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Center for Preventive Action

Preventive Priorities Survey 2022

The Preventive Priorities Survey was made possible by a generous grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the Center for Preventive Action.

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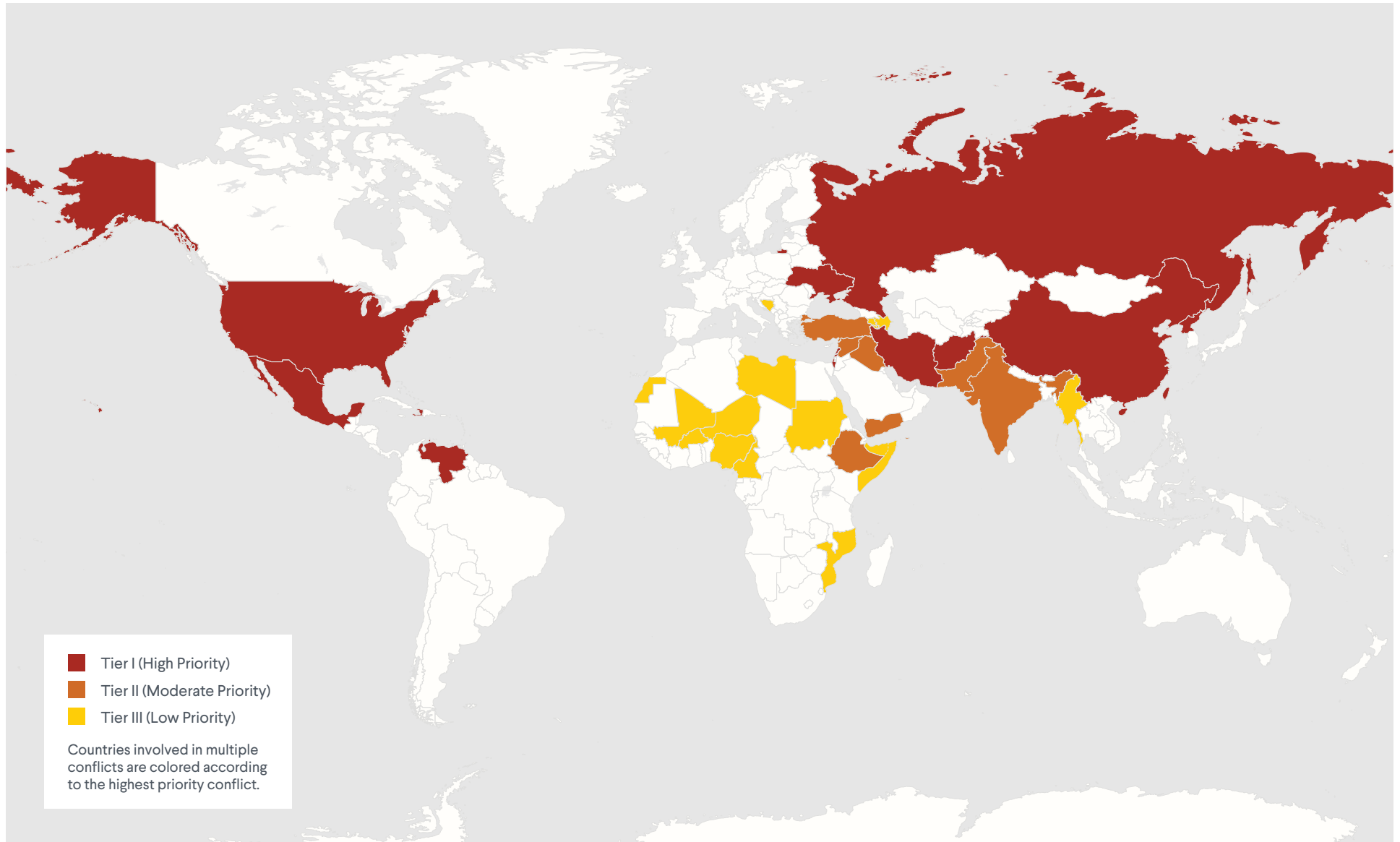
Paul B. Stares

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 crisis mitigation demands.

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



About the Preventive Priorities Survey

Since taking office, the Joe Biden administration has been regularly reminded of how unstable and dangerous the world can be. Violent conflicts have erupted or escalated in virtually every region. Tensions have also been steadily rising among the major powers over territorial disputes in Eastern Europe, South Asia, and the Western Pacific. In many instances, important U.S. interests have been directly threatened or even harmed. Preventing these sources of violent instability from worsening—and new ones from arising—is clearly a desirable policy goal for the United States.

Reducing the risk of violent conflict, however, is easier said than done. The future is inherently unpredictable, and the United States has to worry about many plausible contingencies given its global interests and worldwide security commitments. Policymakers, moreover, typically focus their attention on the demands of the present rather than what may or may not happen in the future. The United States, however, need not be hostage to fortune. Informed judgments can be made about the probability of unwelcome developments arising in a given time frame on the basis of current trends and known risk factors associated with comparable situations in the past. Similarly, it is also possible to weigh the likely impact on U.S. interests should certain contingencies occur. Together, these estimates can help policymakers reach prudent decisions about where to focus their conflict prevention efforts.



A UN High Commissioner for Refugees worker moves aid supplies outside a distribution center on the outskirts of Kabul, Afghanistan, on October 28, 2021. (Zohra Bensemra/Reuters)



Members of Bosnia and Herzegovina's joint armed forces take part in military exercises near Sarajevo on November 30, 2021. (Getty Images)

With these goals in mind, the Center for Preventive Action (CPA) at the Council on Foreign Relations has surveyed American foreign policy experts every year since 2008 to ascertain which sources of instability and conflict warrant the most concern for the coming year. Each respondent is asked to assess the likelihood and potential impact on U.S. interests of thirty contingencies identified in an earlier public solicitation (see methodology, page 4). Those events or series of events were judged to be plausible over the next twelve months—a timeframe that permits more confident forecasting and allows time for a meaningful policy response. The results are then aggregated and the contingencies sorted into three tiers of relative priority for preventive action.

As in previous years, the results of this exercise should be interpreted with care for three reasons. First, the survey only included contingencies of a certain type—those where U.S.

military force could plausibly be employed. We excluded, therefore, broad global trends such as climate change and many potential crises that could harm U.S. interests but are not inherently violent, such as economic or health-related events and potential natural or man-made disasters. Second, although it is a growing concern, we excluded domestic unrest and conflict within the United States to focus on foreign threats. Respondents were given the opportunity, however, to write in additional foreign concerns that they believed warranted attention; the most common of those are included as noted concerns. Third, the results reflect expert opinion at the time the survey was conducted in November 2021. The world is a dynamic place, and so assessments of risk and the ordering of priorities should be regularly updated, which CPA does with its award-winning Global Conflict Tracker interactive, accessible at cfr.org/globalconflicttracker.

Methodology

The Center for Preventive Action carried out the 2022 PPS in three stages:

1. Soliciting PPS Contingencies

In October 2021, CPA harnessed 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 over the next twelve months and potentially harmful to U.S. interests.

2. Polling Foreign Policy Experts

In November 2021, the survey was sent to more than 11,300 U.S. government officials, foreign policy experts, and academics, of whom close to 400 responded. Each was asked to estimate the impact on U.S. interests and likelihood of each contingency according to general guidelines (see risk assessment 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.

Risk Assessment Matrix

		Impact on U.S. Interests		
		High	Moderate	Low
Likelihood	High			
	Moderate			
	Low			

Tier I
 Tier II
 Tier III

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 2022
- **Moderate:** contingency has an even chance of occurring in 2022
- **Low:** contingency is improbable to highly unlikely to occur in 2022



Smoke rises from fires in the aftermath of an airstrike in Mekele, the capital of Ethiopia's northern region, Tigray, on October 20, 2021. (AP Photo)



A street barricade burns in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, in the wake of a demonstration over fuel shortages, on October 23, 2021. (Ralph Tedy Erol/Reuters)



A Yemeni fighter identifies a target during clashes with Houthi rebels near Marib, Yemen, on June 20, 2021. (Nariman El-Mofty/AP Photo)

2022 Findings

Notable takeaways from this year's survey include the following:

- For the first time since the PPS was launched fourteen years ago, a mass-casualty terrorist attack on the United States or a treaty ally by a foreign terrorist organization is no longer judged to be a Tier I priority. A narrow majority of respondents assessed this contingency to be a low probability in 2022. However, the possibility of a highly disruptive cyberattack on U.S. critical infrastructure remains a Tier I concern for 2022.
- No contingencies in this year's survey were assessed as being both highly likely and having a potentially high impact on U.S. interests—a departure from previous surveys. While the top-ranked concern last year—a renewed crisis on the Korean peninsula—remains a Tier 1 priority, it is now judged to have an even chance of occurring. For 2022, the contingency assessed to be the most likely to happen is a humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.
- In this year's survey, contingencies involving Haiti and Lebanon became Tier I priorities for the first time. Two additional contingencies involving Mexico and Ukraine, which were assessed to be Tier II concerns in last year's survey, were upgraded to Tier I concerns for 2022. For only the second time, three contingencies in the Western Hemisphere—growing political upheaval and deteriorating public security in Haiti, continuing deterioration of social and economic conditions in Venezuela, and surging armed competition among criminal organizations in Mexico—were assessed to be Tier I priorities.



A member of the self-proclaimed Luhansk People's Republic walks in a trench at the line of separation from Ukrainian armed forces in Donetsk, Ukraine, on April 8, 2021. (Alexander Ermochenko/Reuters)

- Contingencies potentially leading to confrontation among major powers continue to be prominent. A serious crisis involving the United States and China over Taiwan remains a Tier I concern, while an armed clash in the South China Sea between the United States and China and another military confrontation between China and India are judged to be Tier II risks.
- Following a trend from previous surveys, Africa and the Middle East were judged to be the most crisis-prone regions in 2022. Each contingency involving African states was ranked as having a low impact on U.S. interests.

Additional findings from this year's survey are also noteworthy:

Seven new contingencies were included in this year's survey. The new contingencies consist of growing political unrest and separatist threats in Bosnia and Herzegovina, growing ethnic tensions and political instability in Cameroon, escalating tensions and potential military confrontation between Ethiopia and Sudan, growing political upheaval and deteriorating public security in Haiti, a military confrontation between Iran and Israel, escalation of violence between government and insurgent forces in Mozambique, and heightened tensions between Algeria and Morocco over sovereignty in Western Sahara.

Three contingencies changed in significant ways from previous surveys. This year's contingency involving Afghanistan outlines the risk of a worsening humanitarian crisis, a shift from last year's contingency concerning the collapse of the peace process. The 2022 Iran contingency considers a potential confrontation between Iran and Israel, while last year's contingency focused on an armed confrontation between Iran and the United States or one of its allies. Finally, this year's Myanmar contingency covers growing political and ethnic repression, while last year's contingency highlighted continued violence against Muslim Rohingyas.

Six contingencies assessed last year were not included in the 2022 survey. Increasing Russian interference in Belarus; continued violent reimposition of government control in Syria; Russian interference or intimidation against a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO); disputed claims to resource-rich waters in the eastern Mediterranean Sea, leading to a military escalation between Greece and Turkey; deteriorating economic and security conditions in the Northern Triangle;

and increasing al-Shabab attacks and territorial gains in Somalia were not identified as significant concerns in the crowdsourcing phase and thus were dropped.

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 were the most commonly cited:

- A growing refugee crisis at Belarus's border, triggering violent confrontation against asylum seekers and between Belarus and Poland
- Deteriorating political and economic conditions in Central America, triggering increased migration outflows to the southern U.S. border
- A military coup in Brazil, resulting in widespread civil unrest and political instability
- An armed confrontation in the East China Sea among the United States, China, and/or Japan, stemming from tensions over the sovereignty of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands

Tier I ■

Likelihood: High

Impact: Moderate

- A worsening humanitarian crisis in **Afghanistan** caused by acute food shortages, continuing political instability, and diminished foreign assistance, leading to a mass exodus of refugees
- Growing political upheaval and deteriorating public security in **Haiti**, leading to a worsening humanitarian crisis and a mass exodus of refugees
- Growing political instability and social unrest in **Lebanon**, leading to the collapse of state institutions and increasing sectarian violence
- Continuing deterioration of social and economic conditions in **Venezuela**, leading to further political strife and increasing migration outflows

Likelihood: Moderate

Impact: High

- Intensifying coercive pressure by **China** toward **Taiwan**, leading to a major cross-strait crisis involving the United States and/or other countries in the region
- A military confrontation between **Iran** and **Israel** over Iran's nuclear program and continued support for militant groups in neighboring countries
- Surging armed competition among criminal organizations in **Mexico**, resulting in increased civilian casualties, growing political corruption, and a surge in refugees and asylum-seekers
- The resumption of **North Korea's** long-range ballistic missile testing and/or nuclear weapons development, triggering a renewed crisis on the Korean Peninsula
- Increased fighting in eastern **Ukraine** or a major military clash in contested areas, reigniting heightened tensions with **Russia**
- A highly disruptive cyberattack on **U.S. critical infrastructure** by a state or state-supported group



Tier II ■

Likelihood: High
Impact: Low

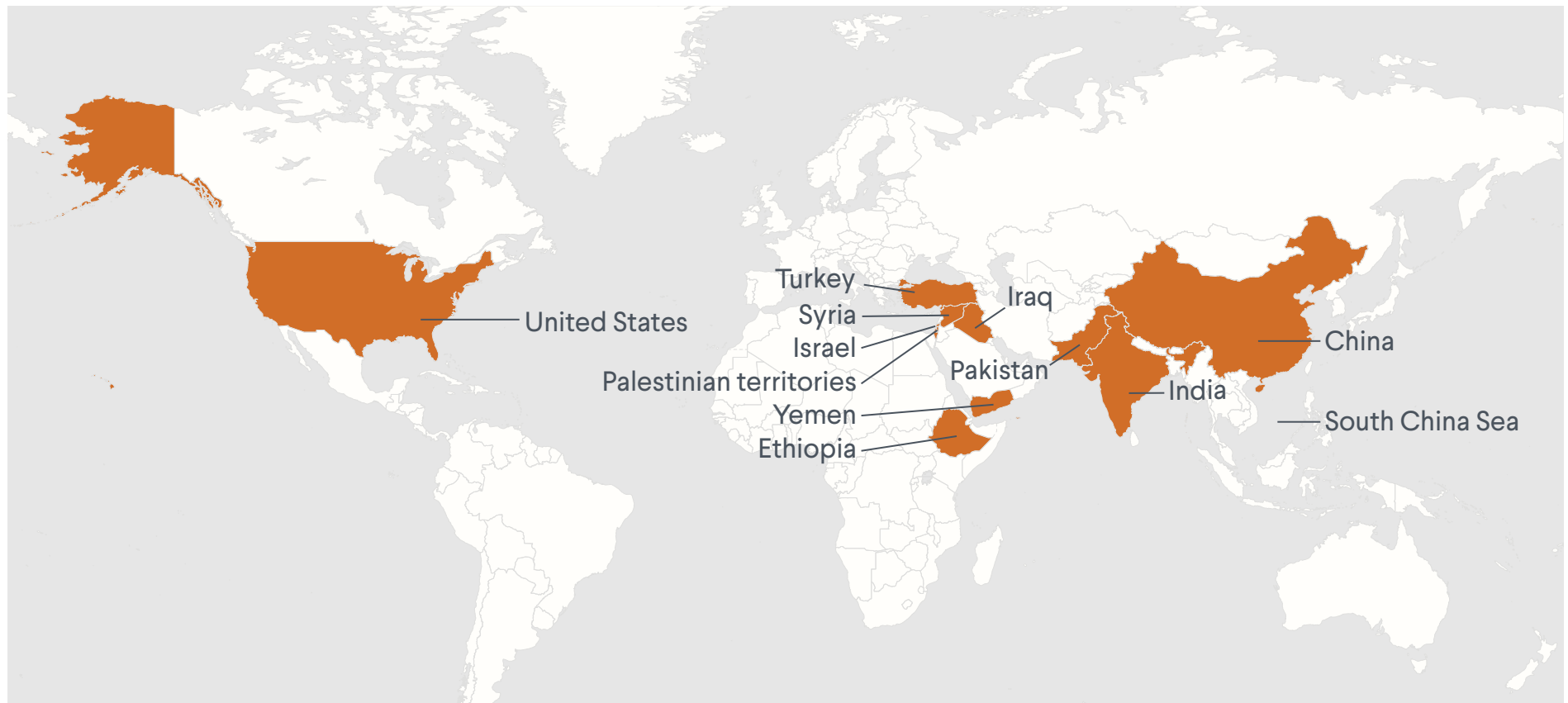
- Intensifying ethno-nationalist conflict in **Ethiopia** involving government forces and armed opposition groups, leading to a worsening humanitarian crisis with destabilizing spillover effects on the region
- Worsening economic and humanitarian crises in **Yemen**, exacerbated by continued fighting between Houthi rebels and the Saudi-led coalition

Likelihood: Moderate
Impact: Moderate

- A breakdown of deconfliction agreements between **China** and **India** over disputed border territories, leading to renewed military confrontation
- A major terrorist attack and/or heightened unrest in Indian-administered Kashmir, triggering a severe **India-Pakistan** military confrontation
- Heightened tensions between **Israelis** and **Palestinians** in Jerusalem and the West Bank as well as over the status of Gaza, leading to violent confrontations and a worsening humanitarian crisis
- Escalation of violence between Turkish security forces and various armed Kurdish groups within **Turkey** or in **Iraq** and **Syria**

Likelihood: Low
Impact: High

- An armed confrontation in the **South China Sea** between the United States and China over freedom of navigation and disputed territorial claims
- A mass-casualty terrorist attack on the **United States** or a treaty ally by a foreign terrorist organization

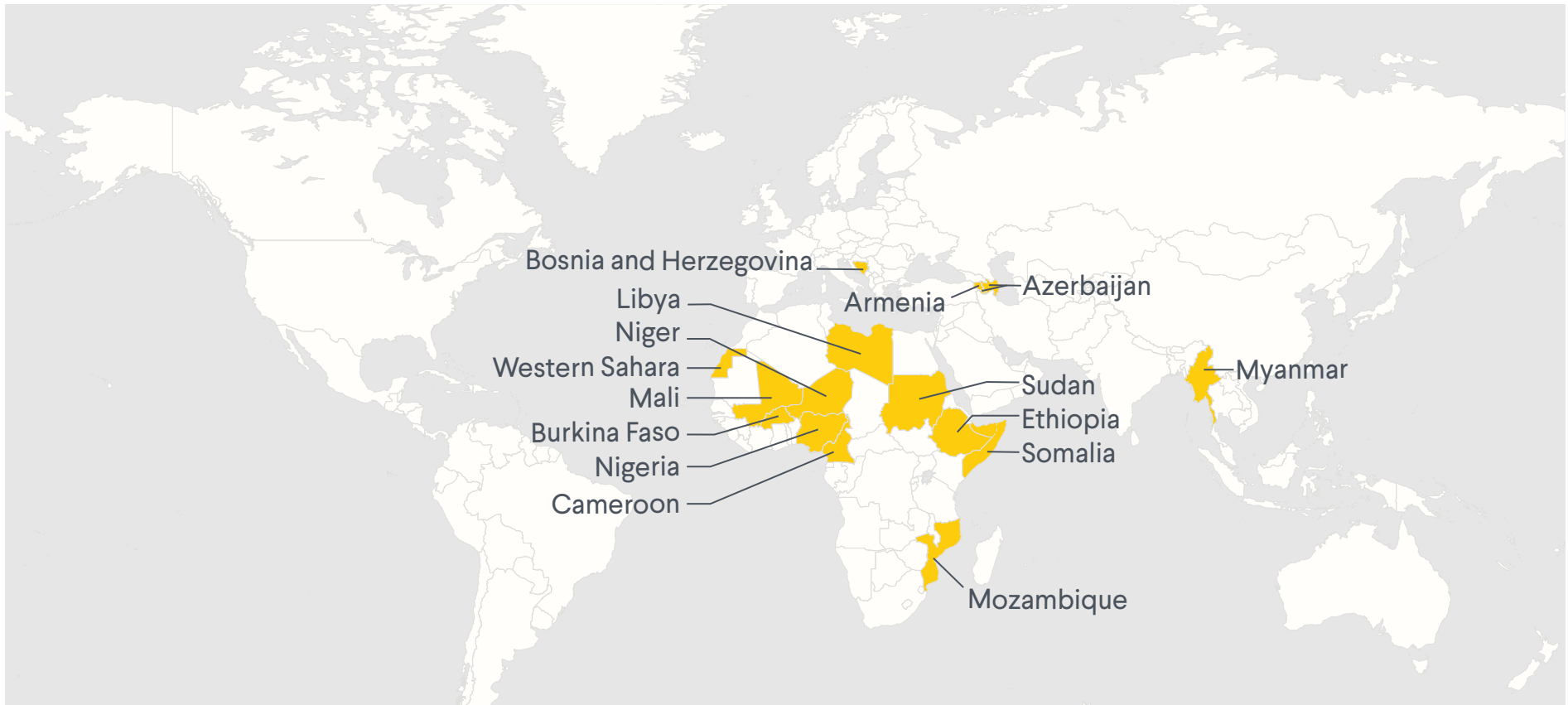


Tier III ■

Likelihood: Moderate

Impact: Low

- Renewed violent conflict between **Armenia** and **Azerbaijan** in and around Nagorno-Karabakh, sparking tensions between Russia and Turkey
- Growing political unrest and separatist threats in **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, necessitating the increased involvement of international peacekeeping forces
- Growing ethnic tensions and political instability in **Cameroon**, leading to increasing violence and a worsening humanitarian crisis
- Escalating tensions and potential military confrontation between **Ethiopia** and **Sudan** concerning the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and disputed territory
- A breakdown of the unity government in **Libya**, leading to renewed conflict among competing political factions supported by rival external powers
- Escalation of violence between government and insurgent forces in **Mozambique**, causing a worsening humanitarian crisis
- Growing political and ethnic repression in **Myanmar**, precipitating widespread violence, increased migration outflows, and heightened regional tensions
- Increasing violence, political instability, and civilian displacement in **Nigeria**, causing destabilizing spillover effects on neighboring states
- Intensifying violence, political instability, and environmental degradation in the **Sahel**, particularly the tri-border area of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, causing a worsening humanitarian crisis
- Growing violence and the further weakening of state institutions in **Somalia**, leading to an expansion of al-Shabab's military and political power
- Continued military rule and state repression in **Sudan**, leading to growing social unrest and violence, with destabilizing spillover effects on neighboring states
- Heightened tensions between Algeria and Morocco over sovereignty in **Western Sahara**, leading to an escalation of the armed conflict



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.

For more information, to sign up for the CPA Newsletter, or to access CPA's latest work, please visit our website at www.cfr.org/programs/center-preventive-action or follow us on Twitter [@CFR_CPA](https://twitter.com/CFR_CPA).

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Cover: A Taiwanese soldier peers out of a tank during the thirty-seventh annual Han Kuang military exercise in Tainan, Taiwan, on September 14, 2021. (Ceng Shou Yi/NurPhoto via AP)

Council on Foreign Relations

New York

58 East 68th Street
New York, NY 10065
212.434.9400

Washington, DC

1777 F Street, NW
Washington, DC 20006
202.509.8400