

# Preface

**A Decade of Decline.** Ten years ago, The Heritage Foundation published the first edition of the *Index of U.S. Military Strength* to provide policymakers and the American people with a one-of-a-kind report card on how the U.S. military stacks up against a growing array of threats to America’s national security. Unfortunately, each successive edition has highlighted how increasing shortfalls in size and capability have left our military weaker.

The American people rely on the federal government to keep them safe in a dangerous world, but a decade of distraction and complacency has left U.S. armed forces in a diminished state. Article One, Section Eight of the Constitution lists 17 separate powers that are granted to the Congress. Six of those powers deal exclusively with the national defense—far more than any other area of governance—and grant the full range of authorities necessary for the nation’s defense. That awesome responsibility must be applied to the restoration of the military that protects our citizens, safeguards our liberty, and preserves our way of life.

U.S. political leaders cashed in on the “peace dividend” after the Cold War and then used President Reagan’s military buildup to fight never-ending wars in the Middle East that contributed to the breakdown of the American people’s trust in our military leaders. This combination, along with Defense budget cuts in the 1990s, exhausted our armed forces and left them weakened as equipment aged and force structure was reduced. Today, the military is a shadow of the force that stood guard against the Soviets, not just in size, but more importantly in capabilities and readiness. We are experiencing the third recruiting crisis in the history of the all-volunteer force, which threatens to leave significant shortfalls in our formations and further degrade readiness. Given the threats we face from Europe to the Middle East to the Pacific, if America intends to remain a global force in the 21st

century, Congress and the Pentagon need to take our security more seriously.

Our number one adversary, the People’s Republic of China (PRC), certainly takes security seriously. Each year, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continues to expand its military capabilities to back evil ideology with steel. As The Heritage Foundation determined earlier this year, we have entered a “New Cold War” with China across the full spectrum of competition that includes the economic, diplomatic, and military spheres. The Chinese seek hegemony in the Indo-Pacific. If they succeed, they will control U.S. access to Asia’s vital markets with dire implications for Americans’ security, prosperity, and freedom. No other country poses a threat to U.S. interests of this magnitude.

Denying China’s imperial ambitions is only growing more difficult. The Chinese are driven and dedicated. Over the past 20 years, they have poured resources into building a military that is increasingly capable of challenging our own. Every year, China builds and commissions more ships to counter the U.S. Navy, especially in the South China Sea. Its navy is now the largest in the world. Meanwhile, China’s air and space forces are improving steadily as are its nuclear forces, which are in the midst of an unprecedented expansion. Gone are the days when the U.S. assumed supremacy over the Chinese military—and time is not on our side. CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping has openly directed the People’s Liberation Army to prepare to seize Taiwan by 2027. We must move quickly if we are to deter Chinese aggression in the dangerous years ahead having learned the lesson that the failure to preserve deterrence in Europe resulted in the disastrous Russian invasion of Ukraine—not to mention the failure to preserve deterrence against the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Middle East, which resulted in the spectacularly horrific Hamas terrorist attack on Israel.

Unfortunately, some of the politically motivated leaders of the United States military do not seem to share this sense of urgency. Instead, they seem more focused on promoting progressive domestic priorities than on preparing to deter or, if necessary, prevail against China or other threats to U.S. vital interests. Under the Biden Administration, Department of Defense (DOD) officials who pursue a woke agenda or approve abortion on demand for service-women are the ones who receive promotions. With drag queen recruiting ads and a focus on shaping the military culture to mirror woke utopian visions or seeking to use the DOD to counter the allegedly primary “national security threat” of global warming, one must wonder whether our leaders are seeing the same threats from the outside world that The Heritage Foundation sees.

The Biden Administration has abandoned its responsibility to preserve our borders, and the resultant crisis threatens our sovereignty. Worse, we are diverting critical resources to house and sustain illegal immigrants, spending twice what we commit to our servicemembers and their families’ housing. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and Hamas’s attack on Israel, as well as the ever-present threat of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, should be wakeup calls. Armed conflict among the great powers is not a thing of the past. Great-power competition is here to stay, and we must be ready—not just so we can win a war but, God willing, to deter armed conflict from ever happening.

Our political leaders must ensure that the military focuses on countering these threats while also

recognizing the dire state of our financial situation here at home. U.S. fiscal resources are not unlimited. America is torn between the need to defend itself and the need to remain fiscally viable. Failure in either category is not acceptable. Congress and our leaders in the Pentagon must work together to cancel wasteful programs, cut unnecessary infrastructure, and ensure that available resources fund the highest-priority national security issues. Even then, however, we cannot expect to spend our way out of the problems facing our nation’s military today—so we must prioritize. This is the essence of strategy, and doing so will no doubt require tough decisions and leadership. But true patriots do not shy away from hard problems. They attack them head on.

America needs a strong military so the American people can live peacefully in a dangerous world. If we want our children and grandchildren to grow up free, safe, and prosperous, U.S. political leaders must step up to the plate and deliver. From the dawn of our Republic, we have depended on the service and sacrifice of our fellow citizens committed to bearing arms in defense of our families, homes, ideals, and this nation. That call has never gone unanswered. Our commitment to those that have given that last full measure of devotion must ensure that we never fail to honor their devotion and ensure a strong national defense.

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