

Navy, Marine Corps Readiness Questioned in Heritage Foundation Assessment

Heritage Foundation.

Despite some improvements in combat readiness, the U.S. military has “marginal” overall capability to meet the increasing global security challenges it faces because all four of the armed services are too small and much of their major combat systems are too old, according to the latest of the annual assessment by the Heritage Foundation.

The Navy and the Marine Corps share that overall rating of “marginal,” with both assessed as “weak” in capacity, which translates into force size, and “marginal” in capability and readiness, even though both of the naval services have focused on improving readiness, the [2020 Index of U.S. Military Strength](#), released by Heritage on Oct. 30, said.

Although Army readiness is rated as “very strong” due to a major increase in the number of its brigade combat teams that are considered combat ready, it also gets an over score of “marginal” because its capacity is rated as “weak” and capability as “marginal.” The Air Force is rated as “marginal in all three of the categories and overall.

The ratings for the four services are little changed from last year’s index and come in the face of the index’s finding of an overall threat to U.S. vital interests of “high” from China, Russia, Iran, North Korea and global terrorism. Heritage rates the behavior of Russia and China as “aggressive” and their capability as “formidable.”

Because of the overall weakness of the services, Heritage said the military “is likely capable of meeting the demands of a single major regional conflict ... while also attending to

various presence and engagement activities, but that it would be very hard pressed to do more and certainly would be ill equipped to handle two nearly simultaneous major regional contingencies.”

As it has in the past, Heritage faults the four services, the Defense Department and Congress for the lack of funding and direction to substantially increased the size of the military and to modernize its equipment, which are the oldest on average since before World War II. Force size is a major criteria for Heritage in its ratings.

For example, it says the Navy needs a battle fleet of 400 ships, while the Navy’s current battle force is 290 ships and its long-term goal is 355. The key shortfalls Heritage cites, compared to its recommendations, are two aircraft carriers, 16 large surface combatants, 41 small surface combatants, 16 attack submarines, 13 amphibious warships and 25 combat logistics ships. It also finds naval air far short of the desired size.

For the Marine Corps, Heritage believes it needs 36 infantry battalions, while it has only 24. Both the previous and current Marine Corps commandants have said they need to reduce the infantry to add capabilities in information warfare and cyber.