

Despite fear-mongering, U.S. is not beset by grave threats

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With Donald Trump in the White House, political divisiveness has reached new heights. Yet virtually everyone in Washington still agrees about at least one thing: The United States is beset by grave threats.

Americans are constantly bombarded with exaggerated claims about the threat from terrorism and immigration, a nuclear North Korea, the Iranian menace, China, Russia, and all manner of perils to world order. Yet the truth is that America faces no major national security threats from abroad. In fact, a much more proximate threat Americans face comes from Washington, when policies intended to chase after inflated threats waste money, undermine civil liberties, and subvert the rule of law.

When it comes to terrorism and immigration, for example, the fact is that neither poses a significant threat to Americans. Research shows that immigrants commit [less crime on average](#) than American citizens do, and [your chance](#) of being killed by a Muslim terrorist is about [1 in 6 million](#). That's way less than your chances of being struck by lightning.

The same goes for supposed threats overseas. In Senate testimony last month, Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats [warned](#) that North Korea's nuclear program is a "very significant, potentially existential threat to the U.S." [Not true](#). Nobody welcomes nuclear weapons in the hands of volatile dictators like Kim Jong Un, but there is no indication that Pyongyang wants the bomb for any reason other than to deter a U.S. or South Korean attack. Using nukes would mean immediate retaliation and the destruction of the regime — not a scenario North Korea is eager to bring about.

The same goes for the supposed threat from Iran. Even putting aside the fact that Iran has rolled back its nuclear program [in compliance](#) with international obligations and has just [reelected](#) a moderate reformist, Iran is a third-rate military power plagued by internal challenges and surrounded by more powerful regional enemies, like Saudi Arabia and Israel. In terms of military capability, [they are a molehill to the American mountain](#) and do not represent a serious threat to U.S. security.

The hysteria over Russia and China is similarly overstated. Moscow is a problem for some of the weaker states that border it, but the [United States' GDP](#) is more than 13 times that of [Russia's](#), and the bulk of European economic and military power towers over Russia's. It is not a great power on the order of the Soviet Union and certainly cannot threaten the security of the United States beyond spreading fake news on the internet.

And China has exhibited an impressively benign foreign policy, given its growing power. The extent of the immediate peril seems to be that Beijing claims sovereignty over a bunch of uninhabited rocks in the South China Sea. It's hard to see how that represents a direct threat to the United States.

In spite of the little there truly is to fear from any of the above, politicians love to exaggerate threats because it makes them look tough and strong. The media love to emphasize looming dangers because it boosts viewership. And the bureaucracies in Washington tend to amplify meager security concerns because it sustains high budgets and political relevance, and protects them from blame in the event of a terrorist attack or instability overseas.

The reality, however, is that the United States is remarkably insulated from foreign threats. We are still an economic powerhouse, we are geographically isolated from enemies, we have a superior nuclear deterrent and the most powerful military in the world.

Indeed, the biggest threat comes not from ISIS, mad Iranian mullahs, or wily autocrats. No, the real threat Americans face is from their own government. When Washington chooses to become entangled in unnecessary foreign wars, it imposes serious human and financial costs. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have killed hundreds of thousands, including almost 7,000 U.S. soldiers, and along with other post-9/11 expenses, has cost [more than \\$5 trillion](#). What we've gained in terms of increased safety is less clear.

Likewise, when the National Security Agency [infringes on our Fourth Amendment rights](#) to privacy in the name of protecting us, it threatens our liberties. When the federal government takes hundreds of billions of dollars every year from the productive sectors of the private economy to pay for a defense budget that is [more than double the combined budgets of both Russia and China](#), the next biggest military spenders, it makes us all poorer. And when a capricious president threatens judges, fires disloyal law enforcement officials, and denigrates American political norms, it undermines the institutions that are designed to prevent tyrannical abuses of power.

As Abraham Lincoln once said, "All the armies of Europe, Asia, and Africa combined" cannot threaten America's survival. "If destruction be our lot we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen we must live through all time or die by suicide."

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