

Conclusion: Global Threat Level

America faces challenges to its security at home and interests abroad from countries and organizations that have:

- Interests that conflict with those of the U.S.;
- Sometimes hostile intentions toward the U.S.; and
- In some cases, growing military capabilities that are leveraged to impose their will by coercion or intimidation of neighboring countries, thereby creating regional instabilities.

The government of the United States constantly faces the challenge of employing, sometimes alone but more often in concert with allies, the right mix of diplomatic, economic, public information, intelligence, and military capabilities to protect and advance U.S. interests.

Russia remains the primary threat to American interests in Europe and is the most pressing threat to the United States. The *2020 Index* again assesses the threat emanating from Russia as “aggressive” in its behavior and “formidable” (the highest category on the scale) in its growing capabilities. Moscow continues to engage in massive pro-Russia propaganda campaigns in Ukraine and other Eastern European countries, actively supports separatist forces in Ukraine, regularly performs provocative military exercises and training missions, and continues to sell and export arms to countries that are hostile to U.S. interests. It also

has increased its investment in modernizing its military and has gained significant combat experience while continuing to sabotage U.S. and Western policy in Syria and Ukraine.

China, the most comprehensive threat the U.S. faces, remained “aggressive” in the scope of its provocative behavior and earns the score of “formidable” for its capability because of its ongoing military modernization and buildup. The People’s Liberation Army continues to extend its reach and military activity beyond its immediate region and engages in larger and more comprehensive exercises, including live-fire exercises in the East China Sea near Taiwan. It also has continued to conduct probes of the South Korean and Japanese air defense identification zones, drawing rebukes from both Seoul and Tokyo. In addition, there is little evidence that Chinese cyber espionage and computer network exploitation have abated.

Iran remains the state actor that is most hostile to American interests in the Middle East. The *2020 Index* assesses Iran’s behavior as “aggressive” and its capability as “gathering.” In the years since publication of the *2015 Index*, Iran has methodically moved closer to becoming a nuclear power, and it continues to enhance its ICBM, missile defense, and unmanned systems capabilities. Iran also continues to perpetuate and exploit instability to expand its influence in the region, both in its direct involvement in regional engagements and through its proxies, particularly in Syria. This year also saw aggressive activity in the Strait of Hormuz, including the downing of a U.S. drone in international airspace and attacks on merchant shipping.

North Korea’s level of behavior remained “testing” in the *2020 Index*. North Korea’s capability level has also remained at “gathering” as Pyongyang continues to develop and refine its missile technology, especially in the area of submarine-launched ballistic missiles. With its ICBM program, North Korea remains both a threat to U.S. allies and assets in the region and an ongoing threat to the U.S. homeland.

The terrorist threats emanating from the Afghanistan–Pakistan region remained “testing” in the *2020 Index*. Fatalities attributed to terrorism inside Pakistan continue to fall as various terrorist groups within the region find themselves in competition with each other for recruits, territory, and resources.

A broad array of terrorist groups remain the most hostile of any of the threats to America examined in the *Index*. As of mid-2018, the Islamic State had been decimated, having

lost more than 98 percent of previously held territory, and its further reduction continued in 2019. However, it has not been completely eliminated and has made efforts to reassert itself in the region. Fortunately, Middle East terrorist groups are the least capable of the threats facing the U.S.

Just as there are American interests that are not covered by this *Index*, there may be additional threats to American interests that are not identified here. The *Index* focuses on the more apparent sources of risk and those that appear to pose the greatest threat.

Compiling the assessments of these threat sources, the *2020 Index* again rates the overall global threat environment as “aggressive” and “gathering” in the areas of threat actor behavior and material ability to harm U.S. security interests, respectively, leading to an aggregated threat score of “high.”

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		✓			

Our combined score for threats to U.S. vital interests can be summarized as:

Threats to U.S. Vital Interests: Summary

