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Center for Preventive Action

Preventive Priorities Survey 2019

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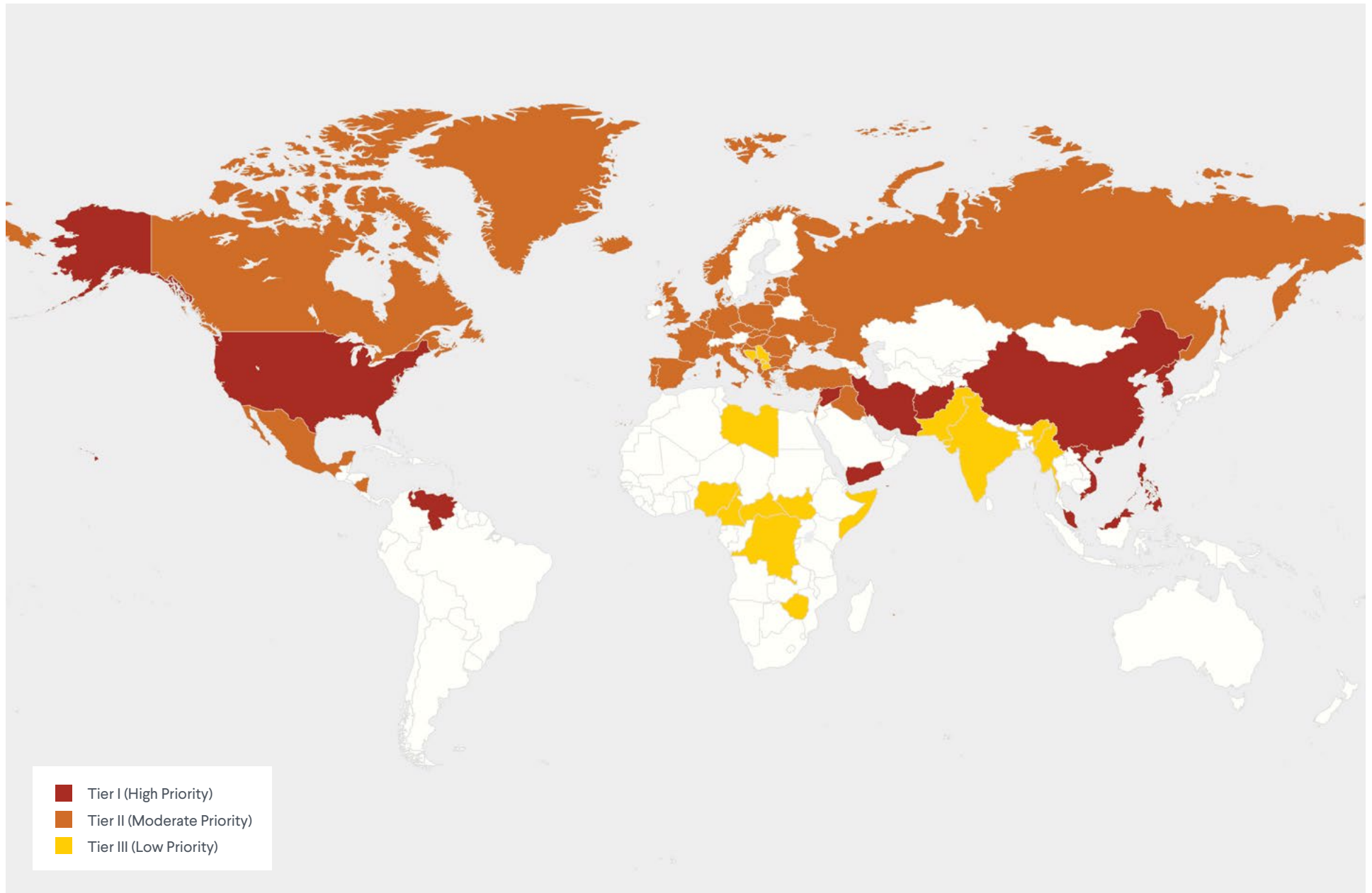
Center for Preventive Action

Preventive Priorities Survey 2019

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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

The Donald J. Trump administration has yet to confront a serious international crisis in which the president has had to wrestle with the agonizing decision over whether to commit the United States to a new and potentially costly military intervention. Previous presidents have not been so fortunate and, with the world growing more disorderly in a variety of ways, it is reasonable to assume that it is only a matter of time before the Trump administration will face its first major crisis.

Such events can seemingly come out of nowhere and leave officials scrambling to react as best they can. In many cases, though, the warning signs are in plain sight, and officials can make preparations to hedge against the growing risk of a crisis. Better still, they can try to steer the anticipated course of events away from danger.

More often than not, however, officials are too consumed fulfilling their day-to-day responsibilities to give much thought to hypothetical events. Furthermore, the range of potential concerns can appear limitless and leave officials without a clear sense as to where they should focus their attention given how little time and energy they can devote to taking precautionary measures.

With the dual goals of alerting U.S. policymakers to prospective international crises and helping them choose which ones to prioritize, the Center for Preventive Action



Ukrainian Air Assault Forces take part in military drills near Zhytomyr, Ukraine, on November 21, 2018. (Gleb Garamich/Reuters)



An Afghan National Army soldier keeps watch at a checkpoint on the Ghazni-Kabul highway in Afghanistan on August 14, 2018. (Mohammad Ismail/Reuters)

(CPA) at the Council on Foreign Relations has surveyed foreign policy experts for their collective judgments on these issues every year since 2008. After first soliciting the public for suggestions of potential developments in the coming year that warranted inclusion in the survey, we produced a list of the top thirty contingencies. We then asked survey respondents to assess each of the contingencies in terms of its likelihood and potential impact on U.S. interests. Given how subjective such judgments can be, we provided guidelines to help respondents evaluate each contingency in a consistent and rigorous fashion. The results were then aggregated and the contingencies sorted into three tiers of relative priority for preventive action.

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 where the use of force is unlikely. Second, we excluded domestic sources of unrest and conflict within the United States, while recognizing that this is a growing concern. Respondents were given the opportunity, however, to write in additional contingencies that they believed warranted attention. We have included their most common suggestions as noted concerns.

Third, the results reflect expert opinion at the time the survey was conducted in early November 2018. 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 Global Conflict Tracker interactive, accessible at [cfr.org/globalconflicttracker](https://www.cfr.org/globalconflicttracker).

Methodology

The Center for Preventive Action carried out the 2019 PPS in three stages:

1. Soliciting PPS Contingencies

In early October 2018, 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 from nearly one thousand suggestions to thirty contingencies deemed both plausible over the next twelve months and potentially harmful to U.S. interests.

2. Polling Foreign Policy Experts

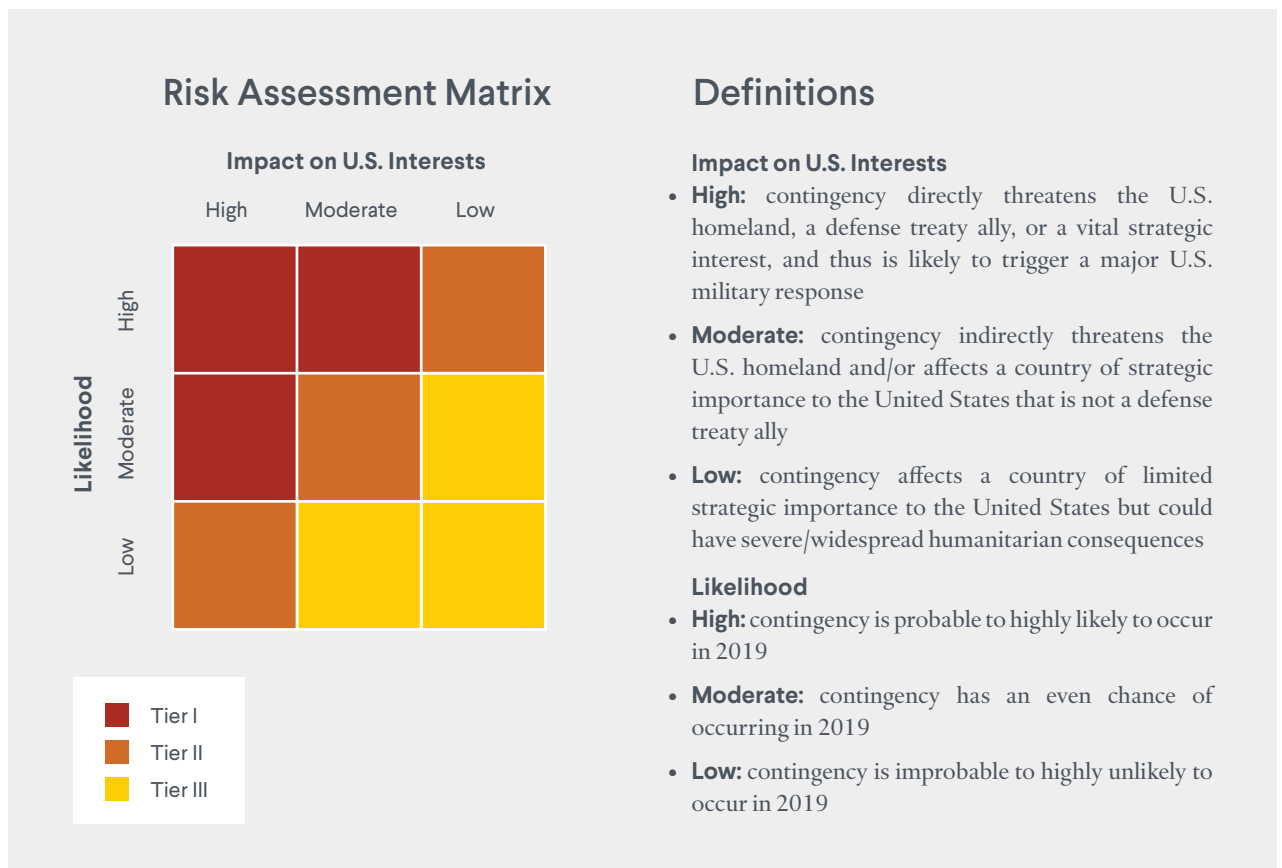
In early November, the survey was sent to over six thousand U.S. government officials, foreign policy experts, and academics, of whom about five hundred responded. Each was asked to estimate the impact on U.S. interests and likelihood of each contingency according to general guidelines (see risk assessment 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.



Yemeni tribesmen keep watch in Nihm District, on the eastern edges of Sanaa, on February 2, 2018. (Abdullah Al-Qadry/Getty Images)



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 2019
- **Moderate:** contingency has an even chance of occurring in 2019
- **Low:** contingency is improbable to highly unlikely to occur in 2019



A member of the Syrian pro-government forces carries the national flag in the southern outskirts of Damascus on May 22, 2018. (Louai Beshara/Getty Images)



A protester holds a sign that reads "Police have betrayed your people" during a protest in Managua, Nicaragua, on September 16, 2018. (Oswaldo Rivas/Reuters)

2019 Findings

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

- The threat of a highly disruptive cyberattack on U.S. critical infrastructure and networks was the top-ranked homeland security–related contingency for 2019, though the possibility of a mass casualty terrorist attack remains a persistent concern.
- Despite increasing apprehension over the growing geopolitical rivalry and potential for conflict between the United States and China, only one contingency—an armed confrontation in the South China Sea—was considered a Tier I priority. The possibility of a similar confrontation in the East China Sea involving China and Japan, which had been a high priority in recent surveys, was considered unlikely in 2019, and thus was not included. For the first time, however, a U.S.-China crisis over Taiwan was included in the survey and ranked as a Tier II concern.
- Anxiety over a possible U.S.-Russia confrontation did not increase in this year's survey. While two Tier I priorities—a cyberattack on the United States and violent reimposition of government control in Syria—could conceivably lead to such a crisis, the contingencies most clearly involving Russia in eastern Europe are considered Tier II priorities.
- Potential crises in the Middle East and North Africa generated more concern than those in any other region. Eight such contingencies were included in this year's survey, of which three were considered Tier I priorities. In contrast, concern over the outlook for South Asia has diminished. While



An elite Rapid Intervention Battalion member walks past a burnt car in Buea, Cameroon, on October 4, 2018. (Zohra Bensemra/Reuters)

increased violence and instability in Afghanistan remains a Tier I priority, fear of a new India-Pakistan military confrontation changed from a Tier II to a Tier III concern, and a potential China-India crisis over disputed territories was ranked a Tier III priority. Potential political instability in Pakistan, which had been a persistent concern in previous years, was not identified as a significant risk in the crowdsourcing phase and thus was not included in this year's survey.

- For the first time since the survey began, three contingencies in Central and South America were assessed, and the ongoing crisis in Venezuela was ranked a Tier I concern. Potential civil unrest in Brazil was also featured among the crises suggested by respondents.

In keeping with the past practice of identifying how the results of the 2019 PPS differed from previous years, it is also important to acknowledge that of the thirty contingencies identified, twenty-six were considered risks in 2018. However, several findings from this year's survey stand out:

Two new contingencies emerged as Tier I priorities. As noted above, worsening conditions in Venezuela and increasing refugee flows to neighboring countries became a top concern this year. The ongoing humanitarian crisis in Yemen was also ranked in the Tier I category. Both contingencies were ranked as Tier II contingencies last year.

Four new contingencies appeared in this year's survey. Based on the initial crowdsourcing, four new contingencies were selected for assessment: worsening civil conflict in Cameroon, a new military confrontation between China and India, political violence and instability in Nicaragua, and a crisis between the United States and China over Taiwan.

The priority rankings of four contingencies were downgraded for 2019. In addition to the changed ranking of an India-Pakistan confrontation, a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-Russia conflict received a lower priority ranking this year, from Tier I to Tier II. Violence in Myanmar and al-Shabab attacks in Somalia also changed from Tier II to Tier III concerns.

Three contingencies have evolved significantly since last year's survey. While concerns over political instability in Iraq remain, fears of a serious escalation of conflict between Iraqi security forces and armed Kurdish groups have diminished. On the

Korean Peninsula, the biggest anxiety in 2018 was that the United States would go to war with North Korea over its nuclear weapon and ballistic missile programs. That prospect has been significantly reduced but apprehensions remain that tensions could again ratchet up if ongoing denuclearization efforts break down. Lastly, after a brutal crackdown and exodus of Muslim Rohingyas from Myanmar in 2017, concern now revolves around the possibility of continued violence and tensions about how and whether refugees return.

Four contingencies assessed last year were not included for 2019. Besides instability within Pakistan and the possibility of an armed confrontation in the East China Sea, intensified violence and political instability in the Sahel and growing political instability and violence in Kenya were not identified as significant concerns in the crowdsourcing phase and thus were dropped from the 2019 survey.

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
- internal instability in Saudi Arabia following an international outcry over the death of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi and scrutiny of the regime's campaign in Yemen
- internal instability in Iran due to the death of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, dissatisfaction with the regime, and/or increasing economic sanctions from the West
- civil unrest in Brazil that could create regional spillover effects

Tier I ■

Impact: High

Likelihood: Moderate

- A highly disruptive cyberattack on **U.S. critical infrastructure and networks**
- Renewed tensions on the **Korean Peninsula** following a collapse of the denuclearization negotiations
- 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
- An armed confrontation over disputed maritime areas in the **South China Sea** between China and one or more Southeast Asian claimants (Brunei, Malaysia, Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam)
- A mass casualty terrorist attack on the **U.S. homeland** or a treaty ally by either (a) foreign or homegrown terrorist(s)

Impact: Moderate

Likelihood: High

- Continued violent reimposition of government control in **Syria** leading to further civilian casualties and heightened tensions among external parties to the conflict
- Deepening economic crisis and political instability in **Venezuela** leading to violent civil unrest and increased refugee outflows
- Worsening of the humanitarian crisis in **Yemen**, exacerbated by ongoing foreign intervention in the civil war
- Increased violence and instability in **Afghanistan** resulting from the Taliban insurgency and potential government collapse



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 campaign ahead of Taiwan's elections in 2020

Impact: Moderate

Likelihood: Moderate

- Intensified clashes between **Israel** and **Iranian-backed forces**, including Hezbollah, in Lebanon and/or Syria
- Intensification of organized crime-related violence in **Mexico**
- Increasing political instability in **Iraq** exacerbated by underlying sectarian tensions
- Increased fighting in eastern **Ukraine** between Russian-backed militias and Ukrainian security forces
- Heightened tensions between **Israelis** and **Palestinians** leading to attacks against civilians, widespread protests, and armed confrontations
- Political violence and instability in **Nicaragua** worsening the migration crisis in Central America
- Escalation of violence between **Turkey** and various **Kurdish armed groups** within Turkey and in neighboring countries



Tier III ■

Impact: Moderate

Likelihood: Low

- A severe **India-Pakistan** military confrontation triggered by a major terrorist attack or heightened unrest in Indian-administered Kashmir
- A new military confrontation between **China** and **India** over disputed border territories

Impact: Low

Likelihood: Moderate

- Escalating violence between rival governing groups in **Libya** and a breakdown of the internationally brokered peace process
- Violence and political instability around national and state elections in **Nigeria**, exacerbated by conflicts in the Delta region and Middle Belt, and with Boko Haram in the northeast
- Increasing al-Shabab attacks in **Somalia** and neighboring countries
- Growing political instability and violence in the **Democratic Republic of Congo**, resulting in continued forced displacement and destabilizing effects on neighboring countries
- Continued violence against Muslim Rohingyas in **Myanmar** by government security forces and increased tensions surrounding the repatriation of refugees from Bangladesh
- Renewed fighting in **South Sudan** and a breakdown of the peace agreement, leading to further displacement of refugees to neighboring countries
- An escalation of sectarian violence in the **Central African Republic**, resulting in continued forced displacement and destabilizing effects on neighboring countries
- Escalating violence and instability in **Zimbabwe** following the contested 2018 presidential elections and continuing economic crisis
- Worsening civil conflict in **Cameroon** between security forces and fighters from the Anglophone separatist movement

Impact: Low

Likelihood: Low

- 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



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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*Venezuelan migrants travel aboard a truck in Tumbes, Peru,
on November 1, 2018. (Juan Vita/Getty Images)*

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