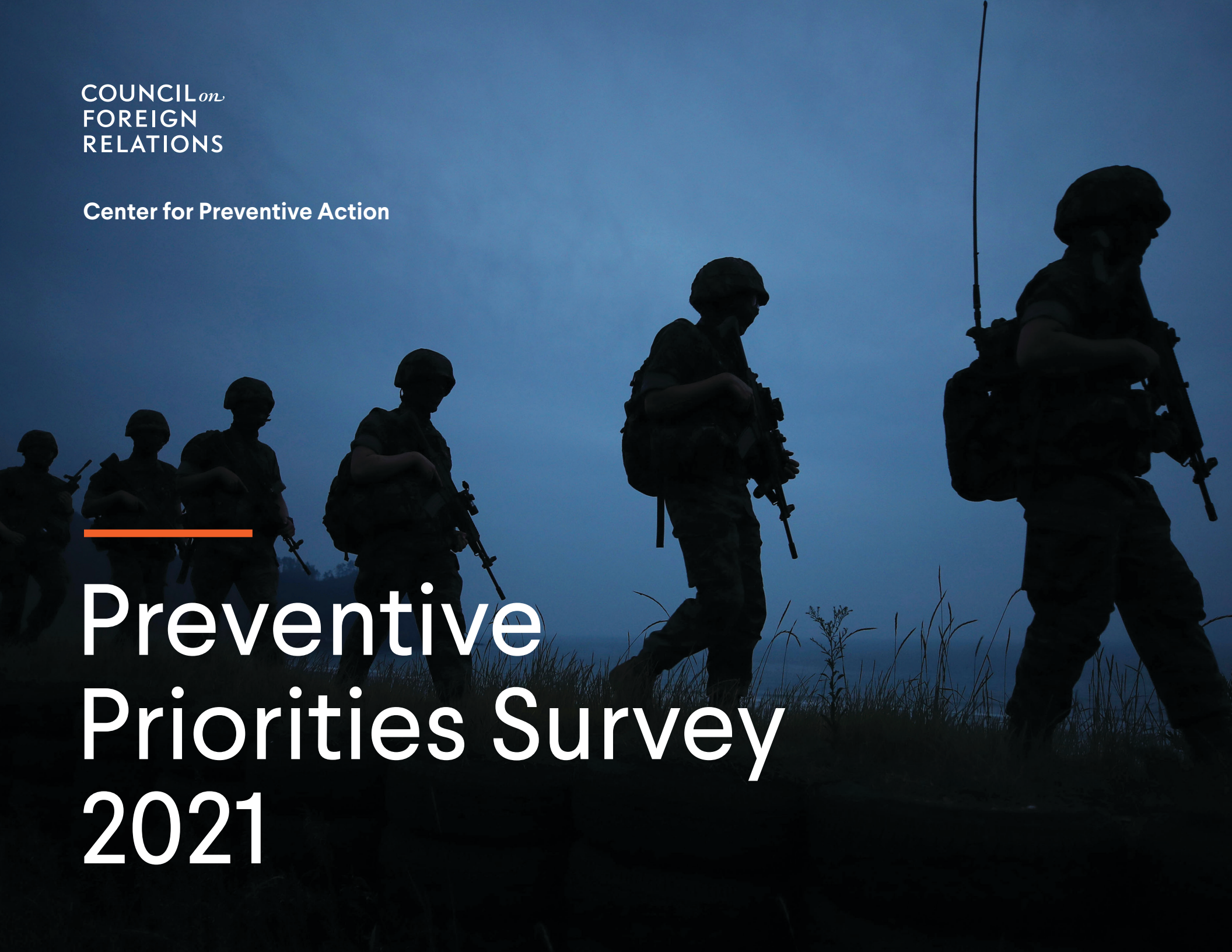

COUNCIL on FOREIGN RELATIONS

Center for Preventive Action

Preventive Priorities Survey 2021

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Preventive Priorities Survey 2021

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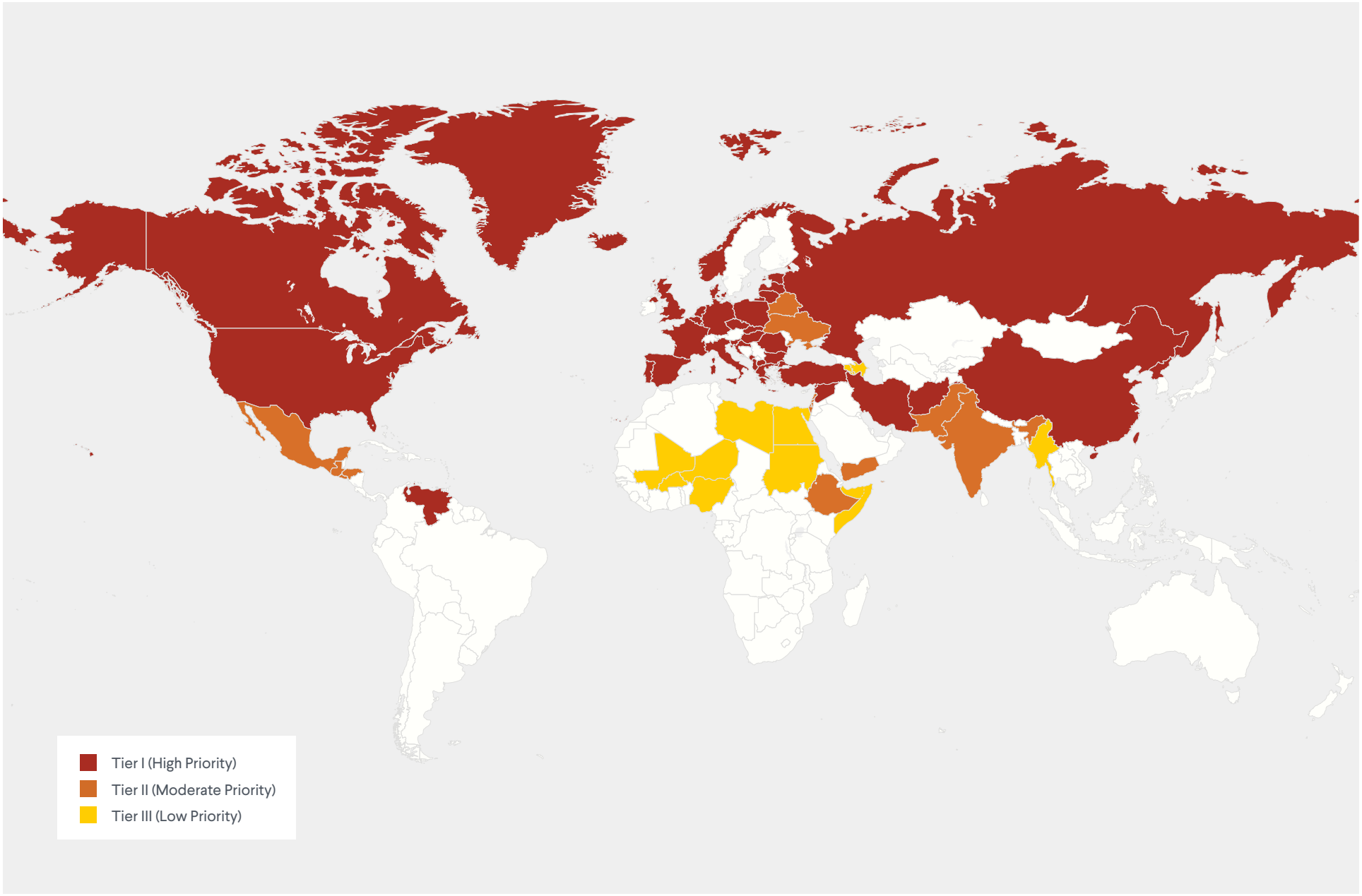
The Center for Preventive Action's annual Preventive Priorities Survey (PPS) evaluates ongoing and potential conflicts based on their likelihood of occurring in the coming year and their impact on U.S. interests. The PPS aims to help the U.S. policymaking community prioritize competing conflict prevention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

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



About the Preventive Priorities Survey

No U.S. president likes to be blindsided by threatening events abroad, not least when there are pressing matters to deal with at home. Until the novel coronavirus pandemic recedes, the Joe Biden administration will certainly not want to be distracted with an unexpected foreign crisis. The world, however, is rarely so accommodating. Every U.S. administration since the end of the Cold War has had to manage, on average, fifteen foreign crises in each four-year term—defined here as intense periods of high-level deliberation triggered by a threatening development overseas that might warrant sending U.S. armed forces in harm's way.

Although future events are inherently unpredictable, the United States is not hostage to fate. The likelihood of specific contingencies occurring is calculable from the presence of known risk factors. Precautionary measures can be directed toward those that appear most threatening to lessen the chance that they materialize and reduce the harmful impact if they do. Because some contingencies clearly pose a greater threat to U.S. interests than others, both preventive and preparatory efforts should be apportioned accordingly. Busy policymakers have limited bandwidth to focus on the future when managing the present and thus need to prioritize their attention and resources.

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)

With these imperatives 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). These 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.

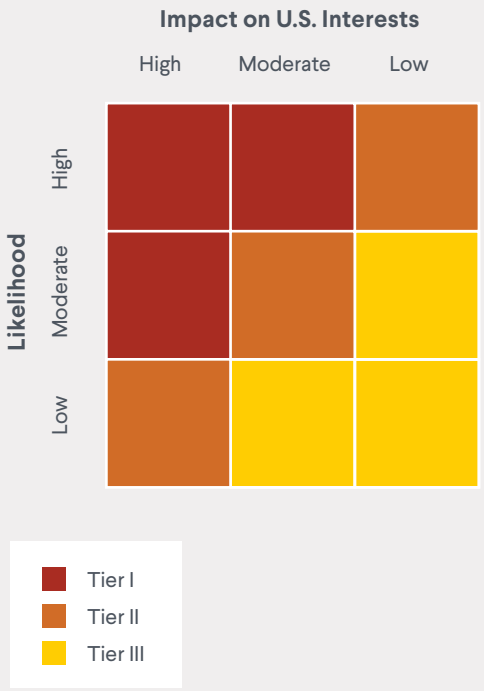
As in previous years, the results of this exercise should be interpreted with care for three reasons. First, the survey only included contingencies of a certain type—those where U.S. military force could plausibly be employed. We excluded, therefore, broad global trends such as climate change and many 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. Respondents were given the opportunity, however, to write in additional contingencies 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 2020. 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 2021 PPS in three stages:

1. **Soliciting PPS Contingencies**
   In October 2020, 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 2020, the survey was sent to more than 6,000 U.S. government officials, foreign policy experts, and academics, of whom about 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 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



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 2021
- **Moderate:** contingency has an even chance of occurring in 2021
- **Low:** contingency is improbable to highly unlikely to occur in 2021

A protester yells at police blocking an opposition march in Caracas, Venezuela, on March 10, 2020. (Ariana Cubillos/AP Photo)

The combat ship USS Gabrielle Giffords *exercises with Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force training ships, on June 23, 2020. (U.S. Navy)*

Fighters hold their weapons during a gathering aimed at mobilizing more support for the Houthi rebel forces in Sanaa, Yemen, on February 25, 2020. (Hani Mohamed/AP Photo)

2021 Findings

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

- Concern over North Korea's further development of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles returns 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 a 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 risk, but is no longer considered as likely as last year; it is now judged to have an even chance of occuring. The possibility of a mass-casualty terrorist attack against the United States or a treaty ally was also downgraded from highly likely to moderately likely this year, but remains a Tier I concern.
- The number of Tier I contingencies fell from a high of eleven in 2020 to nine in 2021. Of these nine Tier I contingencies, only two are considered highly likely, whereas six had been in the previous year.
- Likely reflecting heightened concern over the growing risk of military confrontation between the major powers, the possibility of a severe crisis involving China and the United States over Taiwan rose to a Tier I risk for the first time in 2021, having been in the Tier II category for the previous two years. Moreover, a military clash between China and India over their disputed borders 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.
- Continuing a trend from previous surveys, Africa and the Middle East are viewed as the most crisis-prone regions 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.

People with old Belarusian flags march at an opposition rally to protest official presidential election results in Minsk, Belarus, on October 18, 2020. (AP Photo)

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

Eight new contingencies were included in this year's survey. The new contingencies include conflicts in Ethiopia, a confrontation between China and India, civil war in Lebanon, conflict between Greece and Turkey, interference and unrest in Belarus, the collapse of negotiations around the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, the breakdown of a democratic political transition in Sudan, and renewed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Of these contingencies, five fell into the Tier II category while three were assessed as Tier III risks.

Five contingencies were downgraded for 2021. These contingencies—each reduced from Tier I to Tier II concerns—include conflicts involving the United States and China in the South China Sea, conflict between Russia and Ukraine, deteriorating conditions in the Northern Triangle, violence in Mexico, and conflicts between Turkey and the Kurds. Only one contingency was rated higher in 2021 than in 2020: a potential India-Pakistan military confrontation was upgraded from Tier III to a Tier II concern.

Eight contingencies assessed last year were not included for 2021. Many contingencies that appeared in last year's survey were identified once more in the crowdsourcing phase this year. However, eight were not: increasing political instability in Iraq, clashes between Israel and Iranian-backed forces, an acute humanitarian crisis in Haiti, escalating tensions and/or extremist violence in the Balkans, growing instability and violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo, increased fighting in South Sudan, escalation of violence in the Central African Republic, and mass atrocities in Burundi.

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
- an armed confrontation 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 populist and anti-immigrant sentiments as well as a disruptive exit by the United Kingdom
- political instability and civil unrest in Brazil, potentially leading to a military takeover
- internal instability in Saudi Arabia, potentially surrounding a contested royal succession
- growing violence and political instability in Mozambique

Tier I

Likelihood: High
Impact: High

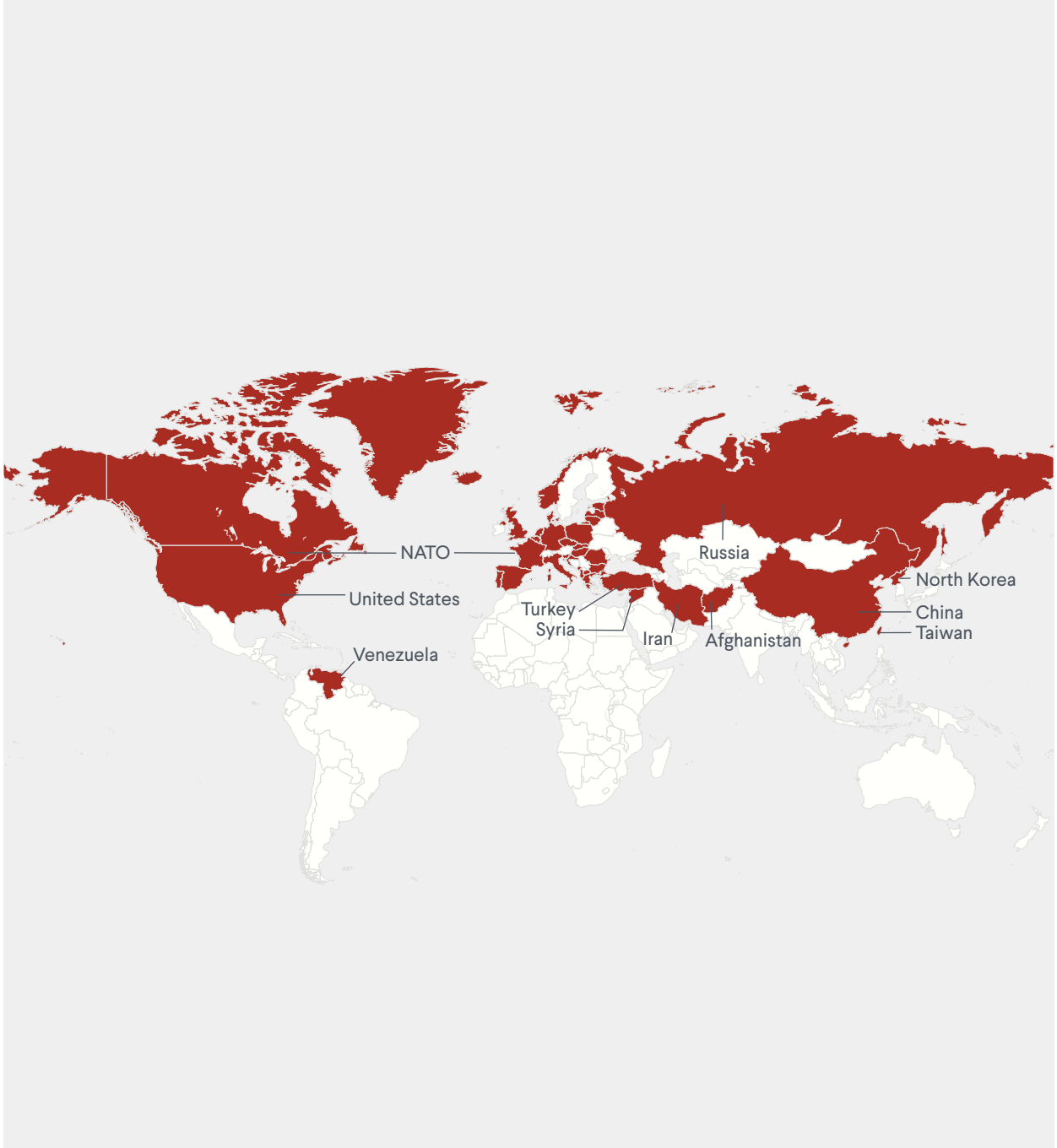
- **North Korea**'s further development of nuclear weapons or ballistic missile testing, precipitating heightened military tensions on the Korean Peninsula

Likelihood: High
Impact: Moderate

- Increasing violence and political instability in **Afghanistan**, resulting in the collapse of the peace process
- Continued violent reimposition of government control in **Syria**, leading to further civilian casualties and heightened tensions among external parties to the conflict
- Accelerating economic collapse and political instability in **Venezuela**, leading to further violent unrest and increased refugee outflows

Likelihood: Moderate
Impact: High

- Intensifying political and economic pressure 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
- 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 treaty ally directed or inspired by a foreign terrorist organization



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 Indian-administered Kashmir, triggering a severe **India-Pakistan** military confrontation
- Deepening economic and political crises in **Lebanon** resulting in renewed civil war
- Disputed claims to resource-rich waters 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 of civilian casualties
- Deteriorating 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 civil unrest

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 northeast
- 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 wider 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 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 or follow us on Twitter @CFR_CPA.

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

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