Nigerien citizens wait for army soldiers to escort them through the desert on their journey north toward Libya, on the outskirts of Agadez, Niger, on October 29, 2019. (Zohra Bensemra/Reuters)

Azerbaijani troops drive an armored vehicle in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, on November 25, 2020. (Aziz Karimov/Reuters)

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

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Methodology

The Center for Preventive Action carried out the 2021 PPS in three stages:

1. Soliciting PPS Contingencies

The Center’s experts and various social media platforms solicited suggestions for 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 and potentially harmful to U.S. interests.

2. Polling Foreign-Policy Experts

In November 2020, the survey was sent to more than 6,000 U.S. government officials, foreign policy experts, and academics from around the world. Each was asked to rank the impact on U.S. interests and likelihood of each contingency according to formal guidelines (see risk assessment definitions).

3. Ranking the Conflicts

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

Risk Assessment Matrix

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Definitions

- High: contingency directly threatens the U.S. homeland, a treaty ally, or a vital strategic interest, and is thus likely to trigger a major U.S. military response.
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Ranking the Conflicts

- High: contingency is probable to highly likely to occur in 2021
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Notable takeaways from this year’s survey include the following:

- Concern over North Korea’s further development of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles remains as the top-ranked contingency, having previously occupied that position in the 2019 PPS. This contingency is judged to be both a high likelihood and high-impact risk.
- The highest-ranked threat for the past two years—a highly disruptive cyberattack on U.S. critical infrastructure—remains a Tier I threat, but is no longer considered as likely to occur this year.
- The number of Tier I contingencies fell from a high of eleven in 2019 to nine in 2021. Of these Tier I contingencies, only two are considered highly likely, whereas one had been in the previous year.
- Likely reflecting heightened concerns over the growing risk of military confrontation between the major powers, the possibility of a severe crisis involving China and the United States on the Taiwan Strait rose to a Tier I contingency for the previous two years. Moreover, a military clash between China and India over their disputed border is now assessed as a Tier II risk, having been dropped altogether from the 2020 PPS. However, an armed confrontation in the South China Sea that involves U.S. and Chinese forces dropped from a Tier I to a Tier II concern. Of the thirty contingencies identified in this year’s survey, this was the only one judged to have a low likelihood of occurring in the coming year.

2021 Findings

Continuing a trend from previous surveys, Africa and the Middle East are viewed as the most crisis-prone region for 2021. The majority of contingencies involving African states were assessed to be Tier III concerns, while contingencies involving the Middle East are represented in all three tiers.

Additional findings from this year’s survey include the following:

- Eight new contingencies were included in this year’s survey that were not identified once more in the crowdsourcing phase this year. 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:

- Growing public protests in Hong Kong over political repression leading to a violent crackdown by Chinese military forces
- Growing risk of confrontation in the Arctic between the United States and another major power, such as Russia, over territory, maritime routes, or access to natural resources
- Growing instability and conflict in the East China Sea between China and Japan, stemming from tensions over the sovereignty of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands
- Political instability in the European Union because of, among other things, continuing popular and anti-immigrant sentiments as well as ongoing tensions between the United Kingdom and its European neighbors
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Tier II

Likelihood: High
Impact: Low
- Intensifying intercommunal violence and ethno-nationalist conflicts in Ethiopia, causing a major humanitarian crisis and regional instability
- The deterioration of the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, exacerbated by continued fighting and foreign intervention

Likelihood: Moderate
Impact: Moderate
- Increased fighting in eastern Ukraine or a major military clash in contested areas, reigniting heightened tensions between Russia and Ukraine
- Heightened tensions between Israelis and Palestinians, leading to widespread protests and violent confrontations
- Escalation of violence between Turkey and various Kurdish armed groups within Turkey or in Syria
- A breakdown of disengagement agreements between China and India over disputed border territories, leading to a military confrontation
- A major terrorist attack or heightened unrest in India-administered Kashmir, triggering a severe India-Pakistan military confrontation
- Disputes over resources in the eastern Mediterranean Sea, leading to military escalation between Greece and Turkey
- Intensification of organized crime-related violence in Mexico, resulting in an increase in civilian casualties
- Diminishing economic and security conditions in the Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras), resulting in increased migration outflows
- Increasing Russian interference in Belarus, provoking widespread and violent unrest

Likelihood: Low
Impact: Moderate
- Increased fighting in western Ukraine, exacerbating heightened tensions between Russia and Ukraine
- Heightened tensions between the United States and China over freedom of navigation and disputed territorial claims
- An armed confrontation between Israel and Iran or its allies over Iran’s involvement in regional conflicts and support of militant proxy groups
- A highly disruptive cyberattack on U.S. critical infrastructure
- Russian interference or intimidation against a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), resulting in heightened military tensions
- A mass-casualty terrorist attack on the United States or a nearby ally directed or inspired by a foreign terrorist organization

Tier I

Likelihood: High
Impact: High
- North Korea’s further development of nuclear weapons or ballistic missile testing, precipitating heightened military tensions on the Korean Peninsula

Likelihood: High
Impact: Moderate
- Increased violence and political instability in Afghanistan, resulting in the collapse of the peace process
- Continued violent repression of government control in Syria, leading to further civil insecurity and heightened tensions among ethnic parties to the conflict
- Accelerating economic crises and political instability in Yemen, leading to further violent unrest and increased refugee outflows

Likelihood: Moderate
Impact: Moderate
- Intensifying political and economic pressures from China against Taiwan, leading to a severe crisis with the United States
- 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
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Likelihood: Low
Impact: High
- An armed confrontation in the South China Sea involving China and the United States over freedom of navigation and disputed territorial claims
Tier III

Likelihood: Moderate
Impact: Low

• A breakdown of the democratic political transition in Sudan, leading to widespread violence against civilians
• A collapse of negotiations between Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan concerning the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, leading to escalating tensions and potential military confrontation
• Increasing al-Shabab attacks and territorial gains in Somalia
• Increasing violence, political instability, and civilian displacement in Nigeria, stemming from conflicts in the Delta region as well as Boko Haram in the north
• The collapse of cease-fires and peace talks in Libya, leading to escalating violence between rival governments and further foreign intervention
• A breakdown of the cease-fire agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, leading to escalating military conflict that destabilizes the region
• 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

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 preventing and mitigating 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 or follow us on Twitter @CFRCFA.

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.

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Cover: South Korean Marines patrol on Yeonpyeong Island, on June 17, 2020. (Yonhap/AP/Kim In-chul)