

Assessing the Global Operating Environment

Aside from assessing a military force's equipment and the readiness of its people, measuring its strength—defined as the extent to which that force can accomplish missions—also requires examination of the environments in which the force operates. Aspects of one environment may facilitate military operations and present the U.S. military with obvious advantages; aspects of another may work against them and limit the effect of U.S. military power. The capabilities and assets of U.S. allies, the strength of foes, the willingness of friend or foe to use its military power, the region's geopolitical environment, and the availability of forward facilities and logistics infrastructure all factor into whether an operating environment is helpful when U.S. military forces must be called into action.

In any assessment of an operating environment, U.S. treaty obligations with countries in the region should always be a prime consideration. A treaty defense obligation ensures that the legal framework is in place for the U.S. to maintain and operate a military presence in a particular country. A treaty partnership usually yields regular training exercises and interoperability as well as political and economic ties. It also obligates the U.S. to commit its military in support of an ally, which has the effect of focusing U.S. military leadership on some regions more than others.

Other factors that affect an operating environment include the military capabilities of allies that might be useful to U.S. military operations; the degree to which the U.S. and allied militaries in the region are interoperable and can use, for example, common means of communication, weaponry, and other systems; and whether the U.S. maintains key bilateral alliances with nations in the region. Nations where the U.S. has stationed assets or permanent bases and countries from which the U.S. has launched military operations in the past could

provide needed support for future U.S. military operations. Additional criteria that should be considered include the quality of the local infrastructure, the area's political stability, whether or not a country is embroiled in any conflicts, and the degree to which a nation is economically free.

The relationships and knowledge gained through any of these factors would undoubtedly ease future U.S. military operations in a region and contribute greatly to a positive operating environment.

Then there are low-likelihood, high-consequence events that, although they occur infrequently, can radically alter conditions in ways that affect U.S. interests. Massive natural disasters like Typhoon Tip in 1979 or the explosion of Mount Tambora in 1816 can displace populations, upend regional power arrangements, or destroy critical infrastructure. The eruption of Mount Pinatubo in 1991, for example, caused so much damage to Clark Airbase and Subic Bay Naval Station that the cost, combined with diplomatic frictions between the U.S. and the Philippines, led the U.S. to abandon these strategic facilities. A massive solar flare could have a similar impact on a much larger scale because of the level of our dependence on electrical power. Scientists, analysts, planners, and officials in public and commercial ventures study such things but seldom take concrete action to mitigate their potential impact.

The COVID-19 pandemic that stretched from late 2019 to early 2023 is the most recent example of such a world-shaking event. It caused governments to spend extraordinary sums of money not only to manage the public health crisis, but also to mitigate the economic impact on their countries. Regardless of one's view with regard to its origin, its severity compared to other diseases, or how it was handled, the economic and societal stresses stemming from the pandemic put terrific pressures on

political establishments. They also caused funding for such essential government functions as defense to be reallocated to meet the more immediate demands of the pandemic and—given the threat of contagion—mitigation measures to be adopted at the expense of military exercises, training events, and deployments.

As of mid-2023, nearly all countries appear to have resolved many of the disruptions caused by the pandemic, adapting their economies and adjusting their policy approaches to deal with the public health crisis. So, too, did populations normalize their routines, mitigating many of the original fears stemming from the crisis. In similar fashion, military forces found ways to return to the training and exercises that are necessary to regain proficiency.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the war that has continued since then have affected national and public perspectives with regard to military power. Before Russia invaded its neighbor, many capitals acknowledged the importance of military power but often failed to follow their words with commensurate investments in operationally relevant military forces. Confronted with the reality of a war in Europe and the possibility of another one in Asia because of China's persistent saber rattling and heavy investment in its ability to project

power, Poland, Germany, Great Britain, and Japan (to name but a few) have substantially increased their defense budgets and, among European allies, have contributed equipment, munitions, and a range of supplies to Ukraine to help it defend itself.

One consequence of this has been reinvigorated discussions among U.S. allies about the status of military power and the need to ensure that forces can work together effectively. But another has been the consumption of expensive military capabilities, which has led some countries to start hedging on their pledges to sustain support to Ukraine or, in some circumstances, to contribute national power to collective defense.

All of this to say that conditions evolve from one year to the next and from one security setting to the next in ways that affect the ease or difficulty of conducting U.S. military operations. Our assessment of the operating environment is meant to add critical context to complement the threat environment and U.S. military assessments that are detailed each year in the *Index of U.S. Military Strength*.

A final note: The names of all disputed territories mentioned in this *Index* are the names used by the U.S. Department of State. The reader should not construe this as reflecting a position on any of these disputes.