

Conclusion: U.S. Military Power

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

- **The U.S. Army as “Marginal.”** Based on the historical use of its ground forces in combat, the Army has less than two-thirds of the forces in its Active Component that it would need to handle more than one major regional contingency (MRC). This shortfall in capacity might be offset if the modernity or technological capability of its forces were very high, but this is not yet the case, and the Army has a long way to go in modernizing its key systems. The Army has fully committed to modernizing its forces for great-power competition, but its programs are still in their development phase, and it will be a few years before they are ready for acquisition and fielding. Insufficient capacity for more than one MRC might also be offset if capabilities and readiness in the National Guard and Reserves were to be enhanced.

In other words, the Army is aging faster than it is modernizing, in addition to which it has faced relatively stagnant budgets in comparison to the Navy and Air Force. At the broadest strategic level, this makes sense, as the Navy and Air Force are more central to Indo-Pacific planning and need major investments to keep up with the People’s Liberation Army. The Army, however, also has an important role to play in the Indo-Pacific and needs targeted investment in new capabilities like the

Multi-Domain Task Force (MDTF). More generally, the Army also needs to maintain an edge over all potential adversaries in the traditional aspects of ground power. The Army remains “weak” in capacity with 62 percent of the force it should have but has significantly increased the force’s readiness, exceeding its own internal requirement that 66 percent of its Brigade Combat Teams (BCTs) must be at the highest readiness levels, thereby earning the highest score of “very strong” for readiness.

- **The U.S. Navy as “Weak.”** The technology gap between the Navy and its peer competitors is narrowing in favor of competitors, and the Navy’s ships are aging faster than they are being replaced. The fleet is too small relative to mission workload, and supporting shipyards are overwhelmed by the repair work that is needed to ensure that ships are available. This inadequate maintenance infrastructure contributes to ships not returning to the fleet in a timely manner, which in turn causes readiness problems as steaming days needed to train crews to levels of proficiency are lost. The Navy is projected to have a fleet of 280 ships by 2027, which is smaller than the current force of 290 and well below the 400 needed to meet operational demands. Current and projected funding shortfalls will make it harder to deal effectively with any of these serious deficiencies. This leaves the Navy unable to arrest and reverse the decline of its fleet as adversary forces grow in number and capability.
- **The U.S. Air Force as “Weak.”** The Air Force is smaller, older, and less ready than at any point in its history. This matters because America’s asymmetric military advantage is

the ability to own the skies and hold adversary targets at risk across the globe. The Air Force's responsibility to America is to field an appropriately sized, capable, and ready force that can execute these critical, Joint Force-enabling military functions. Yet during the decades following the Cold War, this sacred responsibility has been gradually marginalized, and America's ability to own the skies and hold adversary targets at risk has been steadily eroded. As a result, the United States is accepting more strategic risk than it should—risk not just of conflict or deterring a conflict, but risk of losing a conflict. For example, the Air Force has only two-thirds the number of active-duty combat-coded fighter aircraft required to fight two MRCs. Additionally, its warfighting readiness is very low because of aircraft age, aircraft availability, and low sortie rates and flight hours for its aircrew. Finally, the Air Force's fleet seemingly gets smaller every year, and the FY 2026 budget continues this downsizing trend despite President Trump's One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA).

Overall, the service is not ready for peer conflict at a time when the world is increasingly dangerous. Fortunately, a properly sized, capable, and ready Air Force can reduce strategic risk, deter conflict, and ensure that the nation could prevail if deterrence fails, and there are encouraging signs, including passage of the OBBBA in July 2025, that Congress may be ready to resource the Air Force in line with today's strategic environment. To this end, Congress should increase the Air Force's budget to account for the immense cost of nuclear modernization, grow the size of the service's fleet to meet the requirements the Air Force identified in 2018's "The Air Force We Need" for a 2030 fight with China, and assist the service in improving the readiness of combat units with the right mix of jets, maintenance capability and capacity, and trained aircrew, all while prioritizing the core missions the service is uniquely tasked to execute: air superiority and global strike. These actions would ensure that America's Air Force is ready to "fly, fight, and win" anytime and anywhere.

- **The U.S. Marine Corps as "Strong."** The Marine Corps' capacity is evaluated against a one-MRC standard, whereas the other services are evaluated against a two-MRC construct. The Corps consistently meets its unique requirement to produce three simultaneous Marine Expeditionary Units every day of the year. The Corps' strong capacity and capability ratings stem in large part from the inherent flexibility of fighting as O6-led Marine Air Ground Task Forces (MAGTFs). MAGTFs combine ground and air combat power with their associated logistics support under a single commander and can be modified as mission sets dictate. The Marine Corps' strong readiness rating comes from a consistent equipment modernization campaign and being five years into reorganizing itself to fight the PRC more effectively if needed.

The Marine Corps is not without its challenges. The shortages of amphibious shipping, sealift, long-distance transportation, and sustainment affect the entire Joint Force, but the Marines may feel those impacts most acutely in their role as the rapidly responsive expeditionary force. However, while these challenges are significant, they do not yet prevent the Marine Corps from completing its assigned missions.

- **The U.S. Space Force as "Marginal."** The Space Force is assessed the same in this year's *Index* as it was in the *2024 Index*. The Space Force has made significant progress in the six years it has existed. The FY 2026 budget is projected to be more than 250 percent larger than the service's first-year budget. The Space Force established a field command dedicated to testing, training, education, and readiness. It has fielded many new domain awareness sensors and C2 systems. It has launched many next-generation GPS satellites and operationally accepted the long-beleaguered GPS command-and-control program. The Space Force is taking advantage of commercial space capabilities and international allies and partners. It has architected and begun to field resilient data transportation and missile warning constellations of satellites. The Space Force has embraced and initiated many of the

acquisition reforms directed by the FY 2026 National Defense Authorization Act and Secretary of War Pete Hegseth.

At the same time, however, the Space Force has not kept pace with the rapidly advancing threats to and from space. China and Russia are fielding ground-based and space-based threats to our space assets that outpace the Space Force's efforts to develop resilient architectures and defensive capabilities. China is also rapidly fielding space systems that will target our fixed and mobile air, land, and maritime forces in the Pacific Area of Responsibility (AOR). The Space Force must field capabilities to defeat these space-based threats. Additionally, our nation continues to ask more of the Space Force, which will need, for example, to provide critical sensors and interceptors as part of the Golden Dome missile defense program. The Air Force has retired or will retire airborne intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and air battle management sensors; the Space Force is racing to field capabilities to mitigate these retirements. The nation's growing economic dependence on space capabilities suggests that the Space Force will need to have the capability to defend all of our interests in the domain. In short, while the Space Force has made remarkable progress in a few short years, it will need to accelerate its capabilities and capacities if it is to be fully capable of answering our nation's demands.

- **U.S. Strategic Deterrent as “Strong.”** America's strategic deterrent remains strong and credible and is able to impose significant—even catastrophic—costs on any who would carry out a strategic attack on the United States or its allies. However, challenges in modernization of delivery systems, particularly the Sentinel missile, and the production of plutonium pits prevent a rating of “very strong.” Moreover, as time progresses, America's nuclear-armed adversaries—particularly China—will field larger arsenals that will create ever larger deterrence challenges for the United States. Consequently, the United States in the coming years must field a larger and more diverse nuclear arsenal, particularly among theater

nuclear weapons, to deter adversary aggression successfully. This means not only that the nuclear modernization program of record (to include the relevant components within the Department of War and Department of Energy) must be put back on schedule, but also that the United States will likely have to augment the program of record to increase the number of operationally deployed nuclear weapons.

- **U.S. Missile Defense as “Strong.”** Missile defenses have shown—from Ukraine to the Middle East to live-fire tests—that they work remarkably well. Integrated air and theater missile defenses continue to demonstrate their value in deterring and, if necessary, mitigating the impact of adversary missile strikes. As the United States builds Golden Dome, which will integrate existing homeland missile defenses with regional missile defense architectures, and expands global sensor coverage while at the same time fielding additional ground-based and space-based missile interceptors, it will be better postured to deter and, if necessary, defeat enemy missile threats.
- **The U.S. Coast Guard as “Weak.”** Despite some successes in 2025, such as record-breaking drug seizures, a continued fast response to disasters and search and rescue missions, an improvement in recruitment, and a much-needed increase in funding from the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, the U.S. Coast Guard remains burdened by a variety of negative issues. Historically, the Coast Guard has been an underfunded service, and many of its ships and aircraft are old and experience heavy usage, which causes further deterioration. In addition, newer vessel designs have been beset by delays. The USCG's cutters, the backbone of its fleet, have suffered from poor maintenance, maintenance backlogs, and delays in programs that are intended to bring new, more advanced, and more functional modular cutters online. This necessarily has a negative effect on the interdiction of narcotics and illegal immigration insofar as they involve the Coast Guard.

Faced with over 2,500 miles of U.S. Arctic coastline along with missions to U.S. bases in

U.S. Military Power: Summary

VERY WEAK

WEAK

MARGINAL

STRONG

VERY STRONG

the South Pole, the USCG operates only two medium icebreakers and one heavy icebreaker—and its only heavy icebreaker is now 50 years old. Coast Guard helicopters, particularly the workhorse HH-60s, have experienced maintenance issues and groundings as a result of accidents and heavy use. Although recruitment improved in 2025, retention issues persist. The Coast Guard has also gone without antisubmarine training, a deficiency that, in view of the drug cartels' increased use of narco-submarines and the service's duty to escort U.S. vessels during wartime, puts it at a distinct disadvantage. As a result, the USCG would also be at a disadvantage in the event of a conventional great-power conflict, particularly in the Pacific. Acquiring newer modular vessels, aircraft, unmanned systems, and newer training regimens can help to reverse these trends, but the process will necessarily be a slow one.

- **The U.S. Merchant Marine as “Weak.”**

Most emblematic of this sad state of America's sealift is the sidelining of 17 Military Sealift Command ships because of crew shortages. That too few seaworthy commercial ships is a persistent problem that drives low readiness assessments is borne out in activation exercises like Turbo Activation 19 Plus. Moreover, there is little good news on the horizon as both future classes of logistic ships and the revival of America's commercial maritime industry seem to be stalled and delayed. Action is urgently needed to reverse this trend and begin a serious effort to fill gaps in the military and assured commercial shipping that the nation would need to sustain a prolonged major war.

In the aggregate, America's overall military posture must be rated “marginal.” The Space Force and Army are rated “marginal,” and the Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard, and Merchant Marine are rated “weak.” Only the Marine Corps, nuclear forces, and missile defense are rated “strong,” but the Corps is a one-war force, and its overall strength is

therefore not sufficient to compensate for the shortfalls of the larger services. Moreover, if the United States should need to employ nuclear weapons, the escalation into nuclear conflict would seem to imply that handling such a crisis would challenge even a fully ready Joint Force at its current size and equipped with modern weapons. Additionally, the war in Ukraine, which threatens the economic and political stability not just of Europe, but of other regions as well, shows that some actors (in this case Russia) will not necessarily be deterred from conventional action even though the U.S. maintains a strong nuclear capability. Strong conventional forces of necessary size are therefore essential to America's ability to respond to emergent crises in areas of special interest.

The *2026 Index* concludes that the current U.S. military force is at significant risk of being unable to meet the demands of a single major protracted regional conflict while also attending to various other presence and engagement activities. The force would probably not be able to do more and is certainly ill-equipped to handle two nearly simultaneous MRCs—a situation that is made more difficult by the generally weak condition of key military allies.

In general, the military services continue to prioritize readiness and have made some progress over the past few years, but modernization programs, especially in shipbuilding and the production of fifth-generation combat aircraft, continue to suffer as resources are committed to preparing for the future, recovering from 20 years of operations, and offsetting the effects of inflation. With respect to the Air Force, some of its limited acquisition funds are being spent on aircraft of questionable utility in high-threat scenarios while research and development receives a larger share of funding than efforts meant to replace quite aged aircraft are receiving. As observed in the 2021, 2022, 2023, and 2024 editions of the *Index*, the services have normalized reductions in the size and number of military units, the forces remain well below the level needed to meet the two-MRC benchmark, and past difficulties involved in trying to recruit young Americans

U.S. Military Power: Army

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

U.S. Military Power: Navy

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

U.S. Military Power: Air Force

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

U.S. Military Power: Marine Corps

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

U.S. Military Power: Space Force

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

U.S. Military Power: Nuclear

	VERY WEAK	WEAK	MARGINAL	STRONG	VERY STRONG
Nuclear Stockpile				✓	
Strategic Delivery Systems				✓	
Extended Deterrent Credibility				✓	
NNSA Warhead Modernization			✓		
Nuclear Delivery Systems Modernization			✓		
OVERALL				✓	

U.S. Military Power: Missile Defense

	VERY WEAK	WEAK	MARGINAL	STRONG	VERY STRONG
Integrated Command and Control				✓	
Existing Under Layer				✓	
Existing Ground-Based Layer				✓	
Existing Space-Based Overlayer			✓		
Theater Defenses				✓	
Architecture Evolution				✓	
OVERALL				✓	

U.S. Military Power: Coast Guard

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

U.S. Military Power: Merchant Marine

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

U.S. Military Power

	VERY WEAK	WEAK	MARGINAL	STRONG	VERY STRONG
Army			✓		
Navy		✓			
Air Force		✓			
Marine Corps				✓	
Space Force			✓		
Nuclear				✓	
Missile Defense				✓	
Coast Guard		✓			
Merchant Marine		✓			
OVERALL			✓		

to join the military services have had their effect on service end strength even as recruiting has recently improved.

As currently postured, the U.S. military is at significant risk of not being able to defend America’s vital national interests with assurance. It is rated “marginal” relative to the force needed to defend national interests on a global stage against actual challenges in the world *as it is* rather than as we wish it were. As demonstrated by The Heritage Foundation’s recent TIDALWAVE war simulation, these challenges are particularly grave in a protracted conflict. This is the inevitable result of years of sustained use, underfunding, unclear priorities, shifting security policies, poor discipline in program execution, and a lack of seriousness across the national security establishment even as threats to U.S. interests have surged.

Although the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, signed by President Trump on July 4, 2025, added more than \$150 billion in defense spending on top of annual defense appropriations, more investment is needed. The President’s call on January 7, 2026, for a \$1.5 trillion defense budget—more than \$500 billion more than the current budget—is a positive sign that greater investment is on the way, but this must be done in a disciplined and fiscally responsible manner that also seeks savings, reforms, and efficiencies from the U.S. Department of War.¹ The focus of the United States should be on restoring peace through strength, and while some work has been done in this regard, much remains to be finished to reverse the effects of years of defense budgetary decline and lack of prioritization.

Endnote

1. See U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services and U.S. House Committee on Armed Services, "SASC/HASC Defense Reconciliation Overview," undated, https://armedservices.house.gov/uploadedfiles/obbb_hasc_and_sasc_defense_legislation_summary.pdf (accessed January 13, 2026).