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Center for Preventive Action



Preventive
Priorities Survey
2015

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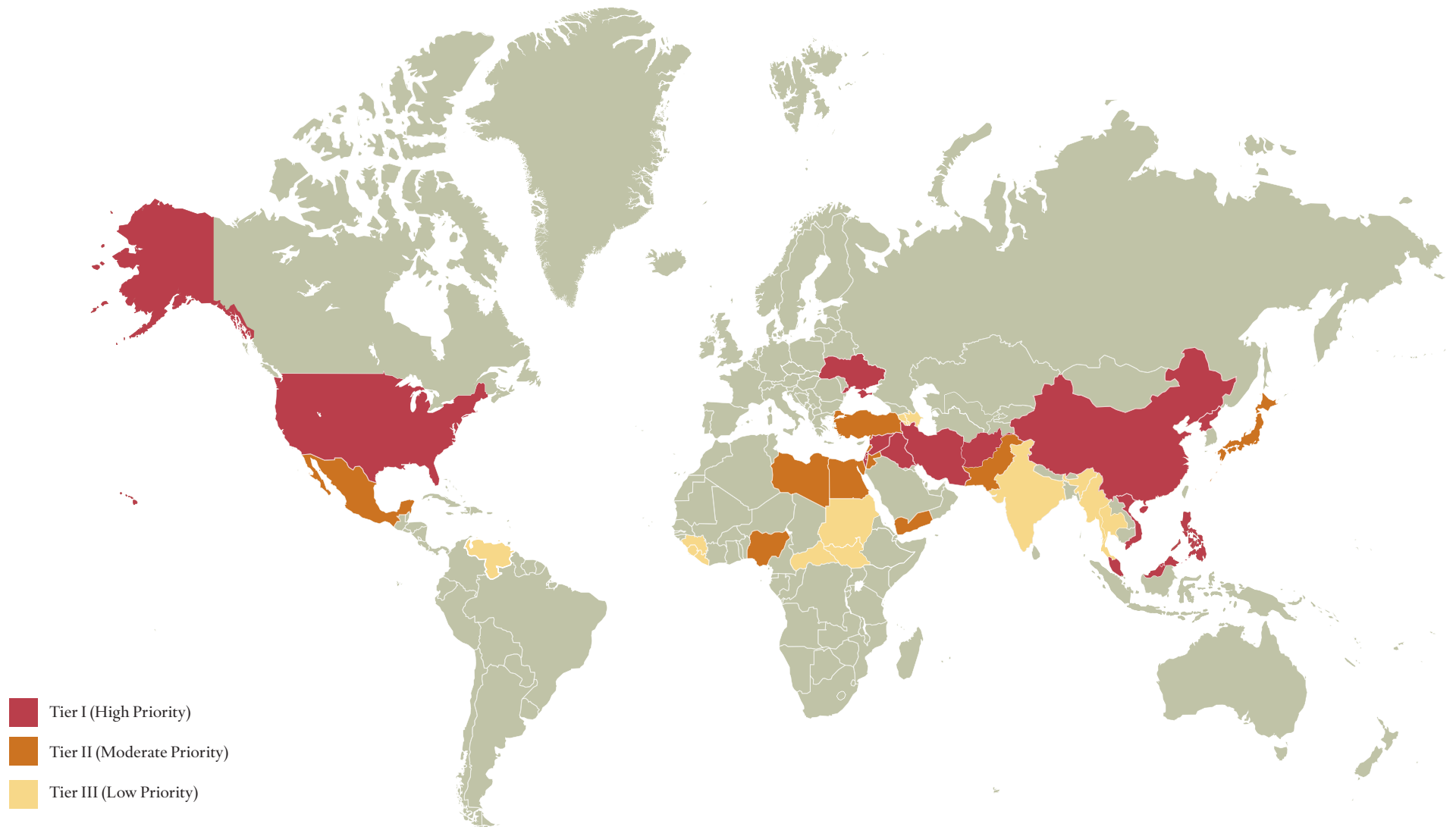
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Preventive Priorities Survey 2015

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



About the Preventive Priorities Survey

The upsurge in political instability and violent conflict around the world in 2014 caught many people by surprise, not least policymakers in the United States, who had to grapple with multiple crises in places as diverse as Ukraine, Nigeria, Israel and the Palestinian territories, Iraq, and Yemen throughout the year. Ideally, early warning of threatening developments in those countries could help the United States, either acting alone or in partnership with other countries and international organizations, to take preventive action to avert the resulting crises or at least mitigate their harmful consequences. Given the inherent uncertainties in predicting the onset and escalation of violent conflict, relying on precise early warnings to galvanize such preventive action is not realistic. Instead, we advocate a “risk assessment” approach to gauge both the likelihood of threatening developments occurring in the coming year and their possible implications for the United States. This approach helps not only to sensitize policymakers to incipient geopolitical risks but also focus their preventive efforts on those areas of greatest concern.

The Preventive Priorities Survey represents a qualitative risk assessment based on the informed judgment of a large number of foreign policy experts, whom we poll each year. The PPS asks respondents to assess the likelihood that each



Opposition supporters take part in a march against the government of Nicolás Maduro in Caracas, Venezuela, October 18, 2014. (Jorge Silva|Courtesy Reuters)



A Ukrainian armored vehicle moves along a road near the eastern Ukrainian town of Debaltseve, October 6, 2014. (David Mdzinarishvili|Courtesy Reuters)

of thirty plausible geopolitical contingencies will arise in the coming year and also to consider how significant an effect each would have on U.S. national interests. Potential economic crises, financial shocks, and conceivable natural disasters were not included in the survey. Although such events can undermine political instability and trigger violent conflict, the focus of the PPS is limited to relatively discrete geopolitical contingencies. Respondents, however, were invited to list additional contingencies not included in the survey that they felt warranted attention as U.S. conflict prevention priorities.

To bring rigor to this exercise, the survey provided the following general guidelines to help each respondent estimate the relative probability and impact of the identified contingencies:

- Contingencies with a greater-than-even chance of occurring in 2015 are classified as having a **high** likelihood. Those with about an even chance of occurring are considered to have a

moderate likelihood, and those with a less-than-even chance are categorized as **low** likelihood.

- Contingencies that could directly harm the United States, or involve countries that the United States is already committed to protect, are classified as having a **high** impact. Conflicts involving countries of strategic importance to the United States but that are not “treaty allies” are considered to have 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, are ranked as **low** impact.

By its very nature, the PPS represents a snapshot of expert opinion at the time it was taken in November 2014. The world is a dynamic place and assumptions and judgments have to be regularly evaluated.

Methodology

The Center for Preventive Action (CPA) carried out the 2015 PPS in three stages:

1. Soliciting of PPS Contingencies

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 one thousand suggestions to thirty contingencies deemed both plausible over the next twelve months and also potentially harmful to U.S. interests.

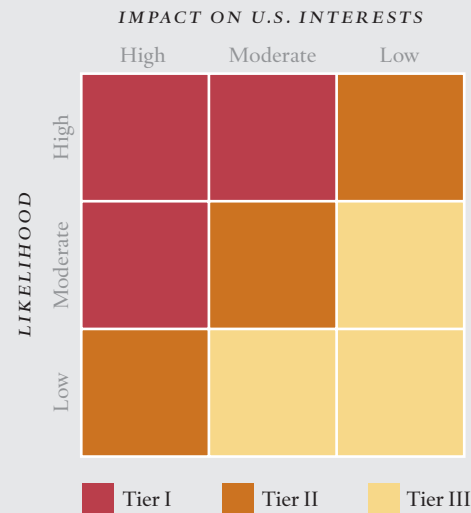
2. Polling of Experts

The survey was sent to more than 2,200 government officials, foreign policy experts, and academics. Respondents were asked to estimate the likelihood and impact on U.S. interests of each of the contingencies. The respondents also had the opportunity to suggest contingencies that did not appear on the survey but might warrant attention. The most popular suggestions are included at the end of this report.

3. Categorization of Contingencies

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

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- **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 2015
- **Moderate:** contingency has about an even chance of occurring in 2015
- **Low:** contingency is improbable to highly unlikely to occur in 2015



Left: Rebel fighters gather in a village in Upper Nile State in South Sudan, February 8, 2014. (Goran Tomasevic|Courtesy Reuters)

Right: Afghan National Army soldiers take part in a training exercise at a military base in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 23, 2014. (Omar Sobhani|Courtesy Reuters)



Military personnel march in front of the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun in Pyongyang, North Korea, to mark the sixty-first anniversary of the armistice that ended the Korean War, July 27, 2014. (Korean Central News Agency/Courtesy Reuters)

2015 Findings

Six new contingencies appear in this year's survey. Of these, two were ranked Tier I contingencies: an intensification of fighting in eastern Ukraine between Russian-backed militia forces and Ukrainian security forces with the potential for more overt Russian military intervention, and heightened tensions within Israel and the Palestinian territories. Growing political violence in Turkey between various Kurdish groups and Turkish security forces exacerbated by spillover from the Syrian civil war was determined to be a Tier II priority. Instability in West Africa stemming from the effects of the Ebola pandemic; growing political unrest in China, particularly in the Xinjiang region as a result of Uighur-related tensions; and political instability in Thailand that could be exacerbated by a royal succession crisis were all considered Tier III priorities.

Two contingencies surveyed last year received a higher-priority ranking for 2015. The first, an intensification of the conflict

in Iraq due to further territorial gains by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), was the only Tier I contingency this year ranked as having a high likelihood and high impact. The second contingency, an armed confrontation in the South China Sea between China and one or more Southeast Asian claimants to disputed maritime areas, rose from Tier II to Tier I.

The priority rankings of two contingencies were downgraded for 2015. Increased internal violence and political instability in Pakistan, now judged to be less likely, slipped from Tier I to Tier II. Likewise, political instability and civil violence in Jordan stemming from the spillover effects of the Syrian conflict is considered less likely to occur in 2015 than in 2014 and dropped to Tier II as a consequence. Each contingency's importance to U.S. interests continued to be assessed as moderate.

Six contingencies included last year did not make the cut for the 2015 survey. These contingencies do not appear in this year's PPS: continuing conflict in Somalia and intensification of al-

Shabab's terrorist attacks on neighboring countries, which was ranked as a Tier II contingency in 2014; a Sino-Indian clash resulting from the escalation of a territorial dispute and/or a military incident; the destabilization of Mali by militant groups with spillover effects on neighboring areas; intensification of violence in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo with regional spillover; protracted internal violence in Bangladesh; and military conflict between Sudan and South Sudan triggered by border and/or resource disputes. All five of the latter contingencies were judged Tier III priorities in 2014.

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 think warrant attention. The following are the most commonly cited:

- increasing Russian interference in the Baltic states, particularly Estonia
- breakdown in peace negotiations between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Colombian government
- growing violence in Kenya resulting from increased attacks by al-Shabab
- increasing gang-related violence in Central America
- intensification of violence in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo with regional spillover
- growing political instability in Saudi Arabia
- crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrators in Hong Kong
- widespread unrest in Zimbabwe surrounding the electoral process and/or the death of President Robert Mugabe
- competing territorial claims in the Arctic
- political unrest following the death of former president Fidel Castro in Cuba

Tier I

Contingencies judged high preventive priorities for U.S. policymakers

IMPACT: HIGH
LIKELIHOOD: HIGH

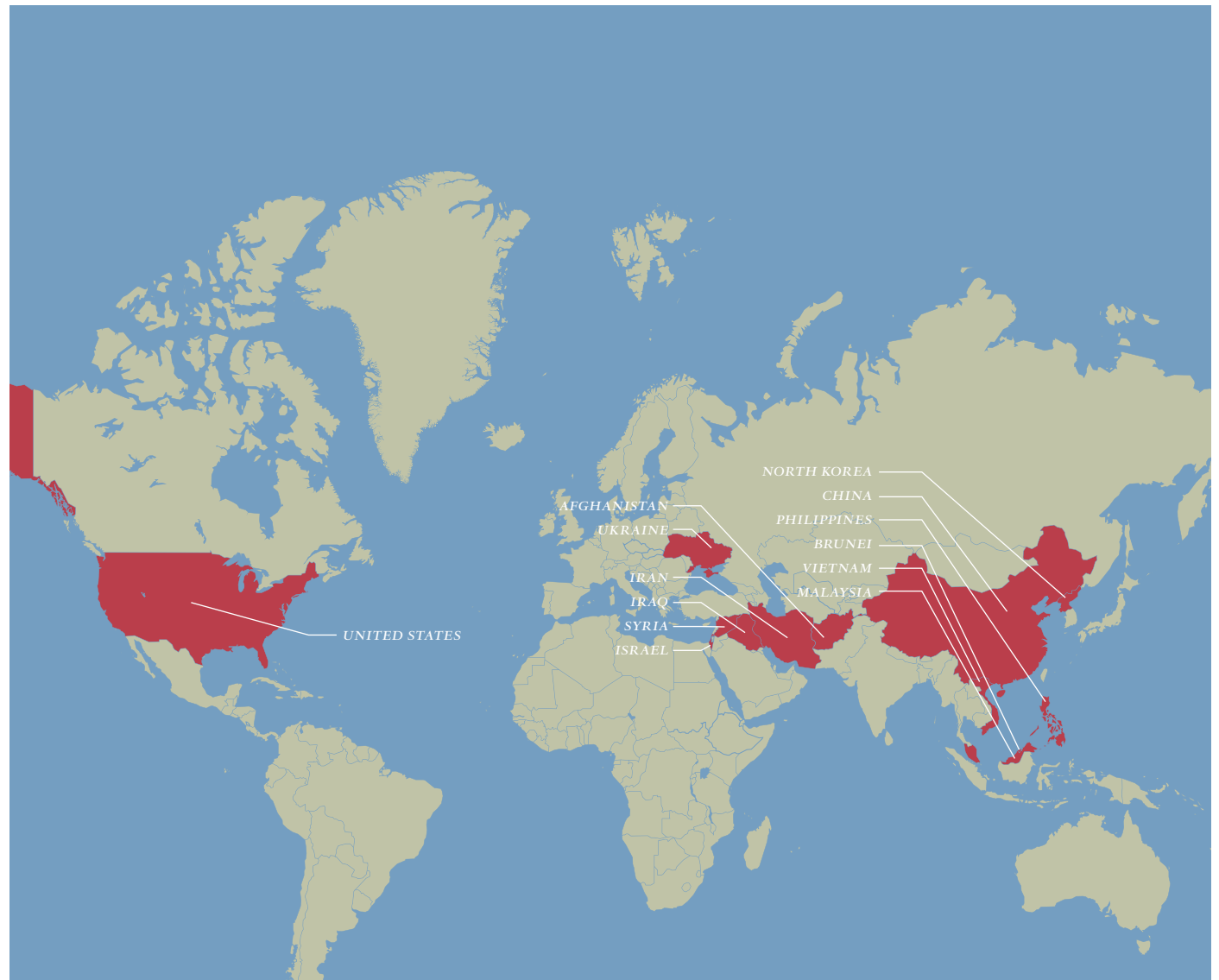
- intensification of the conflict in **Iraq** due to territorial gains by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and operations by Iraqi security forces, as well as ongoing Sunni-Shia sectarian violence

IMPACT: HIGH
LIKELIHOOD: MODERATE

- a mass casualty attack on the **U.S. homeland** or a treaty ally
- a highly disruptive cyberattack on **U.S. critical infrastructure**
- a severe **North Korean** crisis caused by a military provocation, internal political instability, or threatening nuclear weapons/ICBM-related activities
- renewed threat of Israeli 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
- an armed confrontation in the **South China Sea** between China and one or more Southeast Asian claimants to disputed maritime areas

IMPACT: MODERATE
LIKELIHOOD: HIGH

- an intensification of the **Syrian** civil war resulting from increased external support for warring parties, including military intervention by outside powers
- increased violence and instability in **Afghanistan** resulting from the withdrawal of coalition combat forces and strengthening of the Taliban insurgency
- an intensification of fighting in eastern **Ukraine** between Russian-backed militia forces and Ukrainian security forces, with potential overt Russian military intervention
- heightened tensions within **Israel** and the **Palestinian territories** leading to widespread protests and armed confrontations



Tier II

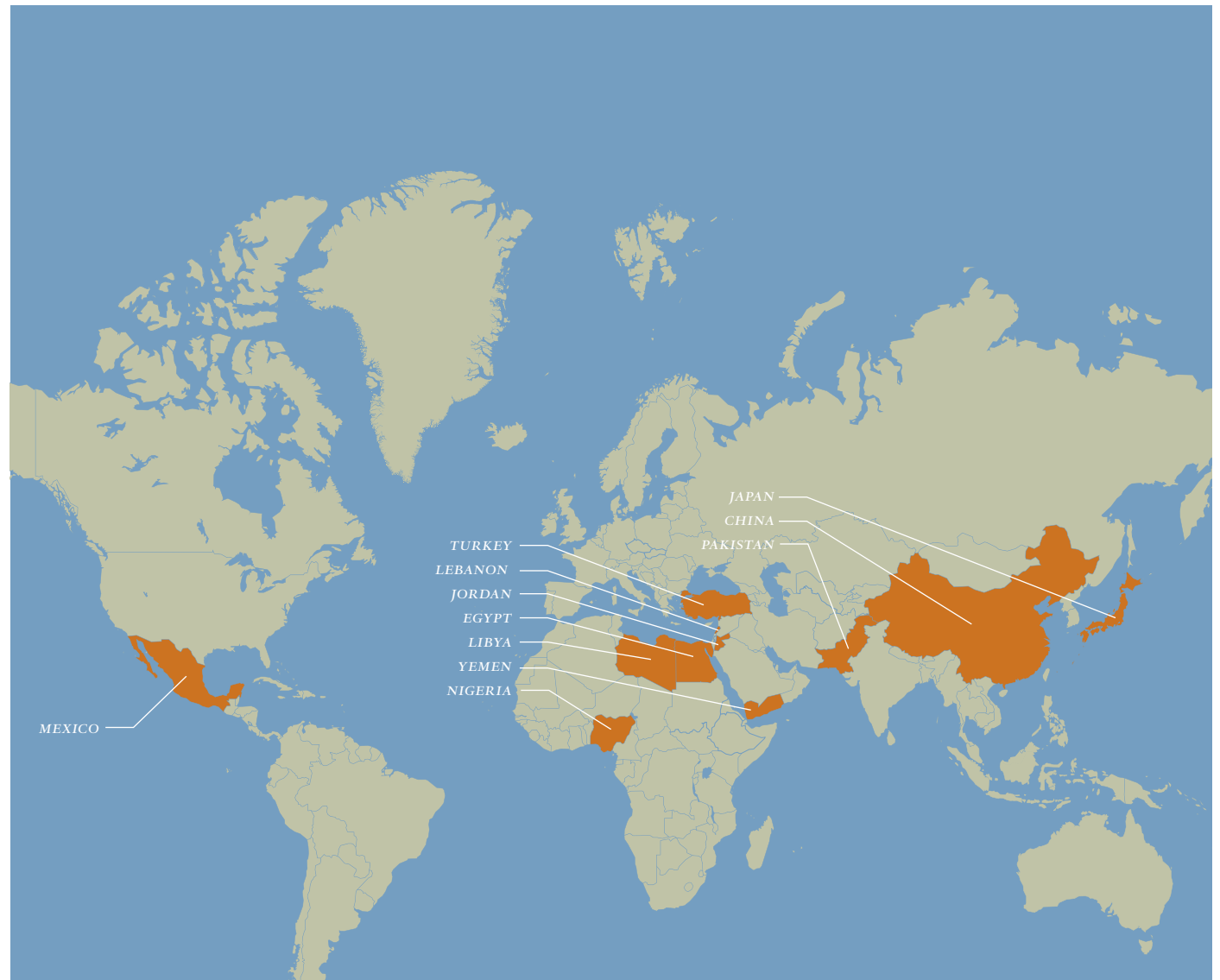
Contingencies judged moderate preventive priorities for U.S. policymakers

IMPACT: MODERATE
LIKELIHOOD: MODERATE

- continued political fracture and growing militancy in **Libya** resulting in state failure, minimal governance, and further military intervention by Arab states
- increased instability and terrorist attacks in **Egypt**, particularly in the Sinai Peninsula, resulting in a military crackdown
- deepened political instability and civil violence in **Jordan** triggered by spillover from the Syrian civil war
- increased sectarian violence and political instability in **Lebanon** due to spillover from the Syrian civil war
- increased internal violence and political instability in **Pakistan** stemming from Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan militancy
- intensified political violence in **Turkey** between various Kurdish groups and Turkish security forces exacerbated by spillover from the Syrian civil war
- strengthening of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula resulting from continued political instability in **Yemen** and the expansion of Houthi rebel territorial control

IMPACT: HIGH
LIKELIHOOD: LOW

- an armed confrontation in the **East China Sea** between China and Japan stemming from tensions over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands
- escalation of organized crime-related violence in **Mexico** that spills over into the United States



IMPACT: LOW
LIKELIHOOD: HIGH

- an intensification of violence and political instability in **Nigeria** related to Boko Haram, as well as surrounding the general elections

Tier III

Contingencies judged low preventive priorities for U.S. policymakers

IMPACT: LOW

LIKELIHOOD: MODERATE

- growth of political unrest in **China**, particularly among the Uighur population
- escalation of sectarian violence in the **Central African Republic** between the Seleka rebels and “anti-balaka” militias, possibly resulting in mass atrocities
- intensification of sectarian violence between Buddhists and Muslim Rohingyas in **Myanmar**
- protracted civil war in **South Sudan** stemming from political and ethnic divisions
- surge in popular unrest and political instability in **Sudan**
- growing political instability and unrest in **Thailand**, potentially exacerbated by a royal succession crisis
- deepening political crisis in **Venezuela** leading to civil violence and potential regional instability
- political instability stemming from the impacts of Ebola in **West Africa**, with potential spillover into neighboring countries

IMPACT: MODERATE

LIKELIHOOD: LOW

- a severe **Indo-Pakistani** military confrontation triggered by a major terrorist attack or heightened violence in Kashmir

IMPACT: LOW

LIKELIHOOD: LOW

- an outbreak of military conflict between **Armenia** and **Azerbaijan** over Nagorno-Karabakh



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](https://twitter.com/CFR_CPA).

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Displaced people from the minority Yazidi sect, fleeing violence from forces loyal to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), walk toward the Syrian border near Sinjar, Iraq, August 11, 2014. (Rodi Said/Courtesy Reuters)

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