Executive Summary

The United States maintains a military force primarily to protect the homeland from attack and to protect its interests abroad. There are secondary uses, such as to assist civil authorities in times of disaster or to deter opponents from threatening America's interests, but this force's primary purpose is to make it possible for the U.S. to physically impose its will on an enemy when necessary.

Consequently, it is critical to understand the condition of the United States military with respect to America's vital national security interests, threats to those interests, and the context within which the U.S. might have to use "hard power." Further, it is important to know how these three areas—operating environments, threats, and the posture of the U.S. military—change over time, given that such changes can have substantial implications for defense policies and investment.

Each year, The Heritage Foundation's *Index of U.S. Military Strength* employs a standardized, consistent set of criteria, accessible both to government officials and to the American public, to gauge the ability of the U.S. military to perform its missions in today's world. The inaugural 2015 edition established a baseline assessment on which this and future annual editions will build, with each issue assessing the state of affairs for its respective year and measuring how key factors have changed from the previous year.

What the *Index* Assesses

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

Any discussion of the aggregate capacity and breadth of the military power needed to address threats to U.S. security interests requires a clear understanding of precisely what interests must be defended. Three vital interests have been stated consistently in various ways by a string of Administrations over the past few decades:

- Defense of the homeland;

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

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

To defend these interests effectively on a global scale, the United States needs a military force of sufficient size, or what is known in the Pentagon as "capacity." Due to the many factors involved, determining how big the military should be is a complex exercise. However, successive Administrations, Congresses, and Department of Defense staffs have managed to arrive at a surprisingly consistent force-sizing rationale: an ability to handle two major wars or "major regional contingencies" (MRCs) simultaneously or in closely overlapping time frames. This "two-war" or "two-MRC" requirement is embraced in this *Index*.

At the core of this requirement is the conviction that the United States should have the ability to engage and decisively defeat one major opponent and simultaneously have the wherewithal to do the same with another to preclude opportunistic exploitation by any competitor. During the Cold War, the U.S. found itself involved in a major "hot" war every 15–20 years while simultaneously maintaining substantial combat forces in Europe and several other regions. The size of the total force roughly approximated the two-MRC model. Accordingly, our assessment of the adequacy of today's U.S. military is based on its ability to engage and defeat two major competitors at roughly the same time.

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

- **Army:** 50 brigade combat teams (BCTs);

- **Navy:** 346 surface combatants and 624 strike aircraft;

- **Air Force:** 1,200 fighter/ground-attack aircraft; and

- **Marine Corps:** 36 battalions.

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

The Global Operating Environment

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

Europe. For the most part, Europe is a stable, mature, and friendly environment, home to America's oldest and closest allies. The U.S. is tied to it by treaty, robust economic bonds, and deeply rooted cultural linkages. America's partners in the region are politically stable; possess mature (if debt-laden) economies; and have fairly modern (though shrinking) militaries. America's longtime presence in the region, Europe's well-established basing and support infrastructure, and the framework for coordinated action provided by NATO make the region quite favorable for military operations.

The Middle East. In contrast, the Middle East is a deeply troubled area riven with conflict, ruled by authoritarian regimes, and populated by an increasing number of terrorist and other destabilizing entities. Though the United States does enjoy a few strong partnerships in the region, its interests are beset by security and political challenges, surging transnational terrorism, and the potential threat of a nuclear Iran. Offsetting these challenges to some extent are the U.S. military's experience in the region and the basing infrastructure that it has developed and leveraged for nearly 25 years.

Asia. Asia's defining characteristic is its expanse, covering 30 percent of the globe's land area. Though the region includes long-standing allies of the U.S. that are stable and possess advanced economies, the tyranny of distance makes U.S. military operations in the region difficult in terms of the time and sealift and airlift that are required.

Summarizing the condition of each region enables us to get a sense of how they compare in terms of the challenge the U.S. would have in projecting military power and sustaining combat operations in each one.

As a whole, the global operating environment currently rates a score of "favorable," meaning that the United States should be able to project military power anywhere in the world as necessary to defend its interests without substantial opposition or high levels of risk.

Operating Environment: Europe

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

Operating Environment: Middle East

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

Operating Environment: Asia

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

Global Operating Environment

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

Global Operating Environment

VERY POOR	UNFAVORABLE	MODERATE	FAVORABLE	EXCELLENT

Threats to U.S. Interests

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

Each of the six threat actors continued to be particularly aggressive during 2015, with a not altogether surprising correlation of physical capability and state robustness or coherence. Our scoring resulted in the individual marks depicted below.

Combining the assessments of behavior and capability led to a general characterization of each threat, ranging from "severe" to "low." Most of the actors pose an "elevated" threat to U.S. interests, while Russia and China are "high" threats due to the scale and reach of their military forces.

While all six threats have been quite problematic in their behavior and in their impact on their respective regions, Russia and China continue to be most worrisome, both because of the investments they are making in the rapid modernization and expansion of their offensive military capabilities and because of the more enduring effect they are having within their respective regions through such actions as Russia's active involvement in the conflict in Ukraine and China's provocative building of islands in highly disputed international waters in the South China Sea.

North Korea warrants sustained attention not because it has any substantial ability to deploy conventional combat power against the United States directly but because it possesses nuclear weapons capable of reaching U.S. facilities and America's critical security and economic partners in the region. Furthermore, a conventional war between North Korea and South Korea would have profound consequences for the global economy.

Similarly, Afghanistan/Pakistan-based terrorism holds strong potential to spark a large-scale conflict between Pakistan and India (two nuclear powers) or even to pose a nuclear threat to others should radicalized Islamists gain control of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal or destabilize Pakistan's government, resulting in the loss of positive control of Pakistan's inventory of nuclear weapons.

Finally, Iran and the various terrorist groups operating in the Middle East would be a greater threat to U.S. security interests than they currently are if they possessed a greater physical ability to project military power outside of their immediate areas. Such a concern is at the heart of the debate over an international agreement pertaining to Iran's nuclear aspirations.

Taken together, the globalized threat to U.S. vital national interests as a whole during 2015 is assessed as "elevated."

Threat Categories

Behavior	HOSTILE	AGGRESSIVE	TESTING	ASSERTIVE	BENIGN
Capability	FORMIDABLE	GATHERING	CAPABLE	ASPIRATIONAL	MARGINAL

Behavior of Threats

	HOSTILE	AGGRESSIVE	TESTING	ASSERTIVE	BENIGN
Russia		✔			
Iran		✔			
Middle East Terrorism		✔			
Af-Pak Terrorism		✔			
China		✔			
North Korea	✔				
OVERALL		✔			

Capability of Threats

	FORMIDABLE	GATHERING	CAPABLE	ASPIRATIONAL	MARGINAL
Russia		✔			
Iran				✔	
Middle East Terrorism				✔	
Af-Pak Terrorism		✔			
China		✔			
North Korea		✔			
OVERALL			✔		

Threats to U.S. Vital Interests

	SEVERE	HIGH	ELEVATED	GUARDED	LOW
Russia		✔			
Iran			✔		
Middle East Terrorism			✔		
Af-Pak Terrorism		✔			
China		✔			
North Korea	✔				
OVERALL			✔		

Threats to U.S. Vital Interests

SEVERE	HIGH	ELEVATED	GUARDED	LOW
		ELEVATED		

The Status of U.S. Military Power

Finally, we assessed the military power of the United States in three areas: capability, capacity, and readiness. We approached this assessment by military service as the clearest way to link military force size; modernization programs; unit readiness; and (in general terms) the functional combat power (land, sea, and air) largely represented by each service. We treated the United States' nuclear capability as a separate entity given the truly unique elements that make it possible, from the weapons themselves to the supporting infrastructure that is fundamentally different from that which supports conventional capabilities.

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

As reported in the 2015 *Index,* the common theme across the services and the United States' nuclear enterprise is one of force degradation resulting from many years of underinvestment, poor execution of modernization programs, and the negative effects of budget sequestration (cuts in funding) on readiness and capacity. While the military has been heavily engaged in operations, primarily in the Middle East but elsewhere as well, since September 11, 2001, experience is both ephemeral and context-sensitive. Valuable combat experience is lost over time as the servicemembers who individually gained experience leave the force, and it maintains direct relevance only for future operations of a similar type (e.g., counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and major conventional operations against a state like Iran or China are fundamentally different).

Thus, though the current Joint Force is experienced in some types of operations, it is still aged and shrinking in its capacity for operations.

We characterized the services and nuclear enterprise on a five-category scale ranging from "very weak" to "very strong," benchmarked against criteria elaborated in the full report. These characterizations are not a reflection of the competence of individual servicemembers or the professionalism of the services or Joint Force as a whole; nor do they speak to the U.S. military's strength relative to other militaries around the world. Rather, they are assessments of the institutional, programmatic, and matériel health or viability of America's hard military power.

Our analysis concluded with these assessments:

- **Army as "Weak."** The Army's score dropped from "marginal" last year to "weak" this year, a development that can be attributed primarily to a drop in capacity, as the Army has fewer BCTs ready for deployment abroad. The Army's capability and readiness scores remained static over the past year as the service continued to struggle with recouping readiness levels after years of budget cuts.

In aggregate, the United States' military posture is rated as **"Marginal"** and is trending toward **"Weak."**

Overall, the *Index* concludes that the current U.S. military force is capable of meeting the demands of a single major regional conflict while also attending to various presence and engagement activities—something it is doing now and has done for the past two decades—but that it would be very hard-pressed to do more and certainly would be ill-equipped to handle two nearly simultaneous major regional contingencies. As was the case in the preceding year, the consistent decline in funding and the consequent shrinking of the force have placed it under significant pressure. Essential maintenance continues to be deferred; fewer units (mostly the Navy's platforms and the Special Operations Forces community) are being cycled through operational deployments more often and for longer periods; and old equipment is being extended while programmed replacements are problematic.

The shift in two services—the Army and Air Force—to a lower category in the course of a single year is surprising and should be seen as evidence of the rapidly accumulating effects of inadequate funding during a time of higher operational demand and policies that have traded long-term health for near-term readiness.

The cumulative effect of these factors has resulted in a U.S. military that is marginally able to meet the demands of defending America's vital national interests.

- **Navy as "Marginal."** The Navy readiness score dropped from "strong" to "marginal" due to shortfalls in the fleet's surge capacity requirements. Deferred maintenance has kept ships at sea, but this is beginning to affect the Navy's ability to deploy. With scores of "weak" in capability (due largely to old platforms and troubled modernization programs) and "marginal" in capacity, the Navy is currently just able to meet operational requirements. Moving forward, the fleet will be further strained to meet operational demands, especially as Reagan-era platforms increasingly near the end of their service lives.

- **Air Force as "Marginal."** In 2015, the Air Force flew sorties in support of many named operations, resulting in a higher than anticipated operational tempo. The USAF scored "very strong" in capacity. Capability scored as "marginal," remaining static since last year's assessment, while "readiness" dropped from "strong" to "marginal." Although difficult to categorize, the readiness decline is best attributed to reports that under half of the service's combat air forces meet full-spectrum readiness requirements. The aggregate score of "marginal" is a decline from the 2015 *Index* score of "strong," driven primarily by degradation in capacity and readiness.

- **Marine Corps as "Marginal."** As with last year, the Corps' strongest suit was in readiness, but even here there are problems as stated by the Corps itself. While the fighting competence of the service is superb, it is hampered by aging equipment; troubled replacement programs for its key ground vehicles (particularly its amphibious personnel carriers); and a shrinking force. The progress the Corps has made in replacing its rotary-wing aircraft has been a notable bright spot in its otherwise uninspiring modernization portfolio.

- **Nuclear Capabilities as "Marginal."** Modernization, testing, and investment in the intellectual/talent underpinnings of this sector are the chief problems facing America's nuclear enterprise. Delivery platforms are good, but the force depends on a very limited set of weapons (in number of designs) and models that are quite old, in stark contrast to the aggressive programs of competitor states. Following developments abroad in regions of national interest and increased uncertainty globally, there is now a greater need to modernize U.S. nuclear capabilities, particularly with regard to aging delivery systems. Continued reliance on legacy systems such as the B-52 will eventually diminish the effectiveness of the nuclear triad and lead to the degradation of our nation's strategic deterrence.

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: Nuclear

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

U.S. Military Power

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