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# Preventive Priorities Survey 2014

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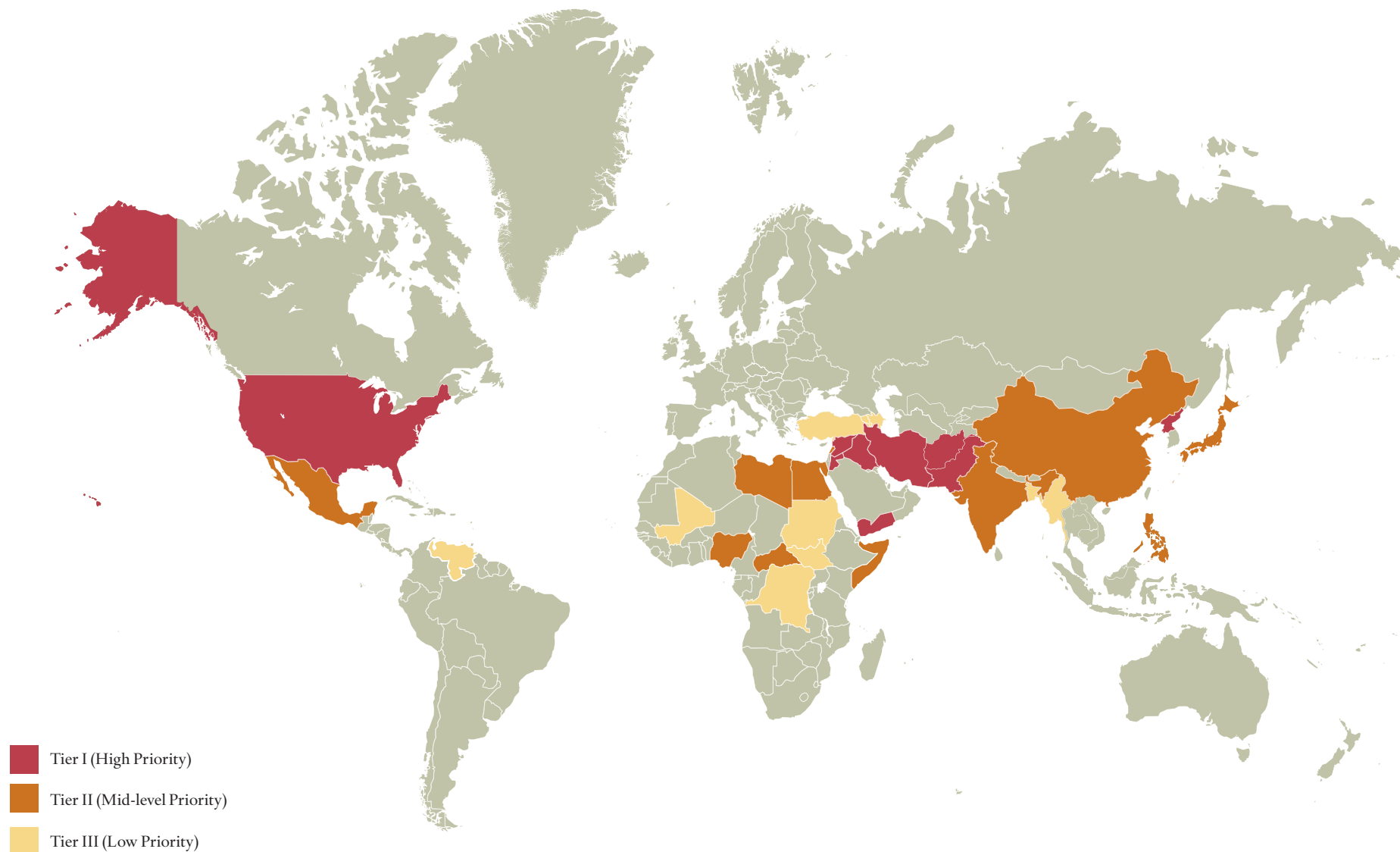
*Director, Center for Preventive Action*

# Preventive Priorities Survey 2014

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 mitigation demands.



View the accompanying online interactive, the Global Conflict Tracker, at [cfr.org/globalconflictracker](https://cfr.org/globalconflictracker)





# About the Preventive Priorities Survey

There are many conceivable sources of instability and conflict around the world that the United States should endeavor to prevent or at least ameliorate in some way. Anticipating which conflicts are more likely to occur and, moreover, pose a greater threat to U.S. interests than others is helpful in deciding where to focus attention and resources. With many domestic programs also vying for support in an increasingly tight fiscal environment, the need for Washington to prioritize its crisis prevention and conflict mitigation efforts has become even more necessary.

The Preventive Priorities Survey seeks to help policymakers choose among competing conflict prevention demands by offering what is essentially a risk assessment of the United States' geopolitical environment over the next twelve months. Risk in this context is defined as the product of the perceived likelihood of a conflict erupting or escalating and the potential impact it could have on U.S. interests. Given the inherent uncertainties surrounding the onset and escalation of violent conflict, precise predictions are simply not possible. The PPS, therefore, is a qualitative



Activists of *Islami Shashontontro Andolon*, a radical Islamist party, shout slogans during a protest rally in Dhaka, Bangladesh, November 8, 2013. (Andrew Biraj|Courtesy Reuters)



Congolese soldier shoots in the direction of M23 rebels from their position near the Rumangabo military base in Runyoni, 58 km (36 miles) north of Goma, October 31, 2013. (Courtesy Reuters)

assessment that draws on the informed judgment of the experts polled. Similarly, what constitutes a threat to the “national interest” also rests on respondents’ personal calculations since there are no objective or widely accepted criteria for making such assessments.

To bring rigor to the exercise and help those polled with their estimations, the survey offered general guidelines to assess the relative probability and impact of potential contingencies:

- Contingencies with a greater-than-even chance of occurring in 2014 were categorized as having a “High” likelihood. Those with about an even chance of occurring were categorized as having a “Moderate” likelihood and those with a less-than-even chance were categorized as having a “Low” likelihood.
- Contingencies that could directly harm the lives or livelihoods of Americans, or involve countries that the United States has already committed to protecting, were afforded a “High” impact classification. Conflicts involving countries of strategic importance to the United States that are not treaty

allies were categorized as having a “Moderate” impact on U.S. interests. Contingencies that affect countries judged to have limited strategic importance to the United States, or for which the risk is essentially humanitarian in nature, received a “Low” impact classification.

It is important to acknowledge that the PPS did not survey experts about potential economic crises or financial shocks, nor did it include conceivable natural disasters and emerging environmental concerns. Although such events can clearly undermine political stability and even trigger armed conflict, the PPS is primarily intended to assess relatively discrete geopolitical contingencies.

A final caveat is that the PPS represents a “snapshot” of expert opinion at the time the survey was conducted in November 2013. Risk assessments change rapidly and frequently. The results, therefore, could be quite different several months hence.

# Methodology

The Center for Preventive Action (CPA) carried out the 2014 PPS in three stages:

## 1. Soliciting of PPS Contingencies

CPA used a variety of social media platforms as well as its blog on CFR.org to solicit suggestions for contingencies to include in the 2014 survey. With the help of the Council on Foreign Relations' in-house regional experts, CPA distilled the hundreds of suggestions into thirty contingencies deemed both plausible over the next twelve months and potentially harmful to U.S. interests.

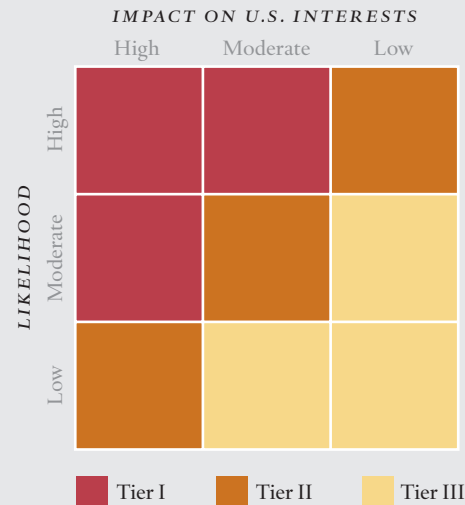
## 2. Polling of Experts

The survey was sent to more than 1,200 government officials, foreign policy experts, and academics. Respondents were asked to estimate the relative likelihood and potential effect of each of the contingencies on U.S. interests according to defined criteria. Respondents also had the opportunity to suggest contingencies that did not appear on the survey but that they felt warranted attention. The most popular suggestions are included at the end of this survey.

## 3. Categorization of Contingencies

The survey results were uniformly scored and the contingencies subsequently sorted into one of three preventive priority tiers 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, is likely to trigger U.S. military involvement because of treaty commitments, or threatens the supply of critical U.S. strategic resources
- **Moderate:** contingency affects countries of strategic importance to the United States but does not involve a mutual-defense treaty commitment
- **Low:** contingency could have severe/widespread humanitarian consequences but in countries of limited strategic importance to the United States

#### LIKELIHOOD

- **High:** contingency is probable to highly likely to occur in 2014
- **Moderate:** contingency has about an even chance of occurring in 2014
- **Low:** contingency is improbable to highly unlikely to occur in 2014



Left: Riot police and army personnel take their positions during clashes with members of the Muslim Brotherhood and supporters of ousted Egyptian president Mohammed Morsi in the area of Rabaa Adawiya Square, where they are camping in Cairo, August 14, 2013. (Asmaa Waquih|Courtesy Reuters) Right: A Kurdish female fighter from Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) checks her weapon near Ras al-Ain, in the province of Hasakah, after capturing it from Islamist rebels, November 6, 2013. (Courtesy Reuters)





An Indian Border Security Force (BSF) soldier patrols near the fenced border with Pakistan in Suchetgarh, southwest of Jammu, January 14, 2013. (Mukesh Gupta/Courtesy Reuters)

## 2014 Findings

Ten contingencies were judged to warrant Tier I status this year though none were considered both highly likely and highly threatening to U.S. interests. Six of these contingencies—intensification of the civil war in Syria; a highly disruptive cyberattack against the United States; a renewed Iranian nuclear crisis; a mass casualty terrorist attack on the U.S. homeland; severe instability in Pakistan; and growing violence in Afghanistan resulting from the drawdown of coalition forces and/or contested elections—were designated Tier I priorities in 2013.

Four contingencies were upgraded from Tier II to Tier I status for 2014. These are: a strengthening of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula as a result of continuing instability in Yemen; a severe North Korean crisis caused by another military provocation, potential internal instability, or nuclear/missile-related activities; civil war in Iraq due to rising Sunni-Shia violence; and growing political instability and civil violence in Jordan due to the spillover effects of the Syrian civil war.

Ten contingencies were judged to warrant Tier II status for 2014. One of these—a Sino-Japanese clash over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands—was previously classified as a Tier I priority in 2013 but, along with the possibility of an armed confrontation in the South China Sea involving China and various claimants to disputed maritime areas, is now considered to have a lower likelihood of occurring. However, the importance of both contingencies to U.S. interests remains high. The possibility of escalating violence and risk of mass atrocities in the Central African Republic and continuing conflict in Somalia represent new Tier II priorities in 2014.

Four contingencies that were not assessed in prior years' surveys became Tier III priorities for 2014. These are: increased sectarian violence between Buddhists and Muslim Rohingyas in Myanmar's Rakhine State; protracted internal violence in Bangladesh surrounding the upcoming general elections; a Sino-Indian border clash; and a deepening political crisis in Venezuela that leads to increasing civil violence and potential regional instability. Meanwhile, the likelihood of intensified violence in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo was judged to be lower for 2014, most likely reflecting the surrender of the M23 rebel group in November 2013.

Prior years' contingencies relating to Kenya, Zimbabwe, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain, as well as the possibility of a U.S.-Pakistan military confrontation, were not included in the 2014 survey because responses to CPA's solicitations did not stress these potential conflicts as contingencies of concern. However, experts who responded to the 2014 survey had the chance to suggest additional noteworthy contingencies. The most frequently cited suggestions are presented below.

### Other Noted Concerns

As the survey was limited to thirty contingencies, government officials, foreign policy experts, and academic respondents had the opportunity to suggest additional potential crises that they thought warranted attention. The most commonly cited were the following:

- growing political instability in China
- competing territorial claims in the Arctic
- rising political instability in Russia
- possible Russian intervention in Georgia, Ukraine, and other former Soviet states
- growing political instability in Saudi Arabia
- political unrest following the death of Fidel Castro in Cuba
- renewed political instability in Bahrain
- third Palestinian intifada or heightened conflict between Israel and Hezbollah
- renewed political instability in Tunisia
- Chinese military action against Taiwan
- rising political instability in Kyrgyzstan

# Tier I

Contingencies judged high preventive priorities for U.S. policymakers

*IMPACT: HIGH  
LIKELIHOOD: MODERATE*

- intensification of the **Syrian** civil war including possible limited military intervention
- a highly disruptive cyberattack on U.S. **critical infrastructure**
- renewed threat of military strikes against **Iran** as a result of a breakdown in nuclear negotiations and/or clear evidence of intent to develop a nuclear weapons capability
- a mass casualty terrorist attack on the U.S. **homeland** or a treaty ally
- a severe **North Korean** crisis caused by a military provocation, internal political instability, or threatening nuclear weapons/ICBM-related activities

*IMPACT: MODERATE  
LIKELIHOOD: HIGH*

- growing violence and instability in **Afghanistan** resulting from the drawdown of coalition forces and/or contested national elections
- increasing internal violence and political instability in **Pakistan**
- strengthening of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula resulting from continued political instability in **Yemen** and/or backlash from U.S. counterterrorism operations
- civil war in **Iraq** due to rising Sunni-Shia sectarian violence
- growing political instability and civil violence in **Jordan** triggered by spillover from the Syrian civil war



## Tier II

Contingencies judged mid-level preventive priorities for U.S. policymakers

*IMPACT: MODERATE  
LIKELIHOOD: MODERATE*

- further deterioration of the political situation in **Egypt** resulting in significantly increased violence, especially in the Sinai Peninsula
- increased sectarian violence and political instability in **Lebanon** due to spillover from the Syrian civil war
- continuing conflict in **Somalia** and intensification of al-Shabab's terrorist attacks on neighboring countries
- continuing political instability and growing militancy in **Libya**
- escalation of drug-related violence in **Mexico**
- a severe **Indo-Pakistani** military confrontation triggered by a major terrorist attack or heightened violence in Kashmir

*IMPACT: HIGH  
LIKELIHOOD: LOW*

- an armed confrontation in the **East China Sea** between China and Japan stemming from tensions over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands
- an armed confrontation in the **South China Sea** between China and one or more Southeast Asian claimants to disputed maritime areas

*IMPACT: LOW  
LIKELIHOOD: HIGH*

- increasing sectarian violence and heightened political instability in **Nigeria**
- escalating violence and risk of mass atrocities in the **Central African Republic** as a result of the ongoing insurgency





## Tier III

Contingencies judged low preventive priorities for U.S. policymakers

*IMPACT: MODERATE*

*LIKELIHOOD: LOW*

- a **Sino-Indian** clash resulting from escalation of a territorial dispute and/or a military incident

*IMPACT: LOW*

*LIKELIHOOD: MODERATE*

- destabilization of **Mali** by militant groups with spillover effects on neighboring areas
- growing popular unrest and political instability in **Sudan**
- military conflict between **Sudan** and **South Sudan** triggered by border and/or resource disputes
- resumption of conflict in the **Kurdish-dominated regions** of Turkey and the Middle East
- intensification of violence in eastern **Democratic Republic of Congo** with regional spillover
- increased sectarian violence between Buddhists and Muslim Rohingyas in **Myanmar's Rakhine State**
- protracted internal violence in **Bangladesh** surrounding the general elections

*IMPACT: LOW*

*LIKELIHOOD: LOW*

- deepening political crisis in **Venezuela** leading to civil violence and potential regional instability
- an outbreak of military conflict between **Armenia** and **Azerbaijan** over Nagorno-Karabakh



