the

latter of which had condemned the coups and imposed sanctions on several Sahel states. Withdrawing from ECOWAS, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger formed the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) in September 2023 as a cooperative forum to engage security and regional issues. Sahel states like Mali and Niger are also revising approaches to managing natural resources; where metals like gold and uranium are sourced can directly impact global supply chains.

In the Sudan, an intra-military conflict between the Sudan National Army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) ultimately ousted democratically elected leaders in April 2023. This ongoing civil war adds to the complicated landscape with the turmoil attracting competing influence and support from North African and Middle East peers and Russia. Instability has displaced thousands, has generated immigration concerns in neighboring states like Egypt and Chad, and is creating avenues for insurgencies to inject further extremism into an already historically stressed country.

Morocco. With dual access to the Atlantic and Mediterranean and long-standing political ties, Morocco is one of the U.S.'s most capable and dependable partners in Africa. Designated as a Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA), it maintains a level of interoperability with U.S. forces that is unmatched anywhere else on the continent. The annual African Lion exercise demonstrates interoperability in practice, bringing together tens of thousands of troops across air, land, and maritime domains. Moroccan forces operate such U.S. platforms as the F-16 and the AH-64E Apache, ensuring seamless integration into joint operations. The State Partnership Program with the Utah National Guard has deepened its ties over the decades and has produced a generation of officers trained to NATO standards.[4]

Morocco is a member of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS and contributes to counterterrorism coordination across North Africa and the Sahel. This cooperation is reinforced at the political level by Washington's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara. First announced in 2020, the policy was reaffirmed in April 2025 by Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who stated that Morocco's autonomy plan is "the only feasible solution" to ambiguity over territorial sovereignty. This further reinforced a relationship that has the potential to expand to basing, port access, and intelligence cooperation.[5]

Algeria. Algeria is Africa's largest country in terms of land area and commands vast natural resources that make it a significant if complicated factor in America's regional calculus. Algeria has exhibited a slight tilt toward China and Russia during the past decade. In 2014, it became the first Arab state to establish a comprehensive strategic partnership with China, a status that signals top-tier political coordination with a defense component, not just commercial ties. Additionally, Russia remains a key partner in Algeria's defense posture. Algeria's force structure and training pipeline are tied to Russian systems, and joint naval drills in the Mediterranean and ground exercises reinforce that cooperation, constraining NATO-standard interoperability and narrowing the space for meaningful U.S. defense engagement.

The United States has tested limited openings. High-level engagements by U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM)[6] have included two visits by AFRICOM Commander General Michael Langley in 2024. That outreach was maintained early in 2025 with a U.S.–Algeria military cooperation memorandum of understanding,[7] and Algiers has signaled interest in selected U.S. equipment while inviting U.S. investment more broadly. The channels opened by AFRICOM and Algeria's interest in selected U.S. defense ties suggest that pragmatic cooperation is possible if it is aligned with clear American conditions and priorities—an uncertain outcome given regional tensions between Algeria and America's long-standing partner Morocco.

Somalia. Somalia's fragility cannot be overstated with the terrorist organization al-Shabaab controlling significant portions of south and central Somalia and threatening to topple the government in Mogadishu. Should the capital fall, U.S. troops and airbase access would immediately be jeopardized, and American and allied maritime security in the Gulf of Aden would suffer greatly from the loss of this position. Despite U.S. defensive attacks against terrorist forces, including airstrikes in February and March 2025 to prevent attacks on American interests,[8] al-Shabaab continues to make gains against a weakened government.

In addition to the threat from al-Shabaab, ISIS maintains a limited but persistent presence in northern Somalia, particularly in the Puntland region. Smaller than al-Shabaab, ISIS in Somalia has established ties with regional and global

jihadist networks. The group engages in targeted assassinations, extortion, and small-scale attacks, clashing with Somali security forces as well as with al-Shabaab.

Desperate for continued U.S. security assistance, Somalia recently offered the United States access to two strategic ports. Both ports, however, are controlled by autonomous territories in Somaliland and Puntland that advocate a possible deal by which the United States would recognize their legitimacy in exchange for basing and commercial port access opportunities. Somaliland's push for recognition presents an inflection point for the country's security, regional stability, and the U.S. presence in Somalia. Somaliland presents itself as a more stable partner against Somalia, and the Somali government cautions that any recognition would subsequently disrupt Mogadishu's relationship with Washington, although to what extent is unknown.

Ethiopia. A stable Ethiopia is important because of Ethiopia's role in mitigating regional risks, including by supporting U.S. counterterrorism efforts against al-Shabaab and other terrorist groups in the Horn of Africa with airspace access, information sharing, and other permissions.[9] The U.S. partnership with Ethiopia is currently minimal, however, because of civil conflict in the country's northern Tigray region.

The two-year war between Ethiopian forces and the Eritrean-backed Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in the Tigray region was resolved with a peace agreement in November 2022.[10] However, periodic violence continues throughout the region, and both sides of the conflict have been accused of violating human rights. As the region attempts to recover, rebel groups operating into Ethiopia from across its borders present new risks. The possibility of a conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea also exists.

In addition, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), which opened on September 9, 2025, stands as a major point of contention among Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan.[11] Essential for Ethiopia's development and energy needs, the GERD affects the flow and control of Blue Nile waters that are critical to downstream countries, and Egypt is concerned that the dam will reduce water availability, threatening its agriculture and water security. Despite multiple rounds of negotiations, the three countries have struggled to reach a binding agreement on dam operations and water management, and the issue remains unresolved, keeping tensions high in a region that requires peer cooperation for lasting security.

Egypt. Egypt is among the continent's most important security partners and plays a crucial role both in the Middle East and in North Africa. Egypt is involved throughout the region and can serve as a mediator in situations like Sudan's and Libya's ongoing civil conflicts. Egypt also cooperates with Gulf States to counterbalance the influence of Iran and terrorist groups, and its control of the Suez Canal ensures its importance in global trade and military logistics.

Egypt's partnership with the United States remains a cornerstone of its security strategy. The United States provides $1.3 billion in military aid to support Egypt's counterterrorism efforts and the modernization of its armed forces.[12] Joint exercises, intelligence sharing, and arms sales, including sales of advanced fighter jets and missile defense systems, reinforce this cooperation. The U.S. and Egypt also continue to collaborate on maritime security to safeguard the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden from piracy and terrorist threats.

Internally, Egypt continues to face threats from Islamist militant groups, particularly in the Sinai Peninsula, where insurgent activity persists despite ongoing military campaigns.

Libya. It has been 15 years since 2011 when the government of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi was overthrown, yet Libya remains highly unstable, beset by multiple political and military conflicts. Tensions have diminished slightly in recent years, but disagreement persists between the Tripoli-based Government of National Unity (GNU) and the Libyan National Army (LNA) operating semi-autonomously in eastern Libya. Factions seeking control of valuable oil resources have ignored ceasefires and other agreements. Efforts to achieve a lasting peace stall partly because of foreign influences that include Europe, Algeria, Turkey, Qatar, and Russia, which operates through its Africa Corps. The ceding of ground to terrorist organizations, chiefly Ansar al-Sharia, by Libya's government represents a serious threat not only to Libya, but to points north of the Mediterranean as well.

Kenya. The U.S. has designated Kenya as a Major Non-NATO Ally and has reinforced Kenya's role as a key security partner by providing access to advanced military equipment and participating in

Terrorist Groups and Paramilitary Organizations in Africa

Terrorists, juntas, and paramilitary groups have undone both long-standing authoritarian regimes and nascent democracies in recent years. They promote extreme agendas through influence, recruitment, violence, and disruption; attack civilian, military, and government targets; and assault Western interests and international peacekeeping efforts. The following are among the most persistent, organized, and dangerous of these actors:

1. **Al-Shabaab: Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya.** Al-Shabaab is a Somalia-based terrorist organization aligned with al-Qaeda that threatens to topple the government in Mogadishu. It also has staged successful attacks in Kenya and throughout the Horn of Africa.

2. **Boko Haram: Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Niger.** Founded in northeastern Nigeria in the early 2000s, Boko Haram works to establish an Islamic state governed by sharia law and has been responsible for multiple bombings, kidnappings, and other attacks across the Lake Chad Basin.

3. **ISIS–West Africa: Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Niger.** Branching off from Boko Haram, ISIS–West Africa, also known as the Islamic State West Africa Province, similarly targets military and civilians in northeastern Nigeria and elsewhere in the Lake Chad Basin.

4. **Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Algeria, Mali, Mauritania, Niger.** Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is the North African affiliate of al-Qaeda. AQIM has operated in the Sahel and lower Sahara for nearly 20 years and seeks to establish an Islamic state and challenge Western influence in the region. It also cooperates with smaller peer groups such as the **Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa** (MUJAO) in Mauritania and **Ansar Dine** in Mali and Niger.

5. **Islamic State in the Greater Sahara: Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger.** The Sahel's ISIS satellite, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), also known as ISIS-Sahel, originated as a jihadist movement in Mali and expanded into Burkina Faso and Niger. ISGS attacks military and civilian targets and Western interests generally, further destabilizing an already destabilized region.

joint training exercises. Recent agreements include the provision of 16 U.S.-manufactured helicopters and the acquisition of 150 M1117 armored vehicles. Kenya co-hosted the 2025 African Chiefs of Defense Conference with the U.S., underscoring its strategic role in regional security.

Kenya continues to confront threats from al-Shabaab, particularly in its coastal regions, and is a key partner in antipiracy efforts. Kenya has strengthened its military capabilities through joint exercises with the United States such as Justified Accord 2025, which was aimed at enhancing multinational combat readiness and crisis response capabilities. Kenya has been actively involved in regional peacekeeping efforts, and its increased participation as a global security partner includes leading a multinational force in Haiti to combat gang violence.

Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Rwanda. Historically, among the threats to Central African security, ongoing violence between DRC military forces and Rwandan-supported Tutsi insurgent organizations has presented the greatest risk to stability for the Great Lakes region. Fighting along the DRC–Rwanda border has been ongoing for 30 years with insurgent groups—chiefly the March 23 Movement (M23)—operating under the Congo River Alliance (CRA). M23 sees itself as defending Tutsi interests against Hutu militias, but its incursions into the North Kivu Province maintain the decades-long conflict that created the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Today, this conflict has grown to encompass fighting over territory, security, migration, and natural resources.

President Trump has actively engaged with the DRC and Rwanda since taking office. Shortly

6. **Ansar al-Sharia: Libya, Tunisia.** Ansar al-Sharia (AAS) rooted itself in the instability following the Libyan Revolution in 2011 and focuses on disrupting the current weak governance structure, establishing sharia law, and eliminating Western influence. Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AAS-T) was founded after the Arab Spring in 2011 and similarly attacks the Tunisian government and Western interests.

7. **Lord's Resistance Army: Uganda, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Central African Republic, South Sudan, Sudan.** Founded by warlord Joseph Kony and infamous for its use of child soldiers, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) is an extremist military organization operating in remote areas of Central Africa. Responsible for widespread violations of human rights since 1987, the LRA is assumed to be greatly reduced though still a problem in areas with weak government oversight.

8. **March 23 Movement: Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).** Operating with the presumed support of the government of Rwanda, the March 23 Movement (M23) is a Tutsi-led rebel paramilitary organization that was established as part of the rebellion against DRC regional governance and the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), a Rwandan Hutu rebel group. M23's operations, which are controversial and include violence, humanitarian abuses, and theft, have attracted tacit support from others in the region as well.

9. **ISIS-Mozambique: Mozambique, Tanzania.** ISIS-Mozambique, a disruptive insurgency formed in 2017 and also known as Ansar al-Sunna or al-Shabab (no known relation to the Somali group), seeks to establish a government under sharia law. Its attacks target the government of Mozambique and foreign energy development projects including investments by the United States. ISIS-Mozambique operates primarily in the Cabo Delgado province but also has executed attacks in Tanzania.

following the President's inauguration, on January 27, 2025, M23 rebel fighters executed a rapid assault into the City of Goma, the largest metropolitan area in North Kivu, and immediately displaced residents in a city of approximately 3 million people.[13] This latest incident risked becoming a major crisis, as the province faces hunger, migration, and health issues that include an Ebola outbreak, the chief humanitarian concern for the West. A peace agreement, brokered by the United States with support from Qatar, was announced in June 2025 and included commitments to resolve such decades-long issues as disarmament, border integrity, paramilitary groups, economic integration, the return of refugees, and humanitarian access to the region.[14] Despite peer government cooperation, questions remain about the rebel groups' willingness to end their attacks.

In addition to M23, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) continues to disrupt DRC and other remote Central African populations in the Great Lakes Region through violence, kidnappings, and abuses of human rights including the use of child soldiers. Operating sporadically in jungles and rural areas from the DRC to Sudan, the LRA remains difficult to eliminate and continues to be a security threat because of weak local governance and the challenging terrain.

South Africa. The Republic of South Africa is the African continent's sole G20 economy. Traditionally, it was viewed as a safe investment destination for Western trade and development, but during the past five years, President Cyril Ramaphosa's government has stood increasingly in opposition to American positions on such issues as currency and Israel, either tacitly or explicitly, while simultaneously advocating for increased U.S. trade, investment, and aid.

South Africa only heightened concerns following a joint naval exercise with Russia and China in the Indian Ocean on the one-year anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine,[15] and as recently as January 2026's Will for Peace BRICS exercise, which expanded the drills to include Iran and the UAE.[16]

Although there is no direct conflict or threat, South Africa's openness to cooperating with these two global military powers, coupled with a tense relationship with the United States, raises the country's risk profile.

Bilateral relations between the U.S. and South Africa have become progressively more strained since 2023; issues include U.S. accusations that South Africa has aided Russian weapons transports and South Africa's support for Palestinian insurgents against Israel.[17] U.S. presidential executive orders condemning South African racism and the expulsion of South Africa's ambassador to the United States in response to derogatory remarks against America further underscore these tensions.[18] South Africa has replaced its ambassador to Washington and continues to lobby in an effort to repair its relationship with the U.S., particularly regarding tariff relief and maintaining its Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) trade program eligibility, but progress appears to be limited at best.

Threats to the Continent

Russia and China. The Russian Federation and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have established their respective presences across Africa with one or the other serving as the primary global relationship for much of the continent. Achieved through a combination of security partnerships, diplomatic relations that capitalize on post-colonial dissent, and commercial engagement and entrapment, Russia's and China's prioritization of African affairs during the past 20 years have led to a favorable view of their defense and commerce aims, replacing an American brand traditionally centered on humanitarian aid and development. This pair of malign actors complicates U.S. military cooperation with countries like their BRICS partner South Africa that find it easier to have connections with authoritarian regimes because of their shared political and social philosophies.

Moscow's fingerprints in Africa's disrupted regions include bilateral security agreements, paramilitary cooperation, and arms proliferation. Acting as a military counterweight to Western democracies, Moscow helps African authoritarian and nascent military regimes create the appearance of legitimacy and stability. Since 2021, Russian influence has been notably evident throughout the Sahel, where multiple coups d'état have been executed by Russian-trained juntas with support from the Wagner Group, a private military company that has since been folded into Russia's Africa Corps.[19] Today, the Africa Corps is involved in Niger, Chad, Mali, Libya, Sudan, the Central African Republic, and Mozambique, among other countries, and offers military assistance to regimes in exchange for access to natural resources, including gold and oil, as well as access to strategic locations along the Mediterranean and the Horn of Africa.

Russia's geopolitical influence ultimately complicates U.S. efforts to promote peace and stability, economic cooperation, and better governance. As Nigerien paramilitary groups deposed the country's democracy with the Wagner Group's assistance, for example, Nigeriens waved Russian flags in celebration.[20]

Unlike Russia's security-focused engagements, China's strategic investments in infrastructure, military cooperation, and resource extraction employ a commercial and development approach that is implemented primarily through Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), an emerging market investment program that has been accused of economic coercion and unfair asset acquisition. China has surpassed the United States and Europe as Africa's chief trade and investment partner; it meets immediate needs (telecommunications, logistics, etc.) in exchange for resource rights and infrastructure primacy as well as influence in government regulatory and procurement entities. China's commercial activities on the continent have strengthened its position in its rivalry with the U.S., and through these efforts, Beijing prioritizes its access to and control of such African resources as oil, gas, critical minerals, and rare earth elements, which are essential for China's industrial growth.

The BRI includes a distinct focus on port development (Africa has more than 230 commercial ports[21]) and creating avenues to enable Chinese naval positioning. China established its first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2021, supporting the naval anti-piracy operations of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) off the coasts of Yemen and Somalia and providing a strategic position in the Gulf of Aden. The PLA Navy has made several visits around the continent during the past four years with an emphasis on West Africa that includes a naval exchange with Nigeria and sponsorship of military projects in Ghana. China also appears to be interested in establishing a second military base in Equatorial Guinea to create a dedicated military port on the Atlantic Ocean.

Terrorism and Extremism. Terrorism and extremism threaten most of Africa with various

militant groups advancing violent ideologies and executing attacks on military, government, civilian, and foreign targets.[22] Reaching every part of the mainland, terrorist organizations such as al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, and ISIS exploit unsettled and fledgling governance structures and long-term humanitarian crises, operating in spaces with weak government control to recruit, train, and orchestrate violence and messaging. Rapidly growing populations throughout Africa, combined with high unemployment rates and poverty among youth, increase vulnerability to terrorist recruitment.

African terrorist networks benefit from operational flexibility, peer organization cooperation, unstable operating environments, remote and disconnected environments, and self-defeating government turmoil. African governments seek global security and peacekeeping assistance, and the United States stands as a reliable partner, but the global commitment to mitigating terrorism and extremism on the continent is limited, partly because of governance issues that often fail to negate the appeal of terrorist ideology.

Maritime Concerns. Given its substantial coastline, Africa's maritime security is under constant threat of piracy. Key commercial waterways in the Gulf of Guinea, Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, Indian Ocean, and Mozambique Channel represent cruising grounds for pirates and crime organizations that present security challenges to U.S. and allied shipping. Conducted by a multitude of organizations and individuals to fund other illegal activities and terrorist operations, examples include attacks on oil and gas interests in the Gulf of Guinea, attacks on large commercial tankers in the Gulf of Aden, and the operations of Yemeni Houthi rebels in the Red Sea as well as widespread abductions and ransoming, drug smuggling, human trafficking, illegal fishing, and other transnational crimes.

The global community has increased naval patrols with a particular emphasis on the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, and the United States remains a leader in anti-piracy efforts and naval training for African forces, deploying efforts such as the CJTF–HOA Bull Shark exercise and the Special Operations Maritime Task Unit's training programs to enhance cooperation and readiness.

Humanitarian and Immigration Crises. Many of the world's least developed countries are represented on the African continent and suffer from the greatest humanitarian challenges including famine, water shortages and drought, cyclones, flooding, and outbreaks of disease. Food insecurity is rampant, and more than half of the continent's countries experience food shortages of greater than 60 percent.[23] More than 600 million Africans also lack reliable access to electricity. Economies can be fragile and subject to corruption, which undermines economic freedom, and characterized by commercial barriers, underemployment, and unemployment, which deter the foreign direct investment that could help to facilitate sustainable change.

These conditions encourage the disruption that fosters desperation, migration, violence, and extremism. Humanitarian and development crises enable further extremism and violence and create opportunities for sophisticated terrorist organizations to exploit as well as global malign influences. Coups d'état across the Sahel, civil conflict in Sudan and Libya, and intensified terrorist activities in Somalia, for example, reflect the instability that terrorists have successfully exploited to expand their influence. As conditions continue to deteriorate, people are displaced and subsequently create added security challenges for neighboring countries as extreme ideologies and dissent are carried into other societies.

Persecuted Religious Minorities. Religious minorities, particularly Christians, face increasing persecution in several African countries, typically from terrorist groups and armed militias. In countries like Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and the Central African Republic, jihadist groups such as Boko Haram and al-Shabaab target Christian communities for killings and abductions as a way to eliminate Western influence. In Nigeria, Christians are especially vulnerable to attacks in the region's Middle Belt by regional terrorist organizations and by local Islamic herdsmen who commit violence against Christian farmers over land disputes. The plight of persecuted Christians in Nigeria has earned the concern of Washington and Brussels, and the U.S. government has relisted Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern. In response to escalating violence, President Trump ordered airstrikes against terrorist groups in the country on December 25, 2025, with further military intervention to be determined.[24]

In Nigeria and elsewhere, the U.S. military plays a small but important role in preventing this persecution through select partnerships with African

MAP 6

Terrorist Groups and Paramilitary Organizations in Africa

Terrorists, juntas, and paramilitary groups have undone both long-standing authoritarian regimes and nascent democracies in recent years. They promote extreme agendas through influence, recruitment, violence, and disruption; attack civilian, military, and government targets; and assault Western interests and international peacekeeping efforts. The following are among the most persistent, organized, and dangerous actors.

SOURCE: Heritage Foundation research.

1 Al-Shabaab

Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya

Al-Shabaab is a Somalia-based terrorist organization aligned with al-Qaeda that threatens to topple the government in Mogadishu. The organization has also staged successful attacks in Kenya and throughout the Horn of Africa.

2 Boko Haram

Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Niger

Founded in northeastern Nigeria in the early 2000s, Boko Haram works to establish a sharia law–governed Islamic state and has been responsible for multiple bombings, kidnappings, and other attacks across the Lake Chad Basin.

3 ISIS-West Africa

Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Niger

Branching off from Boko Haram, ISIS-West Africa (or the Islamic State West Africa Province) similarly targets military and civilians in northeastern Nigeria and elsewhere in the Lake Chad Basin.

4 Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

Algeria, Mali, Mauritania, Niger

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is the North African affiliate of al-Qaeda and has existed in the Sahel and lower Sahara for nearly 20 years. AQIM seeks to establish an Islamic state and challenge Western influence in the region. It cooperates with smaller peer groups such as The Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) in Mauritania and Ansar Dine in Mali and Niger.

5 The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara

Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger

The Sahel's ISIS satellite, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), also known as ISIS-Sahel, threatens an already destabilized region. It originated as a jihadist movement in Mali and expanded into Burkina Faso and Niger. ISGS attacks military and civilian targets and Western interests.

6 Ansar al-Sharia

Libya, Tunisia

Ansar al-Sharia (AAS) rooted itself in the instability following the Libyan Revolution in 2011 and focuses on disrupting the current weak governance structure, establishing sharia law, and eliminating Western influence. Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AAS-T), founded after the Arab Spring in 2011, similarly attacks the Tunisian government and Western interests.

7 The Lord's Resistance Army

Uganda, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Central African Republic, South Sudan, Sudan

Founded by warlord Joseph Kony and infamous for its use of child soldiers, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) is an extremist military organization operating in remote areas of Central Africa. Responsible for widespread human rights violations since 1987, it is today assumed to be greatly reduced though still problematic in areas with weak government oversight.

8 The March 23 Movement

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Under the assumed support of the government of Rwanda, the March 23 Movement (M23) is a Tutsi-led rebel paramilitary organization established as part of the rebellion against DRC regional governance and the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), a Rwandan Hutu rebel group. M23's operations, which are controversial and include violence, humanitarian abuses, and theft, have also attracted tacit support from others in the region.

9 ISIS-Mozambique

Mozambique, Tanzania

ISIS-Mozambique, known also as Ansar al-Sunna or al-Shabab (no known relation to the Somali group), is a disruptive insurgency working to establish a sharia law government. Attacks include violence against the Mozambique government and foreign energy development projects, including investments by the U.S. Formed in 2017, ISIS-Mozambique operates primarily in the Cabo Delgado province and has also executed attacks in Tanzania.

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states for security training to improve the ability of state forces to protect religious minorities and combat terrorist groups.

Threats to the U.S. Homeland

Although disruption, terrorism, and individual malign state activities are not likely to present an immediate risk to the U.S. homeland, security

issues in Africa threaten American interests on and around the continent as well as the interests of U.S. partners. Without mitigation, these security challenges have the potential to create or exacerbate global issues such as terrorism, the drug trade, or immigration crises that can impact the United States.

Quality of Local Forces by Country

A recent ranking of the world's strongest military powers finds five African states in the top quarter percentile: Egypt (ranked 19th); Algeria (26th); Nigeria (31st); South Africa (40th); and Ethiopia (52nd).[25] Military spending for the entire African continent totals an estimated $52.1 billion—just 1.9 percent of global military expenditures.

Military spending varies greatly from country to country but continues to increase overall: It rose by 3 percent during the past year and has grown by 11 percent since 2015.[26] Reporting inconsistencies and other issues make data for many countries uncertain, but rising military expenditures in countries for which the data are more certain reflect such causes as civil and border conflicts, regional disruption in the Sahel, counterterrorism and anti-piracy efforts, and economic growth.

Algeria and Morocco lead the continent in military expenditures. Algeria's military spending was more than $21.8 billion in 2024, a 12 percent increase over the prior year and more than twice as much as 2019's $10.3 billion. This represents more than 40 percent of all military expenditures on the continent and accounts for more than 21 percent of Algeria's total government budget and just under 8 percent of its GDP. Morocco spent $5.5 billion, a 2.6 percent increase, more than 10 percent of government spending, and 3.5 percent of GDP. These two North African states account for half of the continent's total military expenditures.[27]

Though their spending totals are smaller, nascent military-led and junta-led governments in the Sahel represent military growth. Burkina Faso (from $357 million in 2019 to $1.02 billion in 2024), Chad (from $234 million to $557 million), Guinea (from $197 million to $562 million), Mali (from $475 million to $929 million), and Niger (from $247 million to $435 million) have steadily increased both their military spending and the percentage of total government spending on military and defense since a series of coups during the past five years.[28] Neighboring states such as Cameroon and Senegal also have consistently increased their military spending during the same period, possibly signaling a change in posture in response to regional disruption in addition to continuous terrorism concerns. Conflict states, states responding to civil disruption, and states like South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mozambique, Somalia, and Uganda that face terrorism and migration crises also continue to devote more attention to military spending.

However, elsewhere in Africa, expenditures have decreased, most notably in several of the continent's largest economies. Angola, Egypt, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and South Africa have consistently reduced their military spending, as well as military spending as part of total GDP and as a percentage of total government spending, in recent years. As it shifts its focus to economic development, energy, and infrastructure, South Africa, the largest military spender in sub-Saharan Africa, continues to reduce military spending and has decreased its budget by 17.5 percent since 2019 to $2.8 billion in 2024.[29]

Among the most developed African states, Kenya has consistently funded its military. Kenya recently increased its spending from $1.05 billion in 2023 to $1.223 billion in 2024 and is assuming a greater role in regional and global security.

U.S. Force Presence and Infrastructure

The United States' modest interests in Africa are maintained by military capabilities: conducting counterterrorism operations, protecting American interests, providing cooperative training, supporting global peacekeeping and stability efforts, and delivering humanitarian assistance and disaster response. U.S. security activities currently are organized under U.S. Africa Command, established in 2007 and headquartered in Stuttgart, Germany.

AFRICOM reports to the Secretary of War and is currently led by General Dagvin R.M. Anderson, USAF, who was appointed as AFRICOM's sixth Commander on August 15, 2025. AFRICOM works closely with the U.S. Department of State and its embassies. AFRICOM's scope includes security along two oceans, the Mediterranean coast, mountainous regions, deserts, and rainforest as well as a geopolitical arena that encompasses both stable and struggling democracies as well as kingdoms, authoritarian rulers, junta-led regimes, and the

influence of international peers and transnational criminal and terrorist networks. In response to this challenging landscape, the U.S. military's presence includes operations across the continent.

Camp Lemonnier, located in Djibouti near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait between the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, serves as the American hub for operations in the Horn of Africa, including anti-piracy operations in local waters and counterterrorism strikes in Somalia. In addition to Camp Lemonnier, the U.S. has smaller, temporary bases and rotational deployments in such countries as Kenya and Uganda. These spaces serve as logistics hubs, training centers, and intelligence-gathering stations. In addition to working with African forces, AFRICOM partners with allied nations and regional and international organizations like the United Nations (U.N.); African Union (AU); and Economic Community of West African States.

Regions meriting consistent attention and response readiness include the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, the Gulf of Guinea, the Lake Chad Basin, the Great Lakes Region in Central Africa, and the Mozambique Channel. AFRICOM provides substantial support for counterterrorism, anti-piracy, and peacekeeping efforts, particularly in these conflict-prone areas. Security cooperation emphasizes prevention and response capabilities and training programs such as Flintlock, Africa Endeavor, and Cutlass Express as well as the Africa Partnership Station (APS) program, a maritime security effort to improve readiness capabilities.[30] The Special Operations Command (SOCAFRICA) mitigates terrorist threats in countries such as Somalia and Libya, manages counterterrorism operations, coordinates joint task force responses, provides specialized training, and uses drone strikes to target militants.[31]

In addition to protection and counterterrorism, the U.S. military plays a role in providing humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. AFRICOM coordinates efforts to deliver aid, assists in rebuilding efforts, and provides medical assistance for Ebola, malaria, and other outbreaks. For example, AFRICOM was instrumental in managing the West Africa Ebola outbreak in 2014 through its Operation United Assistance with U.S. military personnel constructing treatment centers, organizing supplies, and training local health care staff.[32]

Overall Assessment

Africa is best understood in a regional and country-specific context. To navigate the current environment, U.S. military forces should continue to consider enhancements, programs, and future partnerships with an eye to regional and state needs. Given their impact on U.S. interests and the risk of global disruption, areas of focus should continue to include containment and stabilization in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin and protection of maritime interests off the Horn of Africa and in the Gulf of Guinea and Mozambique Channel. Operational readiness in response to critical health events and outbreaks, like the Ebola virus, should be maintained.

AFRICOM can respond to ongoing challenges by building on existing frameworks such as the Africa Partnership Station program and regional counterterrorism preparedness and response training programs. It also should continue to identify counterterrorism program enhancements with aligned entities to mitigate the spread of extremism and disruption as well as immigration and other related effects. Maritime programs like CJTF-HOA's Bull Shark exercise and the Special Operations Maritime Task Unit could be replicated for the Gulf of Guinea and Mozambique Channel. Other areas for expanded collaboration could include cybersecurity resilience, response to transnational crime, containing the spread of terrorism in North and West Africa, and deescalating regional conflicts and tensions in the DRC and Ethiopia.

Expansion of U.S. military capabilities in Africa should be considered carefully as it would involve navigating political, security, and logistical challenges that include the sensitivity of African governments to foreign military influence; Russian and Chinese competition; poor infrastructure, telecommunications networks, and access to energy; and, in Washington, budget considerations and political will. Advancing AFRICOM's operations would require a direct and clear return on investment to achieve U.S. national security objectives.

In support of greater security, AFRICOM could emphasize partnerships with stable countries like Egypt, Morocco, Ghana, and Kenya and existing or recent security relationships with potential for careful growth such as those with Ethiopia, Uganda, Nigeria, and Senegal. Internationally, it should pursue further cooperation with such peers as the

United Kingdom, Italy, Germany, Saudi Arabia, India, and Australia on security issues of common interest and the capabilities needed to address them.

With a direct correlation to stability, the Trump Administration has underscored the importance of strategic commercial investment to regain ground in the economic competition with China while ensuring a return on investment for the American people. This is especially clear with regard to critical mineral supply chains and logistics infrastructure. Whether advanced bilaterally or through multilateral organizations, greater market reforms and expanded economic freedom would help to solidify working alliances and improve security environments. Examples like Botswana, Mauritius, and Kenya demonstrate success for peer states in adopting free-market principles. Rival influences and governance challenges are among the issues that must be navigated by the U.S. Departments of State and Treasury and the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC). Nevertheless, the United States should continue to invest strategically and proactively in outcomes that will support its economic and national security goals.

Scoring the African Operating Environment

As with the operating environments of Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America, the *2026 Index* assesses the African operating environment with a view to how it could reasonably be expected to facilitate or inhibit America's ability to conduct military operations against threats to its vital national interests. This assessment uses a five-point scale that ranges from "very poor" to "excellent" conditions and covers four regional characteristics of greatest relevance to the conduct of military operations:

1. **Very Poor.** Significant hurdles exist for military operations. Physical infrastructure is insufficient or nonexistent, and the region is politically unstable. The U.S. military is poorly placed or absent, and alliances are nonexistent or diffuse.

2. **Unfavorable.** A challenging operating environment for military operations is marked by inadequate infrastructure, weak alliances, and recurring political instability. The U.S. military is inadequately placed in the region.

3. **Moderate.** A neutral to moderately favorable operating environment is characterized by adequate infrastructure, a moderate alliance structure, and acceptable levels of regional political stability. The U.S. military is adequately placed.

4. **Favorable.** A favorable operating environment includes good infrastructure, strong alliances, and a stable political environment. The U.S. military is well placed for future operations.

5. **Excellent.** An extremely favorable operating environment includes well-established and well-maintained infrastructure, strong and capable allies, and a stable political environment. The U.S. military is exceptionally well placed to defend U.S. interests.

The key regional characteristics consist of:

a. **Alliances.** Alliances are important for interoperability and collective defense, as allies would be more likely to lend support to U.S. military operations. Indicators that provide insight into the strength or health of an alliance include whether the U.S. trains regularly with countries in the region, has good interoperability with the forces of an ally, and shares intelligence with nations in the region.

b. **Political Stability.** Political stability brings predictability for military planners when considering such things as transit, basing, and overflight rights for U.S. military operations. The overall degree of political stability indicates whether U.S. military actions would be hindered or enabled and reflects, for example, whether transfers of power are generally peaceful and whether there have been any recent instances of political instability in the region.

Operating Environment: Africa

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

c. **U.S. Military Positioning.** Having military forces based or equipment and supplies staged in a region greatly facilitates the ability of the United States to respond to crises and presumably achieve success in critical "first battles" more quickly. Being routinely present also helps the United States to maintain familiarity with a region's characteristics and the various actors that might assist or thwart U.S. actions. With this in mind, we assessed whether or not the U.S. military was well positioned in the region. Again, indicators included bases, troop presence, prepositioned equipment, and recent examples of military operations (including training and humanitarian) launched from the region.

d. **Infrastructure.** Modern, reliable, and suitable infrastructure is essential to military operations. Airfields, ports, rail lines, canals, and paved roads enable the U.S. to stage, launch, and logistically sustain combat operations. We combined expert knowledge of regions with publicly available information on critical infrastructure to arrive at our overall assessment of this metric.

For Africa, assessment profiles are as complex as the continent itself. The assessments for each country that contribute to the regional assessment highlight the diversity of the operating environment and take into account the following four factors:

- **Alliances.** The United States encounters both opportunities and challenges to sustainable alliance-building across the continent. American security interests benefit from long-standing counterterrorism, anti-piracy, and interoperability alliances found in each African region, and many African nations have worked with the U.S. National Guard State Partnership Program for enhanced training. Increased attention by African governments to counterterrorism suggests the United States as a most reliable partner, creating avenues for additional alliance-building. However, because of political disruption, nascent government structures, and deep ties to American competitors, many states are improbable if not altogether impossible security allies.

- **Political Stability.** The continent's political stability profile is complex. Several states like Morocco, Ghana, Botswana, Mauritius, and Kenya remain stable and encourage political reform at the regional level; in other regions such as the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and parts of Central Africa, instability persists. Key trends include recent military coups in Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Gabon; disputed elections in Mozambique and Tanzania; the ongoing Sudan war; and terrorist disruption of government stability. Economic pressures, migration crises, and food insecurity exacerbate political risk. Conversely, reforms undertaken by African nations with a view to advancing economic freedom have attracted foreign direct investment, solidified governance stability, and increased geopolitical importance.

- **U.S. Military Positioning.** Permanent U.S. basing is limited to Djibouti, but the U.S. is involved in several joint exercises and other operations throughout the continent with an emphasis on the Gulf of Aden and the Horn of Africa. Greater attention is likely needed

to reinforce positioning capabilities and readiness for North Africa, the Sahel, and West Africa.

- **Infrastructure.** The continent's infrastructure varies from country to country. Generally, the need for greater infrastructure remains urgent for much of Africa, especially in its rural regions. Reforms have supported swift economic growth in some areas, and the continent often boasts that it is among the world's most rapidly developing markets. In many countries, such as Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa, and Morocco, infrastructure is reliable and improving, and multilateral and foreign direct investment further encourage expectations for development. However, this growth is not found consistently across the continent and can be influenced by malign partners and, for some regions, completely undone by governance issues, conflict, and terrorism.

Taking into account the complexities encountered in the African operating environment, as well as weak governance and the limited U.S. footprint, we arrived at these average scores (rounded to the nearest whole number):

- Alliances: **2—Unfavorable.**
- Political Stability: **3—Moderate.**
- U.S. Military Positioning: **2—Unfavorable.**
- Infrastructure: **2—Unfavorable.**

Aggregating to a regional score of: **Unfavorable.**

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Conclusion: Scoring the Global Operating Environment

Because the United States is a global power with interests in various parts of the world, threats to those interests can emerge from a number of regions, to include the Western Hemisphere, East Asia, Europe, or the Middle East. The U.S. military must be prepared to operate in a variety of regions, even while maintaining strategic focus on the regions that matter most and must account for a range of conditions that it might encounter when planning for potential military operations. These considerations necessarily inform the military's decisions about the types and amounts of equipment it procures (especially to transport and sustain the force); the locations from which it might operate; and how easily it can project and sustain combat power during conflict.

Aggregating the five regional scores provides a global operating environment score of "moderate" in the *2026 Index*.

Western Hemisphere/Latin America. After years of military, economic, and political cooperation with the United States, the Latin American operating environment is broadly supportive of U.S. relations and military activities, but it also is under stress. Illegal immigration, drug cartels, and the malign influence of the People's Republic of China have strained both regional stability and relations between many countries and the United States. The activities of the Venezuelan regime in particular, as well as those of Cuba, have exacerbated destabilization in the region, but the removal of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro could significantly mitigate some of these trends. We assess Latin America as "moderate" with respect to U.S. interests in terms of alliances, overall political stability, and military threats. The United States has neglected the security of the Western Hemisphere for decades, and the actions taken by the second Trump Administration in 2025 and 2026 are an outstanding first step toward fixing this and setting things in order in America's backyard.

Asia. The Asian strategic environment includes half of the planet and is characterized by a variety of diverse nations. American conceptions of Asia and the Indo-Pacific must recognize the physical limitations imposed by the tyranny of distance and the need to move forces to respond to Chinese and North Korean aggression. The need to prioritize the Indo-Pacific in defense planning is clear and the United States will need to shift forces to the Indo-Pacific, invest greater resources, and prioritize Indo-Pacific operations and systems relevant to deterring China across the board.

The lack of a regional alliance structure such as NATO makes the defense of U.S. security interests in Asia challenging. However, the United States has strong relations with allies and partners in the region and their willingness to host bases helps 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 are interested in developing missile defense capabilities that will be essential in combatting the regional threats posed by China and North Korea. In Japan, public awareness of the need to adopt a more "normal" military posture in response to China's increasingly aggressive actions continues to grow. Nevertheless, the continued growth of China's military and its aggression in the region as U.S. military posture and infrastructure have weakened prompt a downgrade of the region's overall stability from "favorable" to "moderate."

Europe. Overall, the European region remains a stable, mature, and friendly operating

Global Operating Environment: Summary

VERY POOR	UNFAVORABLE	MODERATE	FAVORABLE	EXCELLENT

environment. Russia remains the primary military threat to Europe, both with conventional and nuclear forces, and its invasion of Ukraine marks a serious escalation of its efforts to exert influence in the region. China continues its efforts to expand its presence in Europe through propaganda, influence operations, and financial investments. By mitigating the effect of sanctions and supporting Russia's war in Ukraine, it also has significantly enhanced and deepened its relationship with Russia. Both NATO and non-NATO European countries should be increasingly concerned about the neo-imperialist ambitions of Russia and China. European nations will need to take primary responsibility for the conventional defense of Europe as America by necessity shifts resources to the Indo-Pacific to deter China.

In the *2024 Index*, we noted a strengthening of alliance relationships. NATO placed renewed emphasis on logistical matters and the extent to which it could respond to emergent crises. In 2025, U.S. prodding and leadership have had a galvanizing effect on European political establishments, causing them to focus on increasing their defense expenditures and on reinvesting in their defense industrial base. The 2025 Hague Summit resulted in an alliance-wide shift with nations pledging to spend a minimum of 5 percent of their gross domestic product on defense spending. However, significant work remains to be done if Europe is to assume the lead for the conventional defense of Europe.

This overall picture has led us to score Europe's political stability as "excellent" once again in the *2026 Index*. It is difficult to predict whether NATO's renewed emphasis on collective defense and its reinvigorated defense spending will continue over the long term or are merely short-term responses to Russia's aggression in Ukraine. Given the potential for Russia to replace its battlefield losses, NATO defense spending on capability will be an important issue, both in the medium term and over the long term.

Scores for Europe remained largely steady this year as they have in previous years. The *2026 Index* assesses the European operating environment as "excellent" overall.

The Middle East. The Middle East will remain an area of concern for U.S. military planners because of the interests involved and the region's historical and continuing volatile nature. The Middle East region is now significantly more stable both because of Israel's successful military operations against Hamas and Hezbollah and because of U.S. efforts to destroy Iran's nuclear weapons infrastructure and capabilities. Further, successful operations against the Houthis in Yemen have reduced threats to U.S. interests and to broader global economic shipping.

In the Middle East, the United States benefits from operationally proven procedures that leverage bases, infrastructure, and the logistical processes needed to maintain a large force that is forward deployed thousands of miles away from the homeland. America's relationships in the Middle East are based on shared security and economic concerns. As long as these issues remain relevant to both sides, the United States will be able to act with decisiveness when its national interests require.

The *2026 Index* assesses the Middle East operating environment as "moderate," but the region's political stability continues to be "unfavorable."

Africa. Africa is an enormous region of great complexity. Its operating environment is multifaceted, and U.S. interests there vary based on military infrastructure, terrorist threats to the homeland, illegal immigration, unfavorable trade practices, and the destabilizing effects of Russian and Chinese influence. We assess Africa as "moderate" with respect to U.S. interests in terms of political stability but "unfavorable" overall because of alliance, infrastructure, and U.S. military posture challenges.

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 remains broadly stable with the United States able to project military power anywhere in

Global Operating Environment

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

the world to defend its interests without substantial opposition or high levels of risk. However, increased activities by China cause the overall global environment to be downgraded from "favorable" to "moderate" in the *2026 Index*.