



America at Risk

Memo

Protect America Month: Providing for the Common Defense in the 21st Century

The Heritage Foundation's Protect America Month—running from Memorial Day to Independence Day—focuses on defense spending in the 21st century. America still faces serious threats in the world and now is not the time to weaken our military through defense budget cuts.

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Rogue States and Rising Powers Will Continue to Pose a Strategic Risk to American Security

Peter Brookes

There is a popular notion that the world has changed dramatically with the election of a new American President and that the United States will not be challenged by ambitious peer competitors in the coming decades. While this is a hopeful concept, it is also inaccurate.

The world remains a dangerous place, populated with countries that will compete with the United States for political, economic, and military preeminence and could hold American interests around the world at risk. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and against al-Qaeda certainly should be at the forefront in defense spending and planning, but we also need a balanced force that can address emerging conventional and strategic challenges from rogue states and rising nations.

North Korea continues to be a significant threat to peace and stability, both on and beyond the Korean peninsula. The peaceful reunification of North and South Korea seems as distant as ever, and there are big questions about a successor to North Korea's ailing Kim Jong-Il. The number of North Korean provocations just since the beginning of the year has been staggering.

On the conventional front, Pyongyang's forward-deployed million-man army could lash out at South Korean and American forces across the DMZ at a moment's notice. This spring, Pyongyang declared that it was no longer bound by the conditions of the 1953 Korean War armistice. On the strategic front, in April,

it launched a long-range Taepo Dong ballistic missile with intercontinental-range potential. Pyongyang claimed that the launch was a satellite shot, but experts say that it was a cover for an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) program. Another long-range missile test is expected in the coming weeks.

While walking out of the Six-Party talks aimed at containing North Korea's nuclear ambitions, Pyongyang last month also conducted its second nuclear test in less than three years and reopened a shuttered nuclear facility that could be used to expand its nuclear arsenal. These recent missile and nuclear developments fuel concerns that North Korea is making progress on developing a warhead to fit atop the Taepo Dong ballistic missile that could reach American soil.

Beyond its involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan and its role as the world's most active state sponsor of terrorism, **Iran** is looking to project power across the region and beyond as it seeks to become the most powerful country in the Middle East and the Muslim world.

Tehran's effort to modernize its conventional forces by purchasing arms from Russia and China, while important, is dwarfed by its nuclear and ballistic missile efforts. Iran is almost assuredly involved in a nuclear weapons effort under the guise of a peaceful nuclear power program, and some experts believe it now has the wherewithal to produce a single nuclear device. It may be developing a nuclear warhead. With the

Shahab-class missile, Tehran can already reach all of the Middle East and parts of Southeastern Europe.

But Iran's ambitions seem to go beyond that. This spring, Iran launched its first indigenously produced satellite, putting Tehran on a trajectory to develop an ICBM capability that could be matched with its budding nuclear program.

While the global economic downturn has affected **Russia's** military modernization programs, reducing Moscow's defense spending increase this year from a planned 25 percent to 10 percent, Russia still has every intention of developing a modern force to protect its periphery. It also appears to have every intention of reasserting itself as a world power.

A top Russian Air Force general this spring claimed that Venezuela could host Russian long-range bombers. This follows the visit of Russian bombers and a small flotilla to Venezuela last year. Cuba was mentioned as a possible home to Russian planes as well. Russia is also looking at reestablishing its Cold War naval base in Syria and is discussing basing rights in Libya and Yemen to forward-deploy warships. Russian strategic bombers are operating widely from bases across Russia, and some have conducted flybys near U.S. Navy aircraft carriers.

In our own hemisphere, **Venezuela**, led by stormy president Hugo Chavez, has been involved in a notable military buildup that is seemingly aimed at exerting regional hegemony. With one of Latin America's largest defense budgets, Venezuela has purchased as much as \$4 billion in Russian arms, including fighters, attack helicopters, and assault weapons, and reportedly has signed contracts with Moscow to build nuclear reactors in Venezuela, since other regional powers have shunned cooperation due to concerns about possible nuclear proliferation.

The biggest challenge to American military preeminence will come from **China**. Beijing's unprecedented military buildup has included double-digit increases in defense spending for more than a decade. China now has the world's second-largest defense budget, and Admiral Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has observed that Beijing's military modernization is "very much focused on the United States."

Beijing is professionalizing the People's Liberation Army and has focused its defense budget on asymmetric and power-projection forces such as its navy and ballistic missiles. While long focused on Taiwan, China is evaluating its forces for operations beyond East Asia. It has one of the world's most active ship- and submarine-building programs, and an aircraft carrier program is almost a given. A new anti-ship ballistic missile reportedly can target ships at sea—a threat never before faced by our Navy.

The central argument that the United States can reduce its defense budget, especially its investment in next-generation systems, because it is unlikely to face threats from any peer competitors in the next 20 years is clearly specious. Ambitious rising nations will be sure to challenge the United States militarily if they sense decline or weakness.

While Iraq, Afghanistan, and al-Qaeda are the wolves closest to the sled, they are not the only ones out there. Now is not the time for complacency about the threats looming on the horizon or the need to invest in a strong national defense.

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The 21st century will be a dangerous place if America fails to protect itself and its allies.

