A group of people, likely a militia or far-right group, are gathered outdoors. They are wearing blue short-sleeved shirts, tan cargo pants, and tan balaclavas (face coverings) and caps. They are holding numerous American flags on poles. In the background, the Washington Monument is visible against a cloudy sky. The scene is captured from a low angle, looking up at the participants and the monument.

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Center for Preventive Action

Preventive Priorities Survey 2024

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Preventive Priorities Survey 2024

Paul B. Stares

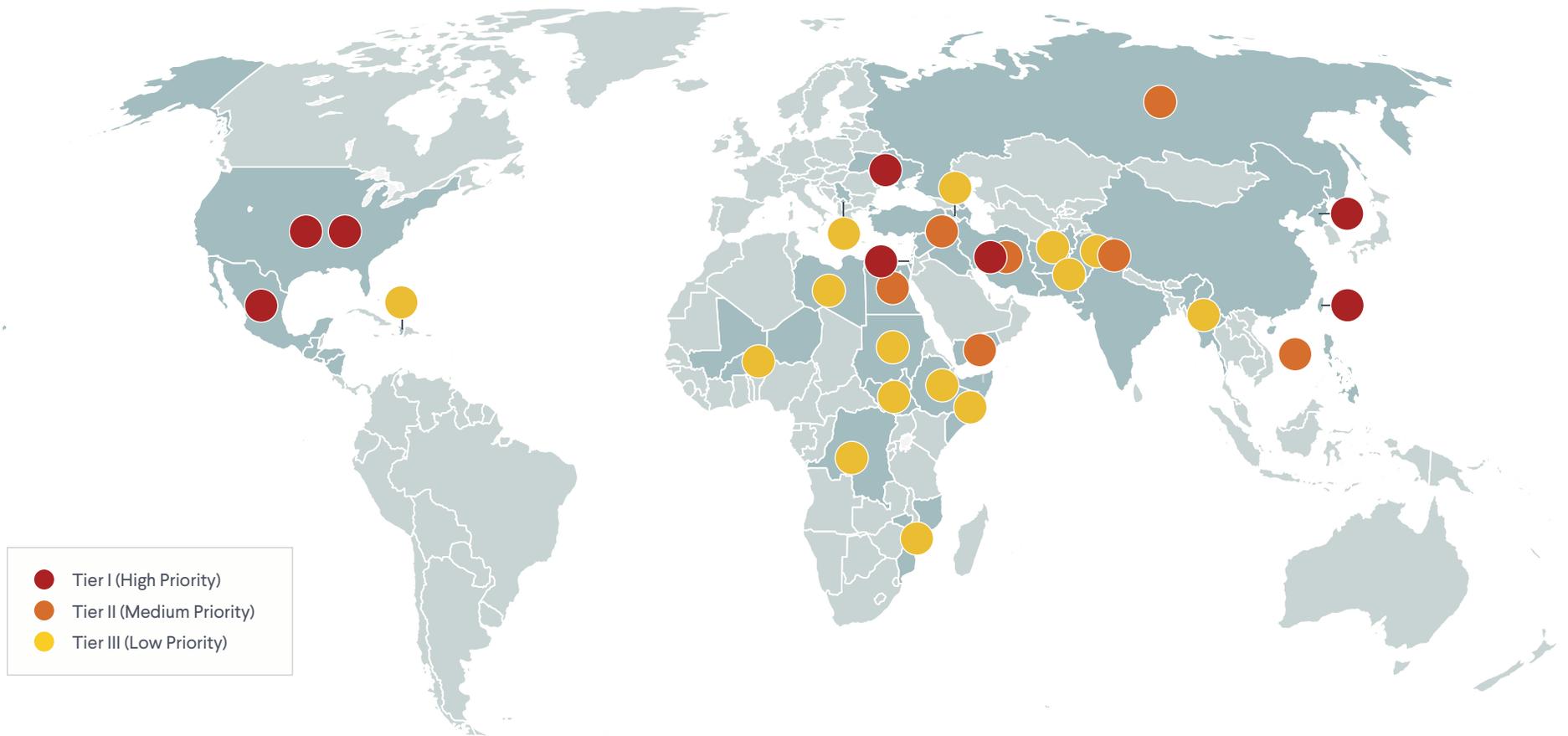
General John W. Vessey Senior Fellow for Conflict Prevention

Director, Center for Preventive Action

The Center for Preventive Action's annual Preventive Priorities Survey (PPS) evaluates ongoing and potential conflicts based on their likelihood of occurring in the coming year and their impact on U.S. interests. The PPS aims to help the U.S. policymaking community prioritize competing conflict prevention and mitigation demands.

To learn more about ongoing conflicts, visit the "Global Conflict Tracker" at cfr.org/globalconflictracker.

The Top Conflicts to Watch in 2024



About the Preventive Priorities Survey

When the Preventive Priorities Survey (PPS) was launched in 2008, the United States was deeply engaged in the global war on terror. With large numbers of U.S. armed forces deployed in Afghanistan, Iraq, and around the world following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the United States could ill afford yet more overseas military commitments. The PPS was primarily created, therefore, to alert U.S. policymakers to potentially threatening sources of instability and conflict overseas so they could take timely preventive action and reduce the risk of additional military interventions.

While the rationale for the PPS remains essentially the same, the global security environment has dramatically changed since 2008. The foreign terrorist threat to the U.S. homeland has receded significantly, but other concerns have emerged. Of those, by far the most worrisome is the growing risk of armed conflict with Russia, especially since the war in Ukraine began in 2022, as well as with China, as a result of rising tensions across the Taiwan Strait and in the South China Sea. The past twelve months have also seen violent conflict erupt or grow worse in many regions, notably in Israel and the Palestinian territories, as well as in Sudan, the Sahel, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Myanmar, and between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. In short, the trend toward *less* armed conflict around the world since the end of the Cold War is now moving in the opposite direction.

With so many ongoing crises, U.S. policymakers are understandably consumed with managing daily events and have limited bandwidth to think about future threats to peace and security, much less devote a great deal of time and energy to averting them. Where they choose to focus their attention has to be carefully prioritized as a consequence. CFR's annual Preventive Priorities Survey is designed to help them do just that. Each year, the PPS polls hundreds of American foreign policy experts for their assessment of the likelihood and the potential harm to U.S. interests of thirty conflict-related contingencies that have been judged to be plausible in the coming twelve months (see methodology, page 4). The results are then collated, and the contingencies are sorted into three tiers of relative priority for preventive action.



Palestinians inspect the rubble of destroyed buildings following Israeli air strikes on the town of Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip on October 26, 2023. (Mohammed Dahman/AP Photo)

In prior years, only overseas or foreign-sourced risks to U.S. interests were evaluated in the PPS. However, during the public solicitation of contingencies for the 2024 PPS, the level of concern expressed about the risk of politically motivated violence in the United States, especially surrounding the upcoming presidential election, was too great to disregard.

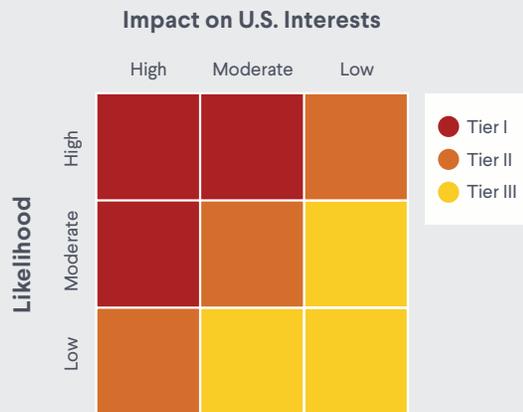
The scope of this year's PPS is otherwise unchanged. The survey did not ask experts to assess broad trends like global warming, demographic change, or technological developments because it is inherently difficult to gauge how such trends could trigger conflict in a specific area over the next twelve months. Nor does the PPS attempt to evaluate the risk associated with more discrete events such as earthquakes, severe weather events, public health crises, or the death of a specific leader, all of which can undermine political stability.

Such random events are inherently unpredictable within a short time frame.

The PPS also does not evaluate more than thirty contingencies each year, even though many more could be added. Respondents are given the opportunity, however, to name additional conflict-related concerns they believe warrant attention. The most frequently suggested appear in the list of "Other Noted Concerns."

Finally, the results reflect expert opinion at the time the survey was conducted in November 2023. The world is a dynamic place and geopolitical risk assessments need to be regularly updated to reflect changing circumstances. For this reason, CPA monitors ongoing and emerging conflicts with its award-winning "Global Conflict Tracker" interactive, accessible at cfr.org/globalconflicttracker.

Risk Assessment Matrix



Definitions

Impact on U.S. Interests

- **High:** contingency directly threatens the U.S. homeland, a defense treaty ally, or a vital strategic interest, and thus is likely to trigger a U.S. military response
- **Moderate:** contingency indirectly threatens the U.S. homeland and/or affects a country of strategic importance to the United States that is not a defense treaty ally
- **Low:** contingency affects a country of limited strategic importance to the United States but could have severe/widespread humanitarian consequences

Likelihood

- **High:** contingency is probable to highly likely to occur in 2024
- **Moderate:** contingency has an even chance of occurring in 2024
- **Low:** contingency is improbable to highly unlikely to occur in 2024

Methodology

The Center for Preventive Action carried out the 2024 PPS in three stages:

1. Soliciting PPS Contingencies

In October 2023, CPA utilized various social media platforms to solicit suggestions about possible conflicts to include in the survey. With the help of the Council on Foreign Relations' in-house regional experts, CPA narrowed down the list of possible conflicts to thirty contingencies deemed both plausible in 2024 and potentially harmful to U.S. interests.

2. Polling Foreign Policy Experts

In November 2023, the survey was sent to more than 15,000 U.S. government officials, foreign policy experts, and academics, of whom approximately 550 responded. Each was asked to estimate the impact on U.S. interests and likelihood of each contingency according to general guidelines (see risk assessment matrix definitions).

3. Ranking the Conflicts

The survey results were then scored according to their ranking, and the contingencies were subsequently sorted into one of three preventive priority tiers (I, II, and III) according to their placement on the accompanying risk assessment matrix.



Ukrainian servicemen fire a D-30 howitzer at Russian positions near Bakhmut in eastern Ukraine on March 21, 2023. (Sergey Shestak/AFP via Getty Images)

2024 Findings

There are several notable takeaways from this year's survey:

- By far the leading concern is the possibility of domestic terrorism and acts of political violence in the United States, particularly around the 2024 presidential election. This was rated a high-likelihood, high-impact contingency, thus validating its inclusion in this year's PPS.
- A total of three Tier I contingencies were judged to be both high-likelihood and high-impact—an unprecedented number since the annual PPS began in 2008. Besides election-related violence in the United States, the other two include an escalation of the Israel-Hamas war into a wider regional conflict and a surge of migration to the southwest U.S. border caused by criminal violence, corruption, and economic hardship in Central America and Mexico. All eight Tier I contingencies, moreover, were judged to be potentially very harmful to U.S. interests should they materialize.
- Only two of the thirty contingencies in the 2024 PPS are judged as having a low probability of occurring, and both were judged to have a high potential impact on U.S. interests—yet another indicator of growing anxiety about the direction of world affairs. These are an armed confrontation in the South China Sea and a potential power struggle in Moscow stemming from elite dissatisfaction over the war in Ukraine. While the latter concern dropped from being a Tier I priority in 2023 to a Tier II priority in 2024, several others have risen in the rankings. The possibility of escalating violence between Turkish security forces and various armed Kurdish groups, renewed hostilities in Yemen, and armed clashes between Indian and Chinese troops along their disputed Himalayan border all rose from Tier III to Tier II.
- Half of the 2024 contingencies are judged to be Tier III priorities—moderately likely to occur, but with a low impact on U.S. interests. For several concerns in this category, however, this assessment is surprising, not least the growing risk of political instability in Pakistan—a country that possesses nuclear weapons. The same is also true regarding possible conflict over the disputed region of Kashmir between Pakistan and India—also a nuclear armed power. The looming likelihood of state collapse in Haiti, a country close to the United States, arguably also merits greater concern. Finally, it is remarkable how potentially threatening developments in Afghanistan and

Kosovo—two places that were once considered of great import to the United States—are now considered Tier III priorities.

Additional observations of this year's survey are also noteworthy:

Four new contingencies were included in the 2024 Preventive Priorities Survey. Aside from domestic terrorism and political violence in the United States, the possibility of renewed conflict in South Sudan, civil unrest in Egypt, and increasing political instability in Pakistan were added this year.

Fourteen contingencies changed significantly from last year's survey. Those concerning Mozambique and Taiwan were amended to take into account scheduled national elections in 2024. The long-standing Israeli-Palestinian conflict contingency was updated in light of the Israel-Hamas war that erupted on October 7, 2023. The Yemen contingency was also amended



Top: A Chinese Coast Guard vessel (left) blocks a Filipino-chartered supply boat (right) on a mission to deliver provisions at Second Thomas Shoal in the South China Sea on November 10, 2023. (Jam Sta Rosa/AFP via Getty Images)

Bottom: The Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo arrest a militiaman in Goma on April 13, 2023. (Veronique de Viguerie/Paris Match via Getty Images)

to reflect growing regional tensions due to the Israel-Hamas conflict. The Ukraine contingency now takes into account how the war could expand geographically, while the contingency regarding hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan reflects the September 2023 clash over Nagorno-Karabakh and its subsequent political dissolution. The revised Libya contingency acknowledges increasing fighting within the countries' factions, as well as between them, and the Ethiopia contingency has been altered to account for a shift in the central government's priorities from fighting the Tigray People's Liberation Front to fighting other regional militias to consolidate national control. The Somalia contingency was also changed slightly to include the potential for violence to spill over into Kenya. The possibility of a leadership struggle in Moscow is now viewed as more likely to occur as a result



Top: A military battalion patrols a community in Apopa, El Salvador, as a part of President Nayib Bukele's crackdown against gangs on October 11, 2023. (Marvin Recinos/AFP via Getty Images)

Bottom: Smoke rises above buildings during clashes between the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces and the Sudanese army in Khartoum North on May 1, 2023. (Mohamed Nureldin Abdallah/Reuters)

of elite dissatisfaction than popular unrest. The Sudan contingency was updated to reflect the outbreak of civil war in April 2023, and the possibility of a clash in the South China Sea specifically mentions the maritime dispute between China and the Philippines as a potential flashpoint. Finally, the Democratic Republic of Congo contingency now includes the possibility of neighboring states' direct intervention, and the mention of international stabilization efforts was added to the Haiti contingency.

Four contingencies assessed in the 2023 survey were not included this year. Those relating to the possibility of military conflict along the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border and between Greece and Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean were dropped, as neither concern was raised during the crowdsourcing phase. So too were state collapse in Lebanon and growing political instability in Venezuela, as they received few mentions relative to other concerns.

Other Noted Concerns

Although the survey was limited to thirty contingencies, government officials and foreign policy experts had the opportunity to suggest additional potential crises that they believe warrant attention. The following additional contingencies garnered the most concern from respondents:

- A spillover of violence from the Sahel and increasing political instability in **Coastal West Africa**
- Violent competition among criminal organizations in **Ecuador**, leading to an acute public security crisis
- Disputes over Red Sea port access trigger an escalation of fighting between **Ethiopia and Eritrea** or their proxy groups, potentially leading to a larger war
- Increasingly assertive **Russian** behavior in other parts of Eastern Europe, as well as the **Arctic**, leading to a confrontation with the United States and/or NATO allies
- Political repression in **Venezuela**, especially surrounding scheduled 2024 elections, leading to worsening humanitarian conditions and increased migration outflows

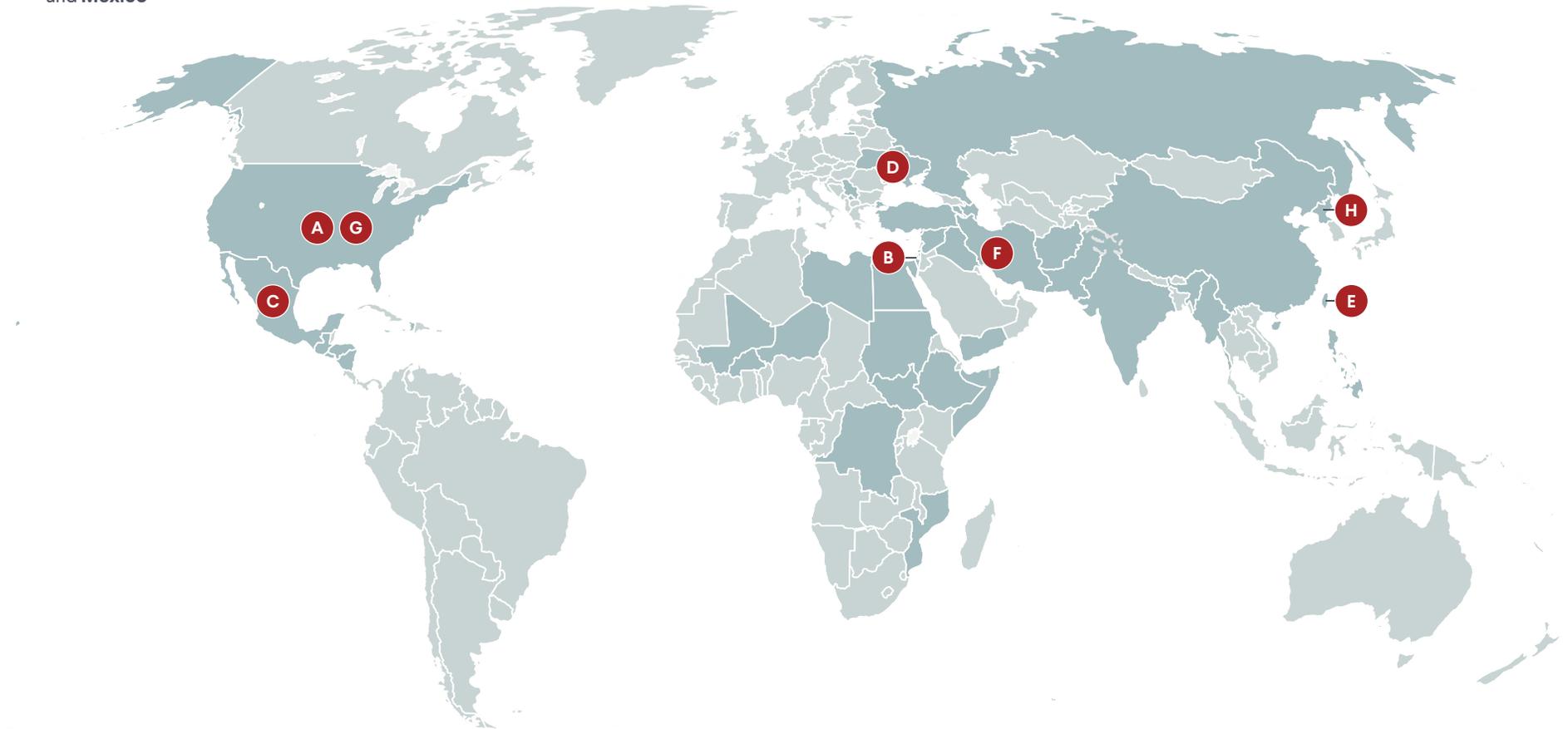
Tier I ■

Likelihood: High
Impact: High

- A** Growing political polarization in the **United States**, particularly around the 2024 presidential election, leads to acts of domestic terrorism and political violence
- B** A protracted war between **Hamas** and **Israel** in Gaza ignites a wider regional conflict involving other Palestinian territories and further clashes between Israel and Islamist militant groups in Lebanon and Syria
- C** A surge in migration to the southwest border of the United States driven by criminal violence, corruption, and economic hardship in **Central America** and **Mexico**

Likelihood: Moderate
Impact: High

- D** An escalation of the war in **Ukraine** resulting from intensified military operations in Crimea, the Black Sea, and/or neighboring states, including **Russia**, potentially leading to direct NATO involvement
- E** Intensified economic and military pressure by **China** toward **Taiwan**, especially around the 2024 Taiwanese presidential election, precipitates a severe cross-strait crisis involving the United States and other countries in the region
- F** Direct military confrontation between **Iran** and **Israel** triggered by Iran's support for militant groups in the region and continued nuclear weapons development
- G** A highly disruptive cyberattack on **U.S. critical infrastructure**, including electoral systems, by a state or nonstate entity
- H** An acute security crisis in Northeast Asia triggered by **North Korea's** further development and testing of nuclear weapons and long-range ballistic missiles



Tier II ■

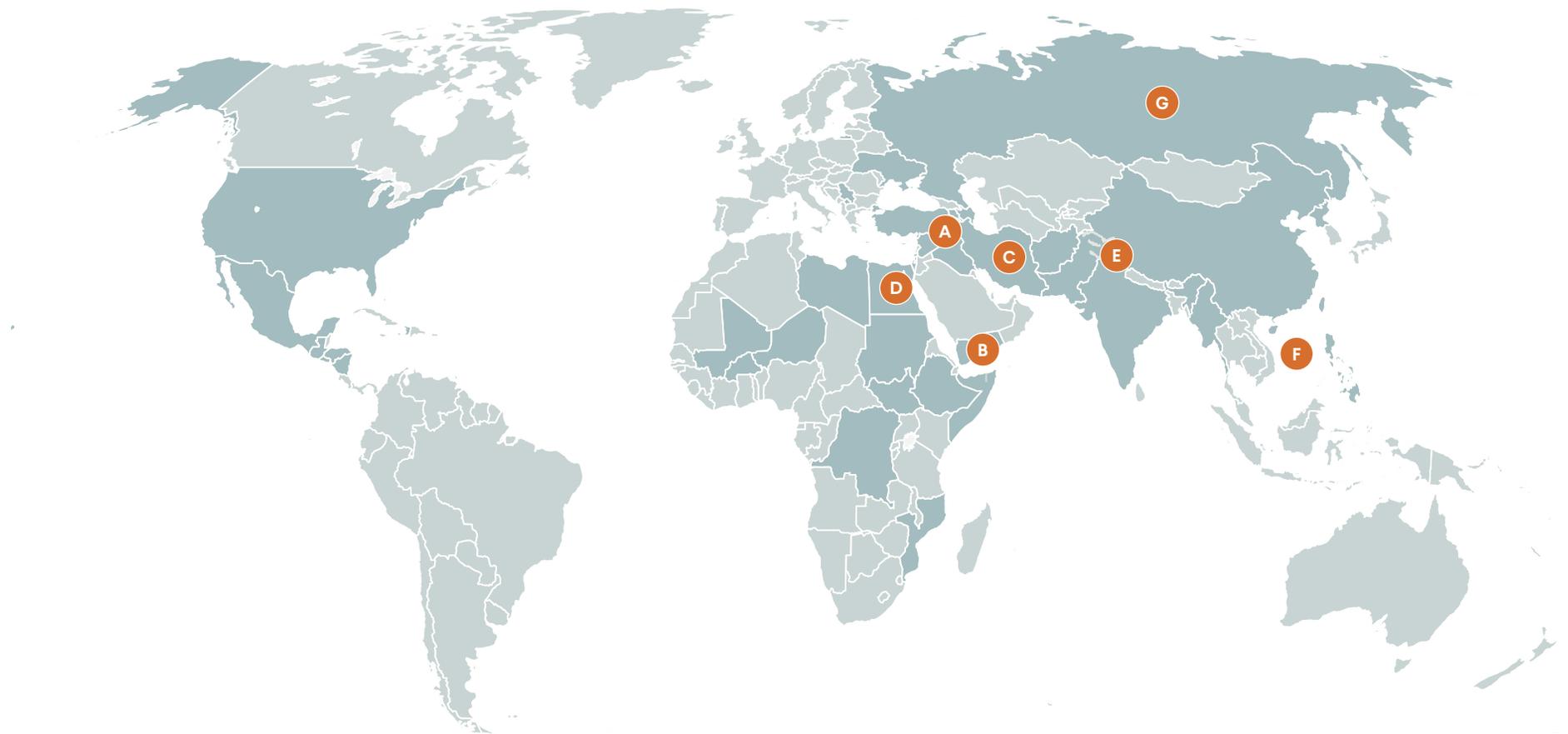
Likelihood: Moderate
Impact: Moderate

- A** An escalation in violence between **Turkish** security forces and various armed Kurdish groups within **Iraq** and/or **Syria**
- B** Renewed hostilities between Saudi-led government forces and Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in **Yemen**, triggered by increasing tensions between Iran, Israel, and Saudi Arabia
- C** Renewed popular unrest in **Iran** triggered by further repression and economic hardship leads to increasing civilian casualties and growing political instability

- D** Widespread civil unrest in **Egypt** around upcoming national elections, aggravated by refugee inflows and economic hardship
- E** An increase in military deployments and infrastructure development on the **China-India** border, prompting armed clashes between Chinese and Indian troops

Likelihood: Low
Impact: High

- F** Aggressive Chinese actions in the **South China Sea**, especially toward the **Philippines**, leading to an armed confrontation involving China, the United States, and U.S. allies
- G** Elite dissatisfaction in **Russia** due to military setbacks in Ukraine and further sanctions, precipitating a power struggle in Moscow

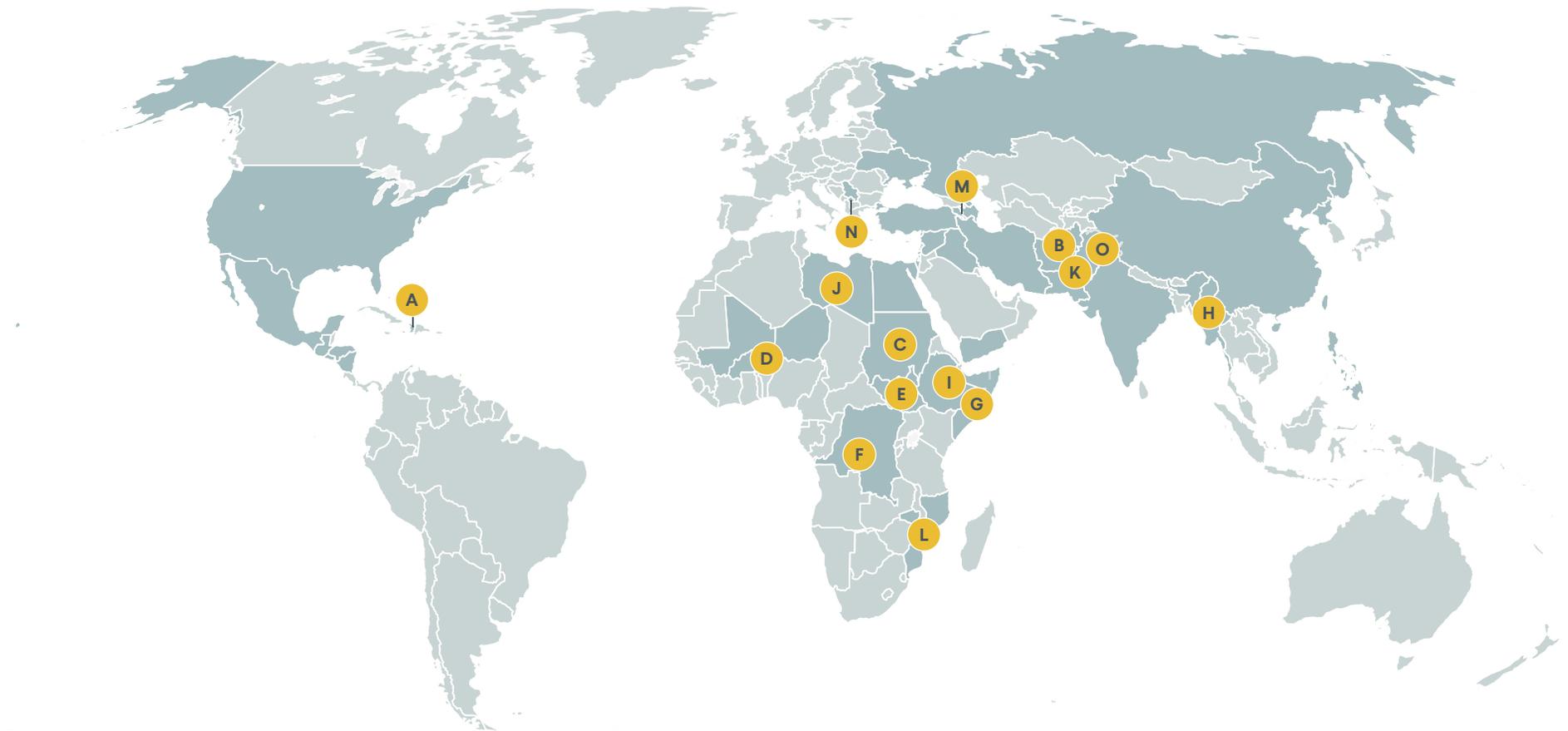


Tier III ■

Likelihood: Moderate

Impact: Low

- A** International stabilization efforts in **Haiti** fail to reduce violence and insecurity, accelerating state collapse
- B** Further repressive actions by the Taliban and clashes involving armed groups in **Afghanistan**, leading to worsening humanitarian conditions and additional refugee outflows
- C** Protracted fighting between warring factions in **Sudan**, compounded by renewed ethnic violence in Darfur, leading to an acute humanitarian crisis with destabilizing effects on neighboring countries
- D** Weakening governance in the **Sahel** (especially in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger), leading to intensified violent conflict between state and nonstate actors, deepening the humanitarian crisis
- E** Renewed conflict in **South Sudan**, provoked by political violence around the scheduled national elections in 2024
- F** An escalation of conflict between state and nonstate armed groups over territory and natural resources in the eastern **Democratic Republic of Congo**, leading to worsening humanitarian conditions and the direct intervention of neighboring states
- G** The planned drawdown of African Union forces and worsening famine conditions in **Somalia**, leading to intensified conflict between government forces and al-Shabaab militants, with spillover violence in neighboring Kenya



- H** Increasing atrocities committed by the junta in **Myanmar**, leading to growing political instability, increased refugee outflows, and heightened regional tensions
- I** Increasingly aggressive efforts by the central government of **Ethiopia** to neutralize regional militias and consolidate its political control, triggering a wider civil war
- J** Worsening armed conflict within and between warring coalitions in **Libya** increases civilian casualties and displacement
- K** An increase in Taliban-backed militant activity and popular unrest in **Pakistan**, leading to growing political instability and escalating clashes with the Taliban in Afghanistan
- L** Violent unrest in **Mozambique** around the 2024 national elections, leading to expanded militant control and increased civilian casualties
- M** Renewed hostilities between **Armenia** and **Azerbaijan** over outstanding territorial disputes in the aftermath of the violent dissolution of Nagorno-Karabakh
- N** An increase in ethnic and political violence in **Kosovo** triggers an armed confrontation between Kosovo and **Serbia**, inflaming regional tensions and potentially necessitating foreign military intervention
- O** Escalating unrest, militant activity, and repression in Indian-administered Kashmir, provoking renewed tensions between **India** and **Pakistan** and a breakdown of cease-fire commitments

About the Center for Preventive Action

The Center for Preventive Action (CPA) seeks to help prevent, defuse, or resolve deadly conflicts around the world and to expand the body of knowledge on conflict prevention. It does so by creating a forum in which representatives of governments, international organizations, nongovernmental organizations, corporations, and civil society can gather to develop operational and timely strategies for promoting peace in specific conflict situations. The center focuses on conflicts in countries or regions that affect U.S. interests, but may be otherwise overlooked; where prevention appears possible; and when the resources of the Council on Foreign Relations can make a difference. The center does this by:

- *Issuing regular reports* to evaluate and respond rapidly to developing sources of instability and formulate timely, concrete policy recommendations that the U.S. government, international community, and local actors can use to limit the potential for deadly violence.
- *Engaging the U.S. government and news media* in conflict prevention efforts. CPA staff members meet with administration officials and members of Congress to brief on CPA's findings and recommendations, facilitate contacts between U.S. officials and important local and external actors, and raise awareness among journalists of potential flashpoints around the globe.
- *Building networks with international organizations and institutions* to complement and leverage the Council's established influence in the U.S. policy arena and increase the impact of CPA's recommendations.
- *Providing a source of expertise on conflict prevention* to include research, case studies, and lessons learned from past conflicts that policymakers and private citizens can use to prevent or mitigate future deadly conflicts.

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Cover: Members of the far-right group Patriot Front march through Washington, DC, on May 13, 2023. (Nathan Posner|Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

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