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A large military parade in North Korea. In the foreground, several tanks are moving down a wide street. A prominent red flag with a yellow hammer and sickle symbol is attached to one of the tanks. Soldiers in military uniforms are visible on the tanks. In the background, a grand, classical-style building with many columns is the focal point. The building has several banners and flags, including the North Korean national flag. A large crowd of people is gathered along the sides of the street. The sky is clear and blue.

Preventive Priorities Survey 2017

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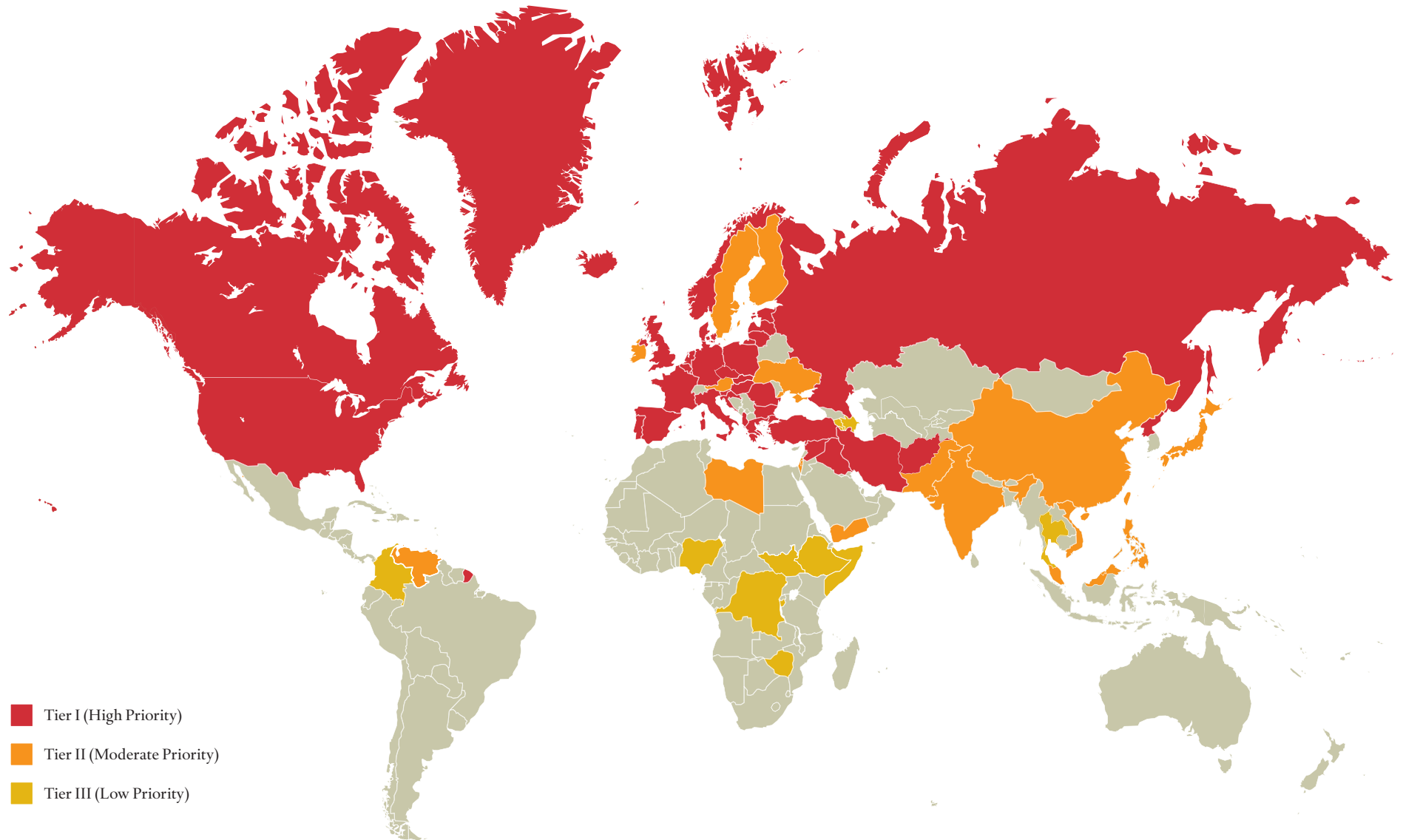
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Preventive Priorities Survey 2017

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

Donald J. Trump assumes office at a particularly turbulent time. It may not be long before his administration is tested by a serious foreign crisis. Geopolitical friction among major powers has been steadily growing in recent years. There are multiple flashpoints around the globe where these powers could confront one another. Violent conflict wracks much of the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia with no sign that it will abate any time soon. Against this backdrop there is the ever-present threat of a major terrorist strike and, increasingly, a highly disruptive cyberattack against the United States and/or its allies.

The new administration must decide how active it wants to be in managing the risks a more turbulent world poses to U.S. interests. Although crises sometimes arise in genuinely unpredictable ways, many can be anticipated. Precautionary measures can in turn be taken to try to avert specific crises and mitigate the potential harm should they occur. All too often, however, policymakers become consumed with managing day-to-day issues to the extent that they devote little time to thinking about—much less managing—the dangers looming just over the horizon. Only when there are incontrovertible warning signs will policymakers typically react, but such certainty rarely presents itself. As a result, the United States



Protesters clash with riot police during a rally to demand a referendum to remove Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro in Caracas, Venezuela, on September 1, 2016. (Carlos Garcia Rawlins|Reuters)



A member of Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army, seen with a mural of the self-proclaimed Islamic State in the background, stands guard in front of a building in the border town of Jarablus, Syria, on August 31, 2016. (Umit Bektas|Reuters)

is often blindsided by threatening developments and forced to respond in a belated and hastily improvised fashion with sometimes costly consequences.

This problem will continue to occur unless there is a regular and rigorous effort to look ahead and scan the horizon in a way that helps busy policymakers not only appreciate emerging risks but also prioritize their limited time and resources for preventive action on the most worrisome concerns. Not all potential crises, after all, pose an equal risk to the United States; some are likely to be more threatening than others and preventive efforts should be prioritized accordingly.

For the last eight years, the Council on Foreign Relations has carried out the Preventive Priorities Survey of foreign policy experts with this goal in mind. The survey is designed to identify conflicts around the world that could plausibly emerge or worsen over the coming year and help U.S. policymakers decide where to devote their attention. After following a series of steps (see the methodology section), we identify thirty such contingencies that are sorted into three tiers of relative policy priority, based on how the survey respondents judged their relative likelihood and

potential impact on U.S. interests. Though such judgments are unavoidably subjective, we provided guidelines to help respondents be as consistent and rigorous as possible.

It is important to acknowledge here that we excluded from the survey all contingencies that we considered to be primarily economic or health-related in nature or that revolved around potential natural or man-made disasters, while recognizing that such events can harm U.S. interests. Respondents were given the opportunity, however, to write in additional conflict-related contingencies that they believed warranted attention. We have included the most common suggestions.

Finally, the survey results represent the informed judgment of those who responded when it was conducted in November 2016. Thus it should be considered a snapshot of their concerns at that time. The world is a dynamic place, and so assessments of risk and the ordering of priorities should be regularly updated. For this reason, all ongoing conflicts are monitored on our online Global Conflict Tracker interactive, accessible at cfr.org/globalconflictracker.

Methodology

The Center for Preventive Action (CPA) carried out the 2017 PPS in three stages:

1. Soliciting PPS Contingencies

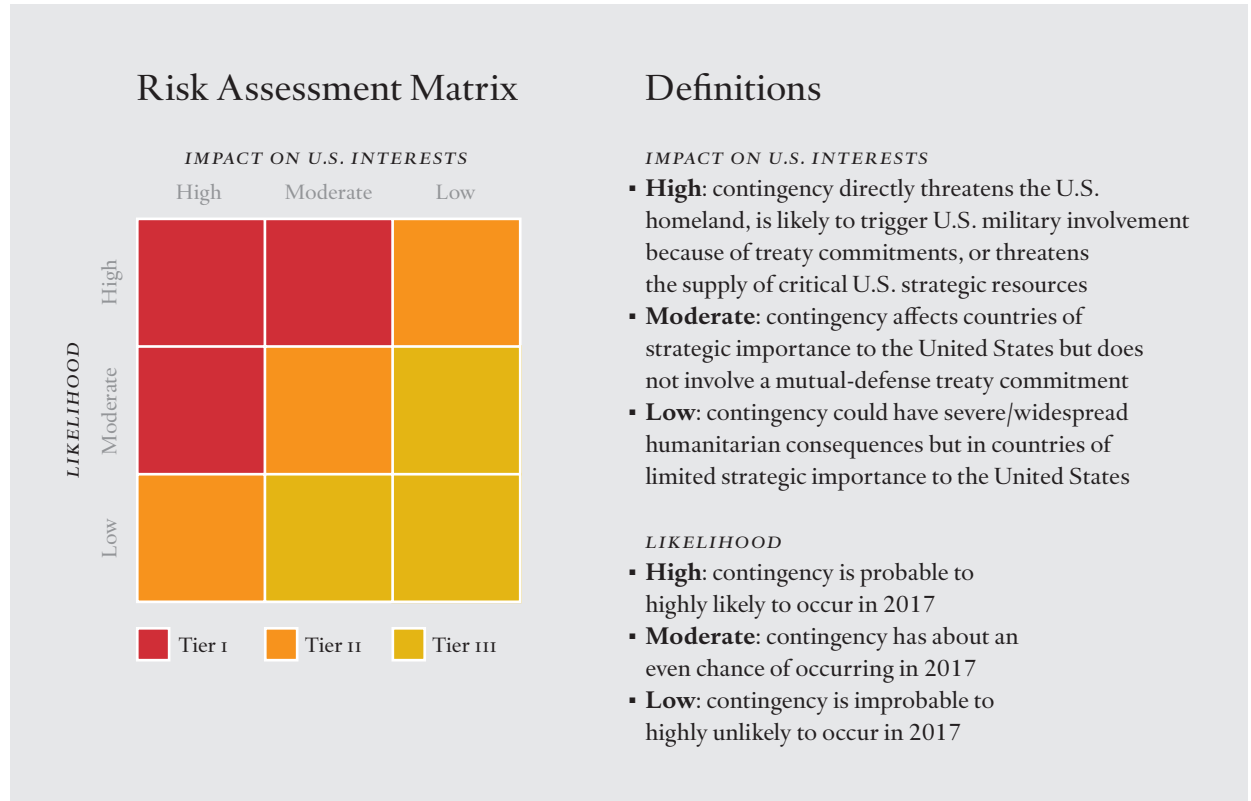
In mid-October, CPA harnessed various social media platforms and blogs to solicit suggestions about possible conflicts to include in the survey. With the help of the Council on Foreign Relations' in-house regional experts, CPA narrowed down the list of possible conflicts from nearly two thousand suggestions 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 randomized survey was sent to nearly seven thousand U.S. government officials, foreign policy experts, and academics, of whom more than five hundred responded. Each was asked to estimate the likelihood and impact on U.S. interests of each of the contingencies 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.



An Indian policeman aims his gun during an anti-India protest in Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir, on November 4, 2016. (Danish Ismail/Reuters)



Children and women protest outside the UN offices against Saudi-led air strikes in Sana'a, Yemen, on January 21, 2016. (Khaled Abdullah/Reuters)



Women gather at a water collecting point at the internally displaced people's camp in Borno State, Nigeria, on August 31, 2016. (Afolabi Sotunde/Reuters)

2017 Findings

Many of the contingencies identified in previous surveys remain concerns for 2017. Of the thirty identified, twenty-one were considered risks last year. Much has changed, however, and several findings stand out:

Two new contingencies emerged as Tier I priorities. In light of Russia's continuing assertive behavior in eastern Europe, the possibility of a serious military confrontation with a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member state—whether the result of deliberate or unintended actions—has become a top concern. So too is a potential intensification of the conflict between Turkey and Kurdish armed groups operating inside Turkey or in neighboring countries. These two contingencies join five others as Tier I priorities: the threat of a major terrorist strike or cyberattack against the United States, a crisis on the Korean peninsula, increased violence and instability in Afghanistan, and further escalation of the Syrian civil war.

Nine new contingencies appeared in this year's survey. The risk of growing authoritarianism and political instability in the Philippines and Turkey represent completely new contingencies both judged to be Tier II concerns. Seven other contingencies were also selected from the initial crowdsourcing: intensification of the current political crisis in Burundi, growing civil unrest and ethnic violence in Ethiopia, continued al-Shabab attacks in Somalia and neighboring countries, political instability in Thailand related to the royal succession, widespread unrest and violence in Zimbabwe, political instability in Colombia stemming from a breakdown of the peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, and a new outbreak of military conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Three contingencies surveyed last year received a higher-priority ranking for 2017. Besides a potential military confrontation between Russia and NATO members moving up from a Tier II to Tier I concern, the likelihood of a major military crisis involving India and Pakistan is now judged to be a Tier II priority, and an intensification of the ongoing economic and political crisis in Venezuela has also moved up to Tier II from Tier III.

The priority rankings of four contingencies were downgraded for 2017. Four contingencies that were top priorities in 2016 moved down to Tier II: political instability in European Union (EU) countries stemming from the refugee crisis, the fracturing of Iraq caused by sectarian violence and the self-proclaimed Islamic State, increased tensions between Israelis and Palestinians, and the political breakup of Libya.

Two contingencies have evolved significantly since last year's survey. Longstanding concerns about the stability of Yemen and in particular the threat posed by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) have shifted to fears regarding the consequences of the Saudi-led military intervention. Growing political violence in Nigeria has also been regularly mentioned in previous surveys but with the focus very much on the threat posed by the militant group Boko Haram. This year, rising unrest in the Delta region of Nigeria has been singled out as a source of concern.

Nine contingencies assessed last year were not included for 2017. These include increased political instability in Egypt, escalation of organized crime-related violence in Mexico, increased sectarian violence in Lebanon, growing political instability in Jordan, a potential confrontation between Iran

and the United States and/or allies over Iran's involvement in regional conflicts, political instability in Saudi Arabia, an escalation of Islamist militancy in Russia, an escalation of sectarian violence in the Central African Republic, and an intensification of sectarian violence in Myanmar. This is surprising as the underlying dynamics that led to their inclusion have not disappeared. None, however, were identified as significant concerns in the initial pool of crowdsourced contingencies, and thus were not included in the 2017 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:

- increased gang-related violence in Northern Triangle countries in Central America
- escalation of organized crime-related violence in Mexico and potential economic and political instability resulting from U.S. trade and immigration policies
- destabilization of Mali by militant groups
- an intensification of sectarian violence between Buddhists and Muslim Rohingyas in Myanmar
- violence and attacks in Bangladesh against foreigners and secularists
- increased political instability in Egypt, including terrorist attacks, particularly in the Sinai Peninsula
- potential confrontation with Iran over the collapse of the nuclear agreement
- renewed confrontation between Russia and Georgia over South Ossetia or Abkhazia
- increased tensions between China and Taiwan
- political or economic instability in Saudi Arabia
- succession crisis in Algeria

Tier I ■

LIKELIHOOD: MODERATE

IMPACT: HIGH

- A severe crisis in **North Korea** caused by nuclear or intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) weapons testing, a military provocation, or internal political instability
- A deliberate or unintended military confrontation between **Russia** and **NATO** members, stemming from assertive Russian behavior in Eastern Europe
- A highly disruptive cyberattack on **U.S. critical infrastructure**
- A mass casualty terrorist attack on the **U.S. homeland** or a treaty ally by either a foreign or homegrown terrorist(s)

LIKELIHOOD: HIGH

IMPACT: MODERATE

- Increased violence and instability in **Afghanistan** resulting from a continued strengthening of the Taliban insurgency and potential government collapse
- Intensification of violence between Turkey and various **Kurdish** armed groups within Turkey and in neighboring countries, including Iran, Iraq, and Syria
- Intensification of the civil war in **Syria** resulting from increased external support for warring parties, including military intervention by outside powers



Tier II ■

LIKELIHOOD: LOW

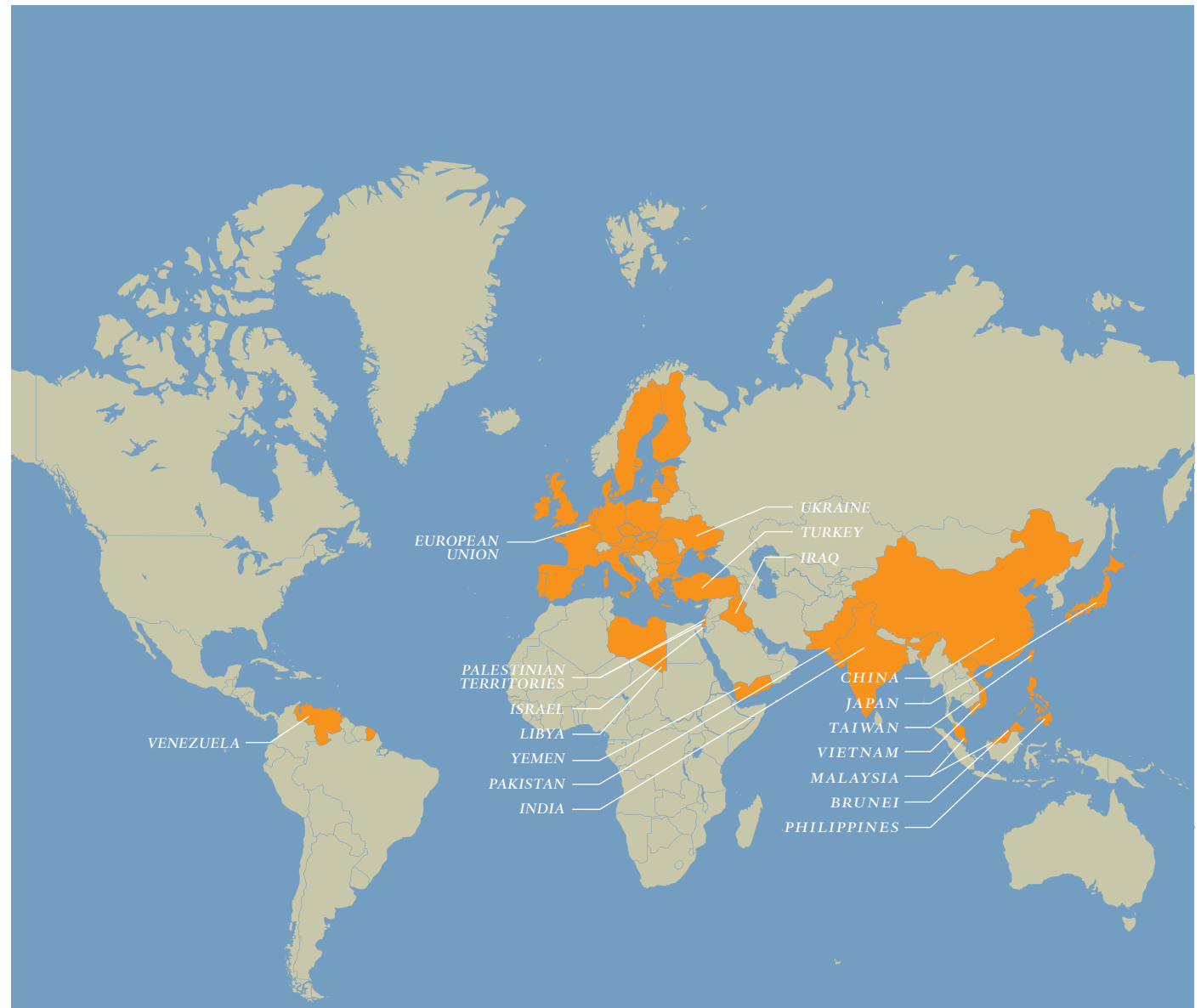
IMPACT: HIGH

- An armed confrontation in the **East China Sea** between China and Japan, stemming from tensions over the sovereignty of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, which draws in the United States
- An armed confrontation over disputed maritime areas in the **South China Sea** between China and one or more Southeast Asian claimants—Brunei, Taiwan, Malaysia, the Philippines, or Vietnam—which draws in the United States

LIKELIHOOD: MODERATE

IMPACT: MODERATE

- Political instability in **EU** countries exacerbated by the influx of refugees and migrants, with heightened civil unrest, isolated terrorist attacks, or violence against refugees and migrants
- A severe **India-Pakistan** military confrontation triggered by a major terrorist attack or heightened unrest in Indian-administered Kashmir
- Further fracturing of **Iraq** caused by political differences and violent clashes among Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish communities, worsened by the presence of the Islamic State
- Heightened tensions between **Israelis** and **Palestinians** leading to attacks against civilians, widespread protests, and armed confrontations
- Continued political fracturing in **Libya**, worsened by the presence of the Islamic State, with heightened violence and further external military intervention
- Increased internal violence and political instability in **Pakistan** caused by multiple militant groups and tension between the government and opposition parties
- Growing political instability in



the **Philippines** stemming from opposition to the government's domestic and foreign policy agenda

- Increased political instability in **Turkey** stemming from growing authoritarianism after the July 2016 coup attempt
- Increased violence in eastern **Ukraine**

between Russian-backed militias and Ukrainian security forces, with potential overt Russian military intervention

- Intensified civil war in **Yemen** stemming from the Saudi-led military intervention against Houthi rebels that further fractures the country

LIKELIHOOD: HIGH

IMPACT: LOW

- Deepening economic crisis and political instability in **Venezuela** leading to violent civil unrest

Tier III ■

LIKELIHOOD: MODERATE

IMPACT: LOW

- Intensification of political crisis in **Burundi** and escalation of violence among state forces, opposition groups, and civilians
- Growing political instability in the **Democratic Republic of Congo** due to delayed elections, resulting in widespread violence
- Growing civil unrest and ethnic violence in **Ethiopia** in response to government repression
- Intensified violence and political instability in **Nigeria** related to conflicts with Boko Haram in the northeast and other conflicts in the Delta region
- Continued al-Shabab attacks in **Somalia** and neighboring countries
- Intensification of the civil war in **South Sudan** stemming from political and ethnic divisions, with destabilizing spillover effects into neighboring countries
- Political instability in **Thailand** resulting from the uncertainty of royal succession—following the death of King Bhumibol Adulyadej in October 2016—and continued military rule
- Widespread unrest and violence in **Zimbabwe** related to the succession of President Robert Mugabe

LIKELIHOOD: LOW

IMPACT: LOW

- Political instability in **Colombia** following the collapse of the peace agreement between the government and the FARC, causing a resumption of the insurgency
- An outbreak of military conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed **Nagorno-Karabakh** region



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 Council Special Reports* to evaluate and respond rapidly to developing conflict situations 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, or to access the Center for Preventive Action's latest work, please visit our website at www.cfr.org/thinktank/cpa, follow us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/CFRCenterforPreventiveAction, or on Twitter @CFR_CPA.

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*North Korean military personnel celebrate the
seventieth anniversary of the founding of the ruling
Workers' Party of Korea in Pyongyang on October
12, 2015. (Korean Central News Agency|Reuters)*

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