

COUNCIL *on*  
FOREIGN  
RELATIONS

*Center for Preventive Action*

---

# Preventive Priorities Survey 2020



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.

Copyright © 2019 by the Council on Foreign Relations® Inc. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America.

This publication may not be reproduced in whole or in part, in any form beyond the reproduction permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law Act (17 U.S.C. Sections 107 and 108) and excerpts by reviewers for the public press, without express written permission from the Council on Foreign Relations.

COUNCIL *on*  
FOREIGN  
RELATIONS

*Center for Preventive Action*

---

# Preventive Priorities Survey 2020

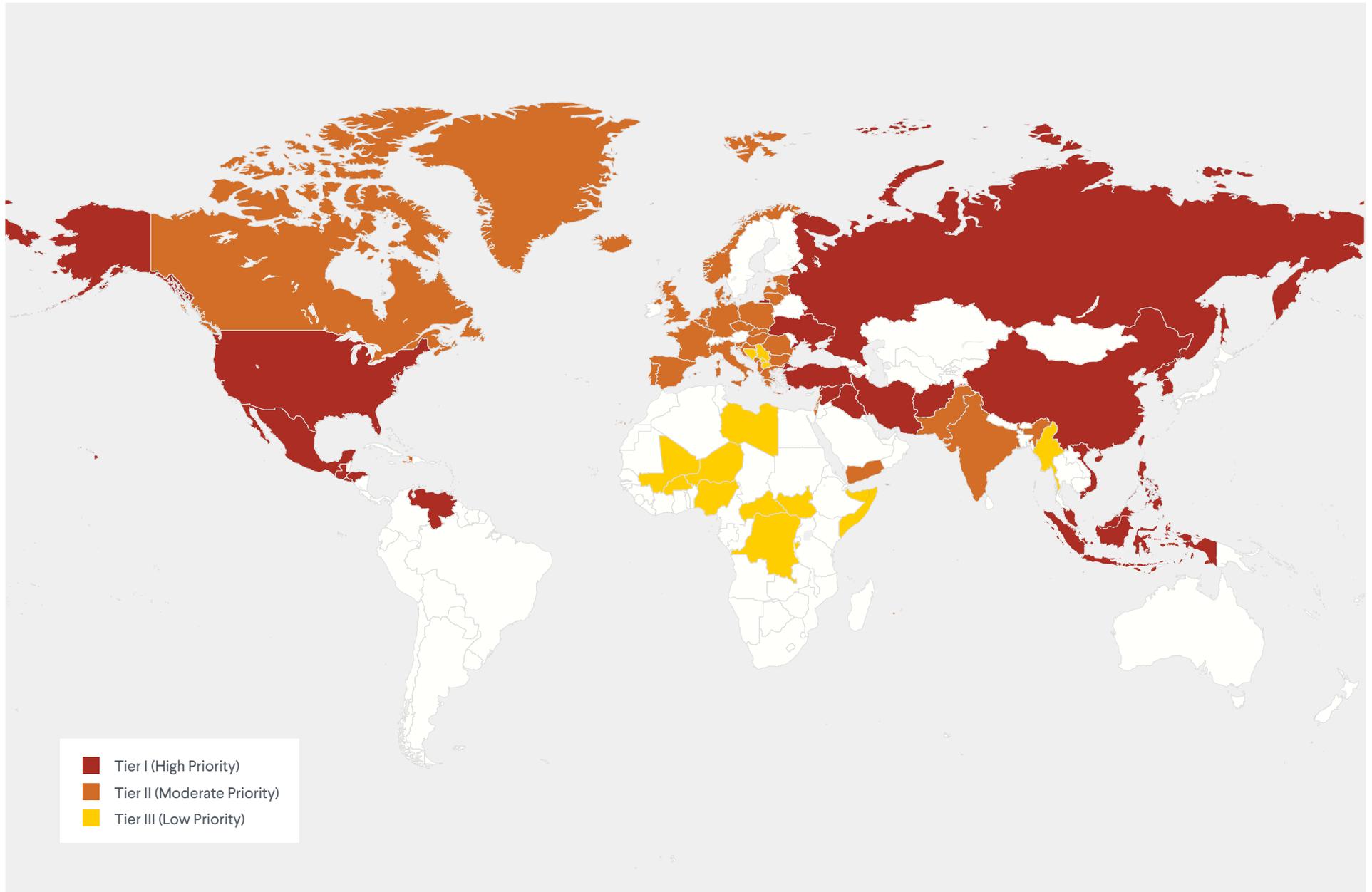
Paul B. Stares

*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/globalconflictracker](https://www.cfr.org/globalconflictracker).



## About the Preventive Priorities Survey

As the still-predominant global power with worldwide interests and commitments, the United States is more exposed to the risks of armed conflict and violent instability overseas than any other country. Preventing or managing such conflict before it causes a dangerous international crisis or humanitarian disaster that may require the use of force to protect U.S. interests and restore order—potentially at great cost—remains, therefore, a desirable foreign policy goal.

Accomplishing this task is easier said than done. U.S. policymakers are typically too consumed by the crisis of the day to devote much attention to what might happen in the future. Relying on early warning of the first signs of danger to trigger a timely response has proven, however, to be difficult. Typically, the direction of events is hard to discern. By the time there is greater clarity, it is often too late or more costly to defuse the crisis. Therefore, it is better to try to anticipate where conflict might erupt or escalate, particularly in places where U.S. interests are likely to be most at risk. In other words, policymakers should prioritize conflict prevention efforts given limited time and resources.

To help U.S. policymakers decide where to focus their attention, the Center for Preventive Action (CPA) at the Council on Foreign Relations has surveyed American foreign policy experts every year since 2008 to ascertain



Protestors march against Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro in Caracas, Venezuela, on November 16, 2019. (Carlos Garcia Rawlins/Reuters)



A CM-11 Brave Tiger tank fires during the Han Kuang live-fire exercises held by Republic of China Armed Forces in Pingtung, Taiwan, on May 30, 2019. (Tyrone Siu/Reuters)

which sources of instability and conflict warrant the most concern. 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). 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, 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. Respondents were given the opportunity, however, to write in additional contingencies that they

believed warranted attention; the most common of these are included as noted concerns. Third, the results reflect expert opinion at the time the survey was conducted in early November 2019. 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/globalconflictracker](https://cfr.org/globalconflictracker).

# Methodology

The Center for Preventive Action carried out the 2020 PPS in three stages:

## 1. Soliciting PPS Contingencies

In early October 2019, 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 early November, the survey was sent to more than six thousand U.S. government officials, foreign policy experts, and academics, of whom about five hundred 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	Tier I	Tier II	Tier III
	Moderate	Tier I	Tier II	Tier III
	Low	Tier II	Tier III	Tier III

- 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 major 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 2020
- **Moderate:** contingency has an even chance of occurring in 2020
- **Low:** contingency is improbable to highly unlikely to occur in 2020



Afghan security forces arrive after a powerful explosion outside the provincial police headquarters in Kandahar, Afghanistan, on Thursday, July 18, 2019. (AP Photo)



Indian soldiers stand next to the wreckage of an Indian Air Force helicopter after it crashed in the Budgam district of Kashmir, on February 27, 2019. (Danish Ismail/Reuters)



A UN peacekeeper in Mali patrols the destroyed Fulani village of Sadia Peulh, on July 5, 2019. (Marco Longari/AFP/Getty Images)

# 2020 Findings

Major takeaways from this year's survey results include the following:

- Homeland security–related contingencies received the highest rankings this year. The threat of a highly disruptive cyberattack on U.S. critical infrastructure, including electoral systems, was the top-ranked contingency for the second straight year. Concern over the possibility of a mass casualty terrorist attack on the United States was a close second. A serious confrontation involving the United States and Iran or North Korea were the two highest-rated overseas contingencies.
- More contingencies (thirteen) were rated as Tier I concerns for 2020 than in any other PPS from the last eleven years. Furthermore, six contingencies in the top tier were rated as highly likely to occur, compared to only four last year.
- Of the thirty contingencies identified in this year's survey, only two were judged to have a low likelihood of occurring in the coming year: a military confrontation between Russia and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members and a crisis between the United States and China over Taiwan. Both were rated as Tier II priorities, however, given their importance to U.S. interests.
- Africa and the Middle East are viewed as the most crisis-prone regions for 2020. Latin America continues to be a growing source of concern, however, with four prospective contingencies identified this year. Of these, three were ranked as Tier I priorities—increasing organized crime–related



Ukrainian servicemen attend military training in Chernihiv, Ukraine, on November 28, 2018. (Mykola Lazarenko/Presidential Press Service/AP Photo)

violence in Mexico, an economic crisis and political instability in Venezuela, and deteriorating conditions in the Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras)—an unprecedented number compared to previous survey results.

It is also worth noting that twenty-six of the thirty contingencies identified were considered risks in 2019, though in some cases the nature of the potential crisis has changed. Several findings from this year's survey stand out:

*Five contingencies were ranked higher in 2020.* In the Western Hemisphere, two contingencies were assessed to be Tier I concerns: organized crime–related violence in Mexico and the risk of mass migration from the Northern Triangle. Two ongoing conflicts were also included as top concerns: a violent escalation of the conflict between Turkey and Kurdish fighters and a serious crisis between Russia and Ukraine, both of which moved from Tier II to Tier I priorities. Additionally, in light of deteriorating conditions, political instability in Iraq moved from Tier II to Tier I.

*Four contingencies that were not assessed in last year's survey were included this year.* The risk of increased mass migration as a result of deteriorating conditions in the Northern Triangle was included for the first time and ranked in the Tier I category. Based on the initial crowdsourcing, several other contingencies were also included: the potential for an acute humanitarian crisis in Haiti, the risk of mass atrocities in Burundi, and the spread of violence in the Sahel. Those three concerns were identified and assessed previously (in 2011, 2017, and 2018, respectively), but were not included in 2019.

*Only one contingency was downgraded for 2020.* The worsening of the civil war in Yemen was reduced from a Tier I to a Tier II concern.

*Two contingencies have evolved significantly since last year's survey.* On the Korean Peninsula, the primary concern in 2019 was that tensions would increase following a collapse of the denuclearization negotiations. This year, the concern is that North Korea will continue testing long-range missiles in the absence of negotiations, thereby increasing the likelihood of a crisis. The conflict between Turkey and Kurdish armed groups has also escalated. In 2019, the assessment was that violence between Turkey and Kurdish armed groups would primarily

occur within Turkey. However, following the recent withdrawal of U.S. troops from northern Syria, the contingency shifted to specifically include Turkish operations against Kurdish armed groups in Syria.

*Four contingencies assessed last year were not included for 2020.* Many contingencies that appeared in last year's survey were identified once more in the crowdsourcing phase this year. Four were not: civil conflict in Cameroon, a conflict between China and India, political violence and instability in Nicaragua, and escalating violence and instability in Zimbabwe.

## 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:

- political instability in the European Union because of, among other things, continuing populist and anti-immigrant sentiments as well as a disruptive exit by the United Kingdom
- growing public protests in Hong Kong lead to a violent crackdown by Chinese military forces
- internal instability in Ethiopia due to separatist movements, civil unrest, and spillover from wider regional instability
- growing risk of confrontation in the Arctic between the United States and another major power, such as Russia, over territory, maritime routes, and/or access to natural resources

# Tier I ■

**Impact: High**

**Likelihood: Moderate**

- A highly disruptive cyberattack on U.S. **critical infrastructure**, including its electoral systems
- A mass-casualty terrorist attack on the **United States** or a treaty ally directed or inspired by a foreign terrorist organization
- An armed confrontation between **Iran** and the **United States** or one of its allies over Iran's involvement in regional conflicts and support of militant proxy groups
- A severe crisis on the **Korean Peninsula** following the collapse of the denuclearization negotiations and renewed long-range missile testing
- An armed confrontation over disputed maritime areas in the **South China Sea** between China and one or more Southeast Asian claimants (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam)
- A severe crisis between **Russia** and **Ukraine** following increased fighting in eastern Ukraine and/or a major military clash in contested areas
- Deteriorating economic and security conditions in the **Northern Triangle** (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras), resulting in increased migration outflows from the region

**Impact: Moderate**

**Likelihood: High**

- Intensification of organized crime-related violence in **Mexico**
- Increasing political instability in **Iraq** exacerbated by underlying sectarian tensions and worsening economic conditions
- Escalation of violence between **Turkey** and various **Kurdish armed groups** within Turkey and/or in Syria
- Continued violent reimposition of government control in **Syria** leading to further civilian casualties and heightened tensions among external parties to the conflict
- Increased violence and political instability in **Afghanistan** resulting in further advances by the Taliban insurgency and potential government collapse
- Intensifying economic crisis and political instability in **Venezuela** leading to further violent unrest and increased refugee outflows



## Tier II ■

**Impact: High**

**Likelihood: Low**

- A deliberate or unintended military confrontation between **Russia** and **NATO** members, stemming from assertive Russian behavior in Eastern Europe
- A crisis between the United States and China over **Taiwan**, as a result of China's intensifying political and economic pressure surrounding Taiwan's elections in 2020

**Impact: Moderate**

**Likelihood: Moderate**

- A severe **India-Pakistan** military confrontation triggered by a major terrorist attack or heightened unrest in Indian-administered Kashmir
- Intensified clashes between **Israel** and **Iranian-backed forces**, including Hezbollah, in Lebanon and/or Syria
- Heightened tensions between **Israelis** and **Palestinians** leading to attacks against civilians, widespread protests, and armed confrontations
- An acute humanitarian crisis in **Haiti** caused by growing political instability and economic stagnation
- Worsening of the civil war in **Yemen**, exacerbated by ongoing foreign intervention



## Tier III ■

**Impact: Low**

**Likelihood: Moderate**

- Escalating violence between rival governing groups in **Libya** with destabilizing spillover effects on the region
- Escalating tensions and/or extremist violence in the **Balkans**—Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia—resulting in political instability and armed clashes
- Growing political instability and violence in the **Democratic Republic of Congo**, exacerbated by the spread of the Ebola virus, resulting in continued forced displacement and destabilizing effects on neighboring countries
- Increasing violence and political instability in **Nigeria**, stemming from conflicts in the Delta region and Middle Belt as well as Boko Haram in the northeast
- Increasing al-Shabab attacks and territorial gains in **Somalia**
- Spreading violence and political instability in the **Sahel**, including in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger
- Continued violence against Muslim Rohingyas in **Myanmar** by government security forces and increased tensions surrounding the repatriation of refugees from Bangladesh
- Intensified fighting in **South Sudan**, leading to further displacement of refugees internally and to neighboring countries
- A breakdown of the peace agreement and continued escalation of sectarian violence in the **Central African Republic**, resulting in continued forced displacement and destabilizing effects on neighboring countries
- Mass atrocities in **Burundi** as a result of the intensification of the political crisis and a violent government crackdown on opposition groups and civilians



## 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, to subscribe to our blog *Strength Through Peace*, or to access CPA's latest work, please visit our website at [www.cfr.org/programs/center-preventive-action](http://www.cfr.org/programs/center-preventive-action) or follow us on Twitter [@CFR\\_CPA](https://twitter.com/CFR_CPA).

## About the Council on Foreign Relations

The Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) is an independent, nonpartisan membership organization, think tank, and publisher dedicated to being a resource for its members, government officials, business executives, journalists, educators and students, civic and religious leaders, and other interested citizens in order to help them better understand the world and the foreign policy choices facing the United States and other countries.

The Council on Foreign Relations takes no institutional positions on policy issues and has no affiliation with the U.S. government. All views expressed in its publications and on its website are the sole responsibility of the author or authors.

For further information about CFR or this publication, please write to the Council on Foreign Relations, 58 East 68th Street, New York, NY 10065, or call Communications at 212.434.9888. Visit CFR's website, [www.cfr.org](http://www.cfr.org).

*A woman covers her face as she stands on the outskirts of Tal Tamr, Syria, a town near the Syria-Turkey border, while smoke plumes meant to decrease visibility for Turkish warplanes billow from tire fires during a cross-border offensive, on October 16, 2019.*  
(Delil Souleiman|AFP/Getty Images)

---

## 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