



America at Risk

Memo

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

The Heritage Foundation's Protect America Month is a month-long campaign focusing on the need for increased 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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Protect America from What?

Peter Brookes

While Americans focus on the significant challenges at home, they must also not forget the growing national security challenges that our nation faces abroad. The world remains a dangerous place, populated with states and groups that hold—or could hold—America and its interests around the world at risk.

Terrorism

The attempted Christmas Day bombing of an airliner over Detroit and the recent Times Square plot in New York City remind us that the terrorist threat is not behind us. We are still squarely in the terrorists' cross-hairs.

In fact, while foiled conspiracies are quickly forgotten, it is important to remember that there have been at least 10 attacks or thwarted plots in the United States just over the past year, headlined by the tragedy at Fort Hood last fall. While we are fundamentally safer today than we were on 9/11, we are still not *safe*.

South Asia and the Middle East

There are challenges in South Asia, too, where terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and the Taliban are seeking to take and hold terrain to train, plan, and operate in places like Pakistan's tribal areas. Next door in Afghanistan, more than 90,000 American troops are fighting a Taliban insurgency that has persisted for nearly nine years. Failure in Afghanistan could allow that country once again to become a terrorist safe haven.

The Middle East is rife with challenges as well. While some 90,000 American troops are drawing down in Iraq, violence still occurs and the peace is fragile, in large part due to continuing political reconciliation challenges and meddling by Iraq's neighbor, Iran. But Iranian troublemaking is not limited to Iraq or Afghanistan; Tehran is unsettling the entire region with its belligerency and nuclear and ballistic missile programs.

Indeed, it is very likely that Iran will join the once-exclusive nuclear weapons club in the near future, despite its insistence that there is no military dimension to its nuclear program. Frankly, there is no reason to believe Tehran's assertions, considering the hiding of its nuclear program for more than 20 years, a violation of its Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty obligations. Moreover, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is still having trouble developing a comprehensive picture of Iran's nuclear program. No surprise: The international community continues to discover additional undeclared nuclear facilities in Iran.

Iran is making matters worse with its ballistic missile efforts, including a long-range program that it is operating under the cover of a civilian space program. In fact, the Pentagon estimates that Iran will be able to field an intercontinental ballistic missile by 2015. The IAEA also believes Iran may be working on a nuclear warhead to be affixed to one of its growing classes of ballistic missiles.



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And don't forget that Iran is still the world's most active state sponsor of terrorism, providing financial, moral, and military support to a number of terrorist groups, including Hamas and Hezbollah. Iran, along with Syria, arms both terrorist groups, destabilizing the region and undermining the chances for Middle East peace.

The Western Hemisphere

Iran has likewise busied itself with affairs in this hemisphere, promising to share nuclear technology with Venezuela. It is also believed that Iranian special forces are being sent to the Latin American country for unknown purposes, but with Caracas's permission, on a regular Venezuela–Syria–Iran flight.

And speaking of Venezuela, we should really be concerned about developments to the South. Venezuela's leader, Hugo Chávez, is virulently anti-American and exporting his socialist agenda across Latin America and the Caribbean by bankrolling like-minded political candidates in places like Nicaragua, Bolivia, and Ecuador. He is also keeping the Castro regime afloat in Cuba by providing cheap oil.

Venezuela has been caught supporting the narco-terrorist group, the FARC, which has been waging war with its neighbor Colombia for years and has held Americans hostage. Chávez has also been allowing the FARC to traffic narcotics across Venezuela for export abroad.

Chávez is also spending billions on arms from Russia in the absence of a threat. But most worrisome is his interest in nuclear power, where he is seeking assistance from both Russia and Iran, conjuring up the possibility of a nuclear threat not far from our shores.

Korea, China, and Russia

In Asia, North Korea remains a security wild card. The likelihood of a power transition—the first in 15 or so years—from “Dear Leader” Kim Jong-il to a suc-

cessor is cause for concern as there could be a power struggle for the capital, Pyongyang.

The North maintains a very large army with significant firepower and is not afraid to use that firepower, even without provocation, as it demonstrated recently by sinking a South Korean ship with a torpedo. A confirmed nuclear weapons state since 2006, Pyongyang continues to work on an ICBM program that can target American cities.

Equally worrisome on the nuclear front, Pyongyang is willing to proliferate its nuclear know-how off the Korean peninsula. In 2007, Israel destroyed a Syrian nuclear facility being built by the North Koreans. Some believe that such cooperation continues.

China is also a growing challenge as it works diligently to wrest a top spot on the big-power stage. While China's economic juggernaut is of concern to some, its military buildup may be the most alarming. Today, China may have the world's third largest defense budget. While budget comparisons can be misleading, there is no question that Beijing has matched its budget growth—increasing at a double-digit rate for at least a decade—with improvements in the quality of its weaponry.

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China has the second largest navy in the Pacific after the United States, with expectations of aircraft carriers not far over the horizon. It is also developing its air and missile power projection forces as well as cyber-warfare and counter-space capabilities, aimed almost exclusively at U.S. military operations.

And what about Russia? It is fair to say that Russia has readjusted its foreign policy orientation from one that was Western-friendly to one that is increasingly nationalistic—even anti-West—and intent on reasserting Russia as a great power.

Equally troubling are Russian arms sales to the likes of China, Syria, Iran, and Venezuela, which are clearly aimed at complicating America's security situation.

Moscow has also reportedly cut nuclear power deals with Tehran, Damascus, and Caracas.

Moscow will be an increasingly significant player in international politics, and while cooperation is possible, there will be issues of critical importance on which Russia will *not* align itself with American interests.

Conclusion

Regrettably, the list of challenges does not end there and could include such others as the drug war

in Mexico, pirates off the Horn of Africa, and energy security. As a result, there is no question that we need a strong defense and a vigorous foreign policy to protect and advance American interests against this litany of challenges and threats. The consequences of not providing for our national security are incalculable.

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PROTECT AMERICA

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

*This product is part of the Protect America Initiative, one of 10 transformational initiatives in our **Leadership for America** campaign.*