

## An Assessment of U.S. Military Power

The United States military is at an inflection point. After two decades of counterterrorism operations and nation-building, the United States is attempting to rebuild its military power—particularly the platforms and munitions that are so needed for the current era of great-power confrontation.

While the United States military can execute breathtakingly flawless operations, as evidenced in Operation Midnight Hammer when American aircraft destroyed large portions of Iran’s nuclear program and in Operation Absolute Resolve when the United States extracted Venezuelan dictator Nicolás Maduro, the military itself requires significant reinvestment if it is to be able to deter and, if necessary, defeat adversary aggression.

Fortunately, because of President Trump’s proposed reinvestment in the American military—from new shipyards to new production lines, from Golden Dome missile defenses to modernizing America’s strategic deterrent, and from new fighters like the F-47 to the next-generation B-21 stealth bomber—the United States will spend trillions of dollars over the next four years to enhance America’s combat power. But this will take time, and that reinvestment must cover an enormous amount of ground.

The 2025 National Security Strategy articulates the importance of securing the Western Hemisphere and America’s borders. It identifies China as America’s primary foreign adversary while still recognizing the challenges posed by America’s adversaries in Russia, Iran, and North Korea. This is a formidable set of challenges that in many ways is greater than those our nation faced in the Cold War.

Not only do America’s new adversaries field more advanced capabilities and enjoy far more comparative wealth than the Soviets did, but they have demonstrated a willingness to engage in incredible acts of violence to achieve their aims. China threatens Taiwan and other neighbors on a routine basis,

to include using force against neighboring ships operating in international waters. Russia has brutally invaded its neighbors and threatens NATO allies with nuclear annihilation on a regular basis. Iran not only has sought the nuclear bomb and attacked American forces across the Middle East, but also has tried repeatedly through missile and terrorist attacks to destroy America’s most valuable partner in the region, Israel. North Korea continues to expand its nuclear arsenal and regularly threatens the American homeland as well as our allies in Korea and Japan with devastating strategic attack.

Consequently, the prospect of coordinated or sequential attack by one or more of America’s adversaries is higher now than at any time since the end of the 1930s. This is not hyperbole: The United States and its allies in the Indo-Pacific, Europe, and the Middle East are confronted with multiple adversaries that seek—and have been preparing for many years—to overturn the free and open world order that has benefited the American people for decades.

Unfortunately, the strategic distractions of the 2000s and the 2010s have left the United States underprepared for the challenges at hand. Too much time was spent on the wrong issues and the wrong missions in the wrong parts of the world and focusing on far too many faddish social issues to prepare for the challenges posed by malign actors in the Western Hemisphere and by the dictators in Beijing, Moscow, Tehran, and Pyongyang.

The United States is not postured correctly and does not have sufficient ships, planes, and munitions to focus on all challenges in every theater simultaneously. As it rebuilds its military and refills its stockpiles, it will rely more heavily on allies in Europe and Asia. It must prioritize securing its interests in the Western Hemisphere, as it did with Operation Absolute Resolve, while still setting the Indo-Pacific theater to deter and, if necessary,

defeat a near-peer China that seeks to overturn the free and open world order.

The *2026 Index of U.S. Military Strength* posits that the military should build up to a force that can address two major regional contingencies (MRCs). As of now, it is underprepared to address a single MRC in the Indo-Pacific. The path that President Trump has set with the National Security Strategy, the National Defense Strategy, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, and significant increases in defense spending in the coming years will go far to get the military back to where it needs to be—but much needs to be done in the years to follow.

The good news is that our allies—Japan, Australia, Germany, Poland, South Korea, and others—are taking significant steps to increase defense spending and field more credible combat capability to deter adversary aggression within their theaters. More actors such as the Philippines see that the United States remains committed to opposing revisionist actors from imposing their will on America’s partners and have become more committed themselves to opposing America’s adversaries.

The U.S. military is turning itself around. Within the first week of his Administration, President Trump announced the Golden Dome missile defense system designed to protect America and its allies from strategic attack. Subsequently, President Trump announced the Air Force’s next-generation air dominance fighter, the F-47. The Department of War is addressing challenges in acquisition, shipbuilding, and personnel and ordering thousands of additional missile interceptors and long-range strike missiles.

### Where to Start

The Department of War periodically conducts formal defense reviews to inform decisions on capabilities and capacities across the Joint Force relative to the threat environment (current and projected) and evolutions in operating conditions, the advancement of technologies, and aspects of U.S. interests that may call for one type of military response over another.

Major changes in the global threat environment cause significant reassessments of the capabilities and capacities required for the U.S. military to secure the interests of the American people. In 1993, for example, then-Secretary of Defense Les Aspin conducted the Bottom Up Review (BUR) in

recognition that “the dramatic changes that [had] occurred in the world as a result of the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union” had “fundamentally altered America’s security needs” and were driving an imperative “to reassess all of our defense concepts, plans, and programs from the ground up.”<sup>1</sup>

The BUR formally established the two-MRC standard, the requirement that U.S. forces should be able “to achieve decisive victory in two nearly simultaneous major regional conflicts and to conduct combat operations characterized by rapid response and a high probability of success, while minimizing the risk of significant American casualties.”<sup>2</sup>

Since that study, the government has undertaken others as Administrations, national conditions, and world events have changed the context of national security. Quadrennial Defense Reviews (QDRs) were conducted in 1997, 2010, and 2014 and were accompanied by independent National Defense Panel (NDP) reports that reviewed and commented on them.

The QDR was replaced by the National Defense Strategy (NDS), released in 2018, 2022, and 2026,<sup>3</sup> and the independent perspectives of the formal U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) review by the Commission on the National Defense Strategy, which released its views on the NDS starting in November 2018.<sup>4</sup> Departing from their predecessors, neither document proposed specific force structures or end-strength goals for the services, but both were very clear in arguing that America’s military should be able to address more than one major security challenge at a time. The commission’s report in 2024, for example, even criticized the NDS for not making a stronger case for a larger military that would be capable of meeting the challenges posed by four named competitors—China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea—while also possessing the capacity to address lesser though still important military tasks that included presence, crisis response, and assistance missions.<sup>5</sup>

The Biden Administration’s 2022 NDS echoed the general goal for the U.S. military to “deter and prevent adversaries from directly threatening the United States and our allies, inhibiting access to the global commons, or dominating key regions,”<sup>6</sup> all of which are themes that have remained remarkably consistent from one Administration to the next for several decades.

The new 2025 NSS likewise prioritizes the threat posed by China but, while naming other threats that include Russia, Iran, North Korea, and terrorist groups, advocates dealing with them by improving the forward posture of U.S. forces, our national resilience to attack, and U.S. collaboration with regional allies. This approach will be paired with substantial increases in defense spending, as already seen in the fiscal year (FY) 2026 defense budget and probably will be seen in the FY 2027 budget as well. President Trump has made clear that his goal is to rebuild and revitalize the U.S. military as a necessary component of his National Security Strategy.

### Balancing Investment in Procurement and Research and Development

It has become fashionable to argue that existing systems like aircraft carriers and main battle tanks are becoming obsolete. Critics question their value in an era of technological advancement when new capabilities such as advanced autonomous systems and hypersonic missiles increasingly render the U.S. Navy's biggest and most prominent ships too large and too slow to evade missiles and drones.<sup>7</sup>

Critics point to Ukraine's sinking of the Russian missile cruiser *Moskva* to claim that American carriers would stand little chance of survival during a conflict with China.<sup>8</sup> The U.S. Navy, they insist, should instead invest in various experimental drones and autonomous surface vessels.

These critics, however, are comparing apples to oranges. They are drawing conclusions far beyond the lessons of the war in Ukraine—conclusions that have no bearing on U.S. military requirements in a potential conflict with China in the Pacific. Further, they ignore decades of successful U.S. power projection operations, including the recent Operation Midnight Hammer and Operation Absolute Resolve—flawless tactical successes that utilized legacy American military platforms. The United States already has the world's most technologically advanced military, and the biggest concern for planners considering a conflict with China in the Indo-Pacific should be capacity, not capability. Quality has a quantity all its own, and China's investment in deep stores of precision-guided munitions and the shortages of these same munitions on the American side is a serious concern. Likewise, even though the U.S. Navy still has a qualitative edge over the People's Liberation Army Navy, the PLAN's

numerical superiority in battle force ships is a cause for concern.

New spending in the defense budget therefore needs to be focused on expanding capacity, procuring larger numbers of platforms and munitions that currently exist, with block buys of precision-guided munitions to include long-range anti-ship missiles (LRASM); extended-range joint air-to-surface standoff missiles (JASSM-ER); precision strike missiles (PrSM); and Standard Missile-6s (SM-6). For platforms, the U.S. military needs more ships and aircraft with larger procurement orders of *Virginia*-class submarines, *Arleigh Burke*-class destroyers, F-35 strike fighters, and B-21 bombers.

Our systems and troops also need sustainment, and the vast operating distances of the Indo-Pacific necessitate thinking on airlift, sealift, and sustainment that military planners have largely ignored since the end of the Cold War. To get our troops and weapons systems to the fight, the Air Force and Navy desperately need to be investing in larger procurement orders of dry cargo ships, fueling ships, KC-46 tankers, and C-17s, C-130J/KC130J, and C-5M for air transport.

This is not to say that the United States should not be investing in next-generation technologies. Quite the contrary: Keeping the American technological edge requires the development of new, modernized systems like the B-21 bomber and the F-47 air superiority aircraft. Wherever possible, however, research and development dollars should be spent on next-generation systems that are meant to be procured, and not on generalized research. For more general research, the Department of War has rightly realized that leveraging America's incredible private sector makes more sense than funding generalized Pentagon research and development programs. If the United States is going to beat China in the race to develop higher and higher levels of artificial intelligence, for example, Silicon Valley is far more likely to do so than a government agency is.

In short, the Department of War needs to be focusing new spending on purchasing new ships, planes, and munitions so that China's quantitative edge does not cancel out America's qualitative edge.

### The U.S. Joint Force and the Art of War

This section of the *2026 Index* assesses the adequacy of military capabilities defined as the ability of American forces to engage and defeat an enemy's

forces when called upon to do so. In conducting this assessment, we accounted for both quantitative and qualitative aspects of military forces, informed by an experience-based and scholarly understanding of military operations.

### What Is Not Being Assessed

In assessing the status of America's military forces, the *2026 Index* uses the primary measures used by the military services when they discuss their ability to employ combat power.

- The Army's unit of measure is the brigade combat team (BCT).
- The Marine Corps structures itself by battalions.
- The Navy measures itself by the number of battle force ships.
- The Air Force measures the total number of aircraft, sometimes broken down into fighters and bombers.

Obviously, this is not the totality of service capabilities and is not everything needed for war. Even the services would argue that "what they bring to the fight" is more than these simple metrics. Discussions about military power that take place among career professionals are endless and can be incomprehensible to most people who have not spent years studying such issues. Nevertheless, measures must be found. Vitally important capabilities also must be taken into account as critical enablers of combat forces. For example:

- Combat forces depend on a staggeringly large logistics system that supplies everything from food and water to fuel, ammunition, and repair parts.
- Military operations require engineer support, and the force needs medical, dental, and administrative capabilities.
- The military also fields units that transport combat power to and sustain it wherever they may be needed anywhere in the world.

The scope of the *2026 Index* does not extend to analysis of everything that makes hard power possible. It also does not assess the Reserve and National Guard components, although they account for roughly one-third of the U.S. military force and have been essential to operations for decades.<sup>9</sup> As with other elements that are essential to the effective employment of combat power—logistics, medical support, strategic lift, training, and more—the U.S. military could not handle a major conflict without the Reserve and Guard forces. Nevertheless, to make the challenge of assessing the status of military strength manageable, the *2026 Index*, like its predecessors, looks at factors directly associated with the active component of each service: the baseline requirement for a given amount of combat power that is readily available in the event of a conflict.

### The Defense Budget and Strategic Guidance

How much a nation spends on defense does not determine a military's capability, readiness, or capacity. How much is allocated to defense does not tell us much about the capacity, modernity, or readiness of the forces. Proper funding is a necessary but insufficient variable in determining a military's health. A larger defense budget, for example, is useless if the money is allocated inappropriately or wasted on useless programs. Nevertheless, there is a rough correlation between the percentage of the federal budget or national gross domestic product (GDP) that is spent on defense and the military's capabilities.

The U.S. government will always compare spending on defense with spending in other areas of government activity. In an ideal world, defense requirements are determined by identifying national interests that might need to be defended; assessing the nature of threats to those interests and what would be needed to deter and, if necessary, defeat those threats; and then determining what the country can afford or is willing to spend in order to field the military required to address these challenges. *Any difference between assessed requirements and the amount of money spent on military capabilities would constitute risk to American security interests.*

The *2026 Index* adopts this approach of weighing interests, threats, requirements, required military capabilities, and the associated budget. The composition of the force and the understanding of military risk have become more salient issues with the

shift toward confrontation with China and Russia. Certainly, Russia's war against Ukraine has revealed the reality of war: its appetite for resources and the relative effectiveness of military units possessing various types of equipment, munitions inventories, and histories of training.

Assessments of potential conflict between the United States and China tend toward theory in peacetime and can underestimate what would be needed to prevail in war. The 2017 National Security Strategy,<sup>10</sup> 2018 National Defense Strategy, 2021 Interim National Security Strategic Guidance,<sup>11</sup> 2022 National Security Strategy,<sup>12</sup> 2022 National Defense Strategy,<sup>13</sup> 2025 National Security Strategy,<sup>14</sup> and 2026 National Defense Strategy all have recognized that meeting the challenges posed by great-power competitors requires a U.S. force that is modern, ready, and effective in all domains of warfare with a focus on high-end conflict with Communist China.

### Purpose as a Driver in Force Sizing

The Joint Force is used for a wide range of purposes, by far the most important of which is major combat operations. Fortunately, such events are rare.<sup>15</sup> Between (and even during) major combat operations, the military is used for a variety of non-combat missions, to include support to regional engagements, crisis response activities, deterrence operations, and humanitarian assistance, as well as to support civil authorities and diplomacy. One must ask, of course, whether the overreliance on the military for a variety of operations that fall well outside the realm of major combat operations undermines the military's ability to be prepared for major combat operations.

All of the U.S. Geographic Combatant Commands, or COCOMS<sup>16</sup>—Northern Command (NORTHCOM); European Command (EUCOM); Central Command (CENTCOM); Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM); Southern Command (SOUTHCOM); and Africa Command (AFRICOM)—have engaged with countries in their regions. Such engagements range from small unit training events to larger bilateral and multilateral military exercises. Such efforts foster working relationships with other countries, help participants acquire an understanding of regional political-military dynamics and on-the-ground conditions, and signal U.S. security interests to friends and competitors. As confrontation with China becomes more acute,

planning across all COCOMS will need to account for the possibility of high-end protracted conflict with Communist China.

To support these efforts, the military Services provide forces that are based permanently in their respective regions or that operate in them on a rotational basis. To make these regional rotations possible, the Services maintain forces that are large enough to train, deploy, support, receive back, and again make ready a stream of units that can meet force requirements in a variety of scenarios.

The ratio between time spent at home and time spent on deployment is known as OPTEMPO (operational tempo), and each military Service attempts to maintain a ratio that both gives units enough time to educate, train, and prepare and allows individuals to maintain a semblance of a healthy home life. This ensures that units are fully rested and prepared for the next deployment cycle and that servicemembers do not become “burned out” or suffer in their personal lives because of excessive deployments.

Experience has shown that a ratio of at least 3:1 (three periods of time at home for every period deployed) is sustainable. If a unit is scheduled to deploy for six months, for example, it will be home for 18 months before again deploying. Thus, the size of the total force must be significantly larger than any sampling of its use at any point in time.

By contrast, sizing a force for major combat operations is an exercise informed by history—how much force was needed in previous wars—and then shaped and refined by analysis of current threats, a range of plausible scenarios, and expectations about what the military can do given training, equipment, employment concepts, and other factors. Inevitably, compromises are made that account for how much military the country is willing to buy. Generally speaking:

- **The Army** sizes to major warfighting requirements.
- **The Marine Corps** focuses on crisis response and the ability to fight one major war.
- **The Air Force** attempts to strike a balance that accounts for historically based demand across the spectrum because air assets can be shifted from one theater of operations to

another, and any peacetime engagement typically requires some level of air support.

- **The Navy** is driven by global presence requirements. To meet COCOM requirements for a continuous fleet presence at sea, the Navy must have three to four ships in order to have one at sea on patrol. A commander who wants one U.S. warship stationed off the coast of a hostile country, for example, needs the use of four ships from the fleet: one on station, one that left station and is traveling home, one that just left home and is traveling to station, and one that is otherwise unavailable because of major maintenance or modernization work.

The *2026 Index* focuses on the forces required to win two major wars as the baseline force-sizing metric for the Army, Navy, and Air Force and the one-war paradigm for the Marine Corps. The three large services are meant to be sized for global action in more than one theater at a time; the Marines, by virtue of overall size and most recently by direction of the Commandant, focus on one major conflict in the Indo-Pacific while ensuring that all Fleet Marine Forces are globally deployable for short-notice, smaller-scale actions.<sup>17</sup> The military's effectiveness, both as a deterrent against opportunistic aggressors and as a valued training partner in the eyes of other countries, derives from its military effectiveness.

### Our Approach

With this in mind, we assessed the state of America's military forces as it pertains to their ability to deliver hard power against an enemy in three areas:

- Capability,
- Capacity, and
- Readiness.

**Capability.** Examining the capability of a military force requires consideration of:

- The proper tools with the design, characteristics, technological advancement, and suitability that the force needs to perform its function of defeating America's enemies.

- The sufficiency of armored vehicles, ships, airplanes, and other equipment and weapons to defeat the enemy.
- The appropriate diversity of options to mitigate strategic vulnerability and give flexibility to commanders.
- The degree to which elements of the force mutually support one another, minimizing weaknesses, maximizing strengths, and gaining greater effectiveness.

A modern "major combat operation"<sup>18</sup> along the lines of those upon which Pentagon planners base their requirements should feature a capable near-peer opponent possessing modern integrated air defenses; naval power (surface and undersea); advanced combat aircraft (to include bombers); a substantial inventory of short-range, medium-range, and long-range missiles; current-generation ground forces (tanks, armored vehicles, artillery, rockets, and anti-armor weaponry); cruise missiles; and a variety of strategic and non-strategic nuclear weapons. Such a situation involving an actor capable of threatening vital national interests would present a challenge that is comprehensively different from the challenges that the U.S. Joint Force has faced since the successful conclusion of the Cold War.

In the years since publication of the 2018 National Defense Strategy, the military has focused on its readiness for major conventional warfare, primarily against Communist China.<sup>19</sup> In general terms, this focus was sustained through the release of the 2022 NDS, 2025 NSS, and the 2026 NDS, no doubt reflecting the realities of China's rapid expansion of its military capabilities and activities.

- The Army has invested in units and systems that are relevant to deterring China in the Indo-Pacific, especially the Multi-Domain Task Force (MDTF).
- The Marine Corps has undertaken a dramatic restructuring to posture itself more effectively for high-end warfare against a major opponent, focusing specifically on China and the littorals of the Indo-Pacific through Force Plan 2030.

## U.S. Military Power: Summary

VERY WEAK

WEAK

MARGINAL

STRONG

VERY STRONG

- Both the Navy and the Air Force have acknowledged the evolved threat environment that will demand more of them in the coming decade than they have had to deal with during the past 20 years; however, both services face significant challenges, as will be shown in the assessments for these services

The *2026 Index* ascertains the relevance and health of military service capabilities by looking at such factors as the average age of equipment, military capabilities and capacity as compared to those of America's adversaries, and the status of modern replacement programs. While some of the information is quantitative, some of the assessments are based on judgment calls made by experts in the relevant areas of interest or addressed by senior service officials.

It must be determined whether the Services possess capabilities that are relevant to deterring and, if necessary, defeating America's adversaries.

**Capacity.** The U.S. military must have the right amount of effective capabilities. This *Index* employs the two-MRC metric as a benchmark for most of the force. This benchmark is the *minimum* standard for U.S. military capacity because one will never be able to employ 100 percent of the force at any given time. Some percentage of the force will always be unavailable because of long-term maintenance overhaul, especially for Navy ships; unit training cycles; and the need to keep some portion of the force uncommitted to serve as a strategic reserve.

Summarizing the totals, this *Index* concluded that a Joint Force capable of dealing with two MRCs simultaneously or nearly simultaneously would consist of:

- **Army:** 50 BCTs.
- **Navy:** at least 400 ships and 624 strike aircraft.
- **Air Force:** 1,200 fighter/attack aircraft.
- **Marine Corps:** 30 battalions.

America's security interests require that the Services have the capacity to handle two major regional conflicts successfully.

**Readiness.** The consequences of the sharp reductions in funding mandated by sequestration from 2011 until 2021 caused military service officials, senior DOD officials, and even Members of Congress to warn of the dangers of recreating the "hollow force" of the 1970s when units existed on paper but were staffed at reduced levels, minimally trained, and woefully ill-equipped.<sup>20</sup> To avoid this, the Services traded quantity/capacity and modernization to ensure that what they do have is "ready" for employment.

Over the past several years, the services continued their effort to find an appropriate balance among capability, capacity, and readiness, at first benefiting from a reduction in combat operations and the easing of COVID-related restrictions and disruptions but then forced to contend with a loss in spending power caused by rising inflation. (In fact, accounting for the record-high inflation experienced under the Biden Administration has been one of the most potent arguments for the second Trump Administration's dramatic increases in defense spending.)

A nation must have the right capabilities to defeat the enemy in a single engagement; it also must have enough of those capabilities to sustain operations during a protracted conflict. But sufficient numbers of the right capabilities are meaningless if the force is not ready to engage.

**Scoring.** In our final assessments, we tried not to convey a higher level of precision than we think is achievable using unclassified, open-source, publicly available information and not to reach conclusions that could be viewed as based solely on one individual's opinion. We believe that the logic underlying our methodology is sound. The *2026 Index* draws from a wealth of public testimony from senior government officials, from the work of recognized experts in the defense and national security analytic community, and from historical instances of conflict that seemed most appropriate to this project. New capabilities such as unmanned systems, cyber

tools, hypervelocity weapons, and artificial intelligence have the potential to change military force posture calculations. At the present time, however, they are not realized in any practical sense. Moreover, such new capabilities should be seen as adding to, not as substituting for, legacy capabilities.

The *2026 Index* is focused on the primary purpose of military power—to deter and, if necessary, defeat an enemy, such as China, Russia, Iran, or North Korea, in combat. To this we added the two-MRC benchmark; on-the-record assessments of what the services themselves are saying about their status relative to validated requirements; and the

analysis and opinions of various experts, both in and out of government, who have covered these issues for many years.

Taking everything together, we rejected scales that would imply extraordinary precision and settled on a scale that conveys broader characterizations of status that range from very weak to very strong. Ultimately, any such assessment is a judgment call informed by quantifiable data, qualitative assessments, thoughtful deliberation, and experience. We trust that our approach makes sense, is defensible, and is repeatable.

## Endnotes

1. Les Aspin, Secretary of Defense, *Report on the Bottom-Up Review*, U.S. Department of Defense, October 1993, p. iii, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA359953.pdf> (accessed January 14, 2026).
2. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
3. See James Mattis, Secretary of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*, U.S. Department of Defense, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/May/18/2002302061/-1/-1/1/2018-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-SUMMARY.PDF> (accessed January 14, 2026).
4. Commission on the National Defense Strategy, *Providing for the Common Defense: The Assessment and Recommendations of the National Defense Strategy Commission*, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2018-11/providing-for-the-common-defense.pdf> (accessed January 14, 2026); press release, "National Defense Strategy Commission Releases Its Review of 2018 National Defense Strategy," United States Institute of Peace, November 13, 2018, <https://www.pressreleasepoint.com/national-defense-strategy-commission-releases-its-review-2018-national-defense-strategy> (accessed January 14, 2026). The commission's final report, published in July 2024, may be accessed at <https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/25021844/report-of-the-commission-on-the-national-defense-strategy-2024.pdf> (accessed January 15, 2026).
5. Commission on the National Defense Strategy, *Executive Summary*, August 2024, p. 6, <https://www.rand.org/nsrd/projects/NDS-commission.html> (accessed January 22, 2026).
6. President Joseph R. Biden, Jr., *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, The White House, March 2021, p. 9, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf> (accessed January 14, 2026).
7. Suman Karki, "Are Aircraft Carriers Obsolete?" AviaTech Blog, January 2, 2025, <https://aviatechchannel.com/are-aircraft-carriers-obsolete/> (accessed February 23, 2026).
8. Kyle Mizokami, "China Has Developed 'Powerful Weapons' to Destroy U.S. Aircraft Carriers. The Effects Could Be Devastating," Popular Mechanics, February 25, 2025, <https://www.popularmechanics.com/military/navy-ships/a63917095/us-navy-aircraft-carrier-threats/> (accessed February 23, 2026).
9. For a detailed discussion of this force, see Richard J. Dunn III, "America's Reserve and National Guard Components: Key Contributors to U.S. Military Strength," in *2016 Index of U.S. Military Strength*, ed. Dakota L. Wood (Washington: The Heritage Foundation, 2015), pp. 61–73, [https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/2016\\_IndexOfUSMilitaryStrength\\_America's%20Reserve%20and%20National%20Guard%20Components\\_Key%20Contributors%20to%20US%20Military%20Strength.pdf](https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/2016_IndexOfUSMilitaryStrength_America's%20Reserve%20and%20National%20Guard%20Components_Key%20Contributors%20to%20US%20Military%20Strength.pdf). For the percentage of U.S. military capability that resides in the Guard/Reserve, see *ibid.*, p. 63.
10. *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, The White House, December 2017, pp. 2–3, 25–26, and 28, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf> (accessed January 14, 2026).
11. Biden, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, p. 14.
12. Biden, *National Security Strategy*, pp. 3, 20–21, and 23–27.
13. Austin, *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, pp. iii, 2–5, and 10.
14. President Donald J. Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, The White House, November 2025, pp. 6–11 and 19–26, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf> (accessed January 14, 2026).
15. Since World War II, the U.S. has fought four major wars: the Korean War (1950–1953); the Vietnam War (1965–1973); the Gulf War/Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm (1990–1991); and the Iraq War/Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003–2011). Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), commenced immediately following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, was focused primarily on combat operations in Afghanistan but included related actions against terrorist organizations worldwide. OEF was concluded in 2014 when combat operations in Afghanistan were shifted to advisory support operations under the name Operation Freedom's Sentinel. While OEF was not at the same level of intensity as the other named wars, its duration and demand for a constant rotation of forces, to include continuous airpower support, took a similar toll in terms of wear on equipment, consumption of fuel and ammunition, and repeated deployments by personnel.
16. U.S. Space Command (USSPACECOM) is also considered a geographic command, but within the context of this discussion, SPACECOM's interactions with other countries and the extent to which it must deal with units and peoples operating on its terrain are very different from those of terrestrial commands.
17. In previous editions of the *Index*, the capacity of the Marine Corps was assessed against a two-war requirement of 36 battalions: a historical average of 15 battalions for a major conflict (twice that for two) and a 20 percent buffer, bringing the total to 36. The Corps has consistently maintained that it is a one-war force and has no intention of growing to the size needed to fight two wars. Its annual budget requests and top-level planning documents reflect this position. Having assessed that the Indo-Pacific region will continue to be of central importance to the U.S., that China is a more worrisome "pacing threat" than any other competitor, and that the Joint Force lacks the ability to operate within the range of intensely weaponized, layered defenses featuring large numbers of precision-guided munitions, the Corps is reshaping itself to optimize its capabilities and organizational structures for this challenge. This *Index* concurs with this effort but assesses that the Corps will still need greater capacity to succeed in war in the very circumstances for which the Marines believe they must prepare. For a detailed examination of the current

state of the Corps, see Dakota Wood, “The U.S. Marine Corps: A Service in Transition,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 3501, June 16, 2020, [https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/BG3501\\_0.pdf](https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/BG3501_0.pdf).

18. Defense references to war have varied over the past few decades from “major combat operation” (MCO) and “major theater war” (MTW) to the current “major regional contingency” (MRC). Arguably, there is a supporting rationale for such shifts as planners attempt to find the best words to describe the scope and scale of significant military efforts, but the terms are basically interchangeable.
19. Mattis, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, p. 4.
20. For more on the potential for a hollow force, see Association of the United States Army, “Preventing a Hollow Force Is Army’s Top Priority,” May 25, 2017, <https://www.ausa.org/news/preventing-hollow-force-army%E2%80%99s-top-priority> (accessed January 14, 2026), and J. V. Venable, “America’s Air Force Is in Bad Shape,” *National Review*, June 13, 2017, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/448556/us-air-force-weakened-funding-cuts-shrinking-workforce-aging-fleet-hurt-preparedness> (accessed January 14, 2026).