FACTUM

Global Security Alarm: Public Sees Major Threats, but Doubts Governments Are Prepared to Respond

New Ipsos survey for Halifax International Security Forum finds the largest gaps between perceived threats and confidence in preparedness involve hacking, disinformation and nuclear attacks. Concern about artificial intelligence is rising rapidly.

Toronto, Canada, November 20, 2026 — People around the world recognize that their countries face serious security threats. What they are much less certain about is whether their governments are prepared to deal with them. A major new Ipsos survey conducted for the Halifax International Security Forum finds substantial differences between the proportion of people who regard particular dangers as real threats and those who believe their countries are prepared to respond. The largest gaps involve hacking for fraudulent or espionage purposes, deliberate disinformation and nuclear, biological or chemical attacks. Concern about artificial intelligence defence systems escaping human control is also growing rapidly. The findings come as political and military leaders gather in Halifax to discuss the challenges facing democratic countries in an increasingly dangerous international environment.

The Biggest Threats Expose the Largest Preparedness Gaps

Across the 30 countries surveyed, the largest gap between perceived threat and preparedness involves hacking for fraudulent or espionage purposes. The difference between the proportion who regard hacking as a real threat and those who believe their country is prepared to respond is 30 percentage points. Deliberate disinformation and nuclear, biological or chemical attacks follow, each with a gap of 28 points. An artificial intelligence defence system escaping human control ranks fourth, with a gap of 26 points. These differences are larger than those recorded for more familiar security concerns, including terrorism and armed conflict between nations.

The findings reveal a public that recognizes the dangers associated with new technologies but has considerably less confidence in governments' ability to respond to them. This does not mean conventional military threats have become less important. It means governments must now contend with serious public concerns about threats that cannot necessarily be addressed through traditional military capabilities.

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Artificial Intelligence Is the Fastest Growing Concern

Concern about artificial intelligence stands out as one of the most significant changes in this year's survey. Across the 20 countries included consistently in the annual research, 66% now regard an AI-based defence system escaping human control as a real threat. That is an increase of seven percentage points since 2025 and nine points since 2023. The increase is particularly pronounced in the United States, where 75% now regard such a system as a real threat, up 11 points in a single year. In Canada, concern has risen eight points to 68%. The speed of this increase is notable. Public concern about many other security threats has changed relatively little over the past year, while anxiety about the potential loss of human control over military applications of artificial intelligence has grown substantially. The issue is no longer confined to speculation about what advanced technologies might eventually be capable of doing. Large majorities already regard the possibility of an AI defence system escaping human control as a real security threat.

Americans Are Especially Concerned About Their Country's Preparedness

The United States produces some of the most striking findings in this year's research. Americans report large gaps between perceived threats and confidence in preparedness across all ten security threats measured. The largest gap involves deliberate disinformation, at 36 percentage points, followed by hacking at 34 points and nuclear, biological or chemical attacks at 33 points. The gaps for natural disasters and terrorism are also substantial, at 32 points each. Artificial intelligence defence systems and armed conflict with another country both produce gaps of 31 points. Americans are also becoming more concerned about the possibility of their country entering an armed conflict with another nation. Some 86% now regard this as a real threat, an increase of seven percentage points over the past year.

These findings need to be considered in the context of America's war with Iran. The United States began military operations against Iran in February 2026, and the conflict continued through the period when this survey was conducted. For Americans, the possibility of military conflict is no longer simply a hypothetical concern. Their country has been engaged in a war whose consequences for American security and military preparedness remain uncertain. The survey cannot establish how much the conflict has contributed to rising public concern. But the combination of greater anxiety about military conflict and substantial doubts about preparedness is particularly significant for a country already engaged in hostilities.

Canadians See a Different Security Picture

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Canadians also express considerable concern about national security threats, although their assessments of preparedness differ from those of Americans. The largest Canadian gap involves a nuclear, biological or chemical attack, at 31 percentage points. Hacking and deliberate disinformation follow, each with a gap of 28 points. An artificial intelligence defence system escaping human control is close behind at 27 points. But Canadians express greater relative confidence in their country's preparedness for some conventional threats. The gap between perceived threat and preparedness for armed conflict with another country is just two percentage points. For a major health epidemic, the proportion who believe Canada is prepared matches the proportion who regard it as a real threat.

The contrast with the United States is substantial. Americans report much larger gaps across the range of threats measured, including those involving conventional military conflict. The two countries share a continent and a close defence relationship, but their citizens have markedly different assessments of their countries' preparedness.

Recognizing the Threat Is Not Enough

The findings present a challenge for the leaders gathering at this year's Halifax International Security Forum. The public is not indifferent to the dangers facing democratic countries. Large majorities recognize serious threats, and concern about some emerging technologies is increasing rapidly. What is less certain is whether people believe their governments have kept pace. The difference between recognizing a threat and believing a country is prepared to confront it is important. Public confidence in national security depends not simply on identifying dangers, but on demonstrating an ability to respond. As democratic leaders gather in Halifax, the survey suggests that governments have work to do convincing their citizens that they are prepared for the threats they already recognize.

About the Study

The Ipsos World Affairs and Security Report 2026 was conducted online among 22,526 adults under the age of 75 across 30 countries between September 25 and October 9, 2026.

The study examines perceptions of international security threats, confidence in government preparedness and attitudes toward global affairs. Historical comparisons are based on the 20 countries included consistently in the annual research.

The 30-country results represent averages across the countries surveyed rather than population-weighted estimates of global public opinion.

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