

NATIONAL SECURITY THREAT ASSESSMENTS

The United States enjoys a level of security that is unmatched in human history. The country is blessed with its relative geographic isolation, prodigious nuclear deterrent capabilities, diverse and resilient economy, and abundance of natural resources. However, many policymakers see things differently. Intelligence assessments and government reports often exaggerate foreign-based national security threats. Such threat inflation leads to excessive government spending and a misallocation of resources. It often results in policies that erode fundamental civil liberties and can be detrimental to U.S. national security.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Increase transparency.** Policymakers should reform the classification system to make more information available to the public.
- **Incorporate differing perspectives.** Ensure congressionally mandated reports on national security threats are written by experts with diverse viewpoints on foreign policy.
- **Encourage competition.** Empower “Red Team” or other competing assessments of purported national security threats that challenge prevailing assumptions to ensure a more balanced public debate.

BACKGROUND

While the world has grown more complex over the past two decades, it has not become more dangerous. This is especially true for Americans who continue to enjoy a measure of safety that our ancestors would envy and that our contemporaries do envy. The only foreign-based existential threat to the American homeland remains thermonuclear war, which is a real but extremely remote possibility, in large part because of America’s own robust nuclear deterrent.

Despite this level of relative safety, it seems that nearly every foreign policy threat identified in the past several decades has been exaggerated. Such alarmism frequently leads to two types of responses that prove to be unwise, or even dangerous. First, policymakers treat a threatening event not as an aberration but as a harbinger indicating that things have suddenly become much more dangerous, will remain so, and will become worse. Second, there is a tendency to lash out at the threat and to overspend to deal with it without much thought about alternative policies—including ones that might call for simply letting it be. We tolerate all manner of risks in our daily lives, and we should not hold governments to the unreasonable standard of guaranteeing perfect security.

Policymakers should aspire to differentiate the real from the imaginary. Fallacious claims of impending danger will erode one’s credibility to the point that the congenital fearmonger is no longer taken seriously. Americans should instead expect national security officials to seek, communicate, and be guided by fact-based, balanced threat assessments.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[*Clear and Present Safety: The World Has Never Been Better and Why That Matters to Americans*](#) by Michael Cohen and Micah Zenko (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

["Is There Enough of a Shared Identity in U.S. to Meet Threats?"](#) by Trevor Thrall, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 11, 2017.

["Despite Fear-Mongering, U.S. Is Not Beset by Grave Threats"](#) by John Glaser, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 13, 2017.

["Project to Counter Threat Inflation"](#) by the Cato Institute.