

COUNCIL *on* FOREIGN RELATIONS

CENTER FOR PREVENTIVE ACTION

*Preventive
Priorities Survey*
2026

The Preventive Priorities Survey was made possible by a generous grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the Center for Preventive Action.

Copyright © 2025 by the Council on Foreign Relations®, Inc. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America.

This publication may not be reproduced in whole or in part, in any form beyond the reproduction permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law Act (17 U.S.C. Sections 107 and 108) and excerpts by reviewers for the public press, without express written permission from the Council on Foreign Relations.

COUNCIL *on* FOREIGN RELATIONS

CENTER FOR PREVENTIVE ACTION

*Preventive
Priorities Survey*
2026

Paul B. Stares

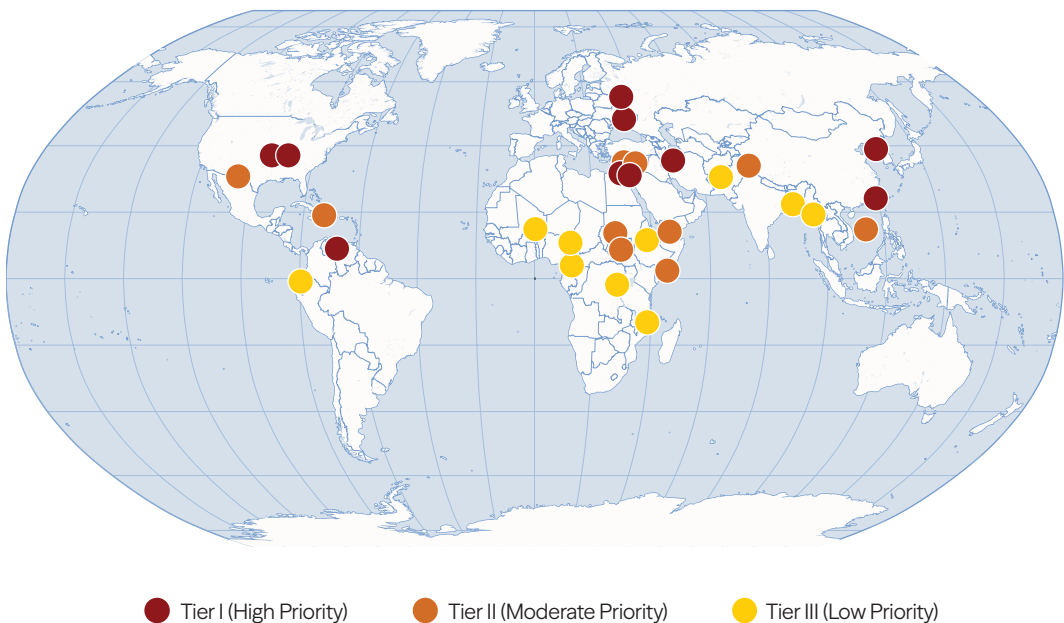
General John W. Vessey Senior Fellow for Conflict Prevention

Director, Center for Preventive Action

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.

To learn more about ongoing conflicts, visit the "Global Conflict Tracker" at [cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker](https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker).

Top Conflicts to Watch in 2026



ABOUT THE PREVENTIVE PRIORITIES SURVEY

For the past eighteen years, the Center for Preventive Action (CPA) has surveyed American foreign policy experts to assess the risk posed to U.S. national interests by ongoing and emerging sources of armed conflict around the world.

The logic of this exercise is straightforward: U.S. policymakers often find themselves blindsided by conflict-related crises that divert attention and resources away from other priorities and even lead to major military interventions that cost American lives. Those involved frequently lament afterward that officials should have done more to avert or prepare for these crises. Thus, the purpose of the Preventive Priorities Survey is not just to alert busy U.S. policymakers to incipient sources of instability over the next twelve months but also to help them decide which are most pressing.

The need for U.S. policymakers to look ahead and actively lessen conflict-related risks grows every year. The world has undeniably become more violent and disorderly. Indeed, the number of armed conflicts

is now at its highest since the end of World War II. An increasing proportion of those, moreover, are interstate conflicts, reversing a post–Cold War trend. The United States is uniquely exposed to the growing risk of armed conflict, as no other power has as many allies and security commitments.

The second Trump administration has sought to end many ongoing conflicts, such as those in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Gaza Strip, and Ukraine, as well as between India and Pakistan and Cambodia and Thailand. At the same time, however, it has engaged in unnecessarily destabilizing behavior, specifically threatening force and other coercive measures against several countries, including allies, notably in the Western Hemisphere. Regrettably, it has also systematically dismantled the very elements of the U.S. government dedicated to strategic foresight, conflict prevention, and peace-building without replacing them with anything better. Related funding has been slashed in the process. Those actions are both counterproductive and shortsighted.



Missiles fired from Iran in the night sky over Jerusalem on June 14, 2025. (Menahem Kahana/AFP via Getty Images)

Hopefully, the Trump administration will reverse course in the coming months by no longer alienating important allies and partners, while giving more emphasis to upstream efforts known to promote peace and stability, particularly in areas important to the United States. The findings of this year's PPS can help in that regard.

The PPS asks experts to assess only relatively discrete political and military contingencies—thirty, to be precise—that have been judged during an initial crowdsourcing effort as plausible in the coming twelve months. It is not designed, therefore, to evaluate the risk posed by broad trends such as global warming, demographic change, or technological developments. Those trends, which could easily trigger violent conflict, are simply too difficult to judge over a short time frame. Nor does the PPS attempt to appraise the risk associated with events such as earthquakes, severe weather, public health crises, or the death of a specific leader. Those

events can trigger instability, but their likelihood is inherently unpredictable. Respondents are given the opportunity, however, to identify additional conflict-related concerns they believe warrant attention. Those suggestions appear in the list of “Other Noted Concerns.”

This year, the survey contained a new feature: respondents were asked to share what they believe are promising opportunities for both averting and managing conflict around the world. The leading results are discussed separately in the “Opportunities for Conflict Prevention and Resolution” section.

Finally, the results reflect expert opinion at the time the survey was conducted in November 2025. The world is ever-changing, so geopolitical risk assessments need to be regularly updated. CPA does this with its award-winning “Global Conflict Tracker” interactive, accessible at cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker.



A man prepares to throw an object as an Israeli tank operates in Jenin, in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, on February 23, 2025. (Raneen Sawafta/Reuters)

METHODOLOGY

The Center for Preventive Action carried out the 2026 PPS in three stages:

1. Soliciting PPS Contingencies

In October 2025, 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 in 2026 and potentially harmful to U.S. interests.

2. Polling Foreign Policy Experts

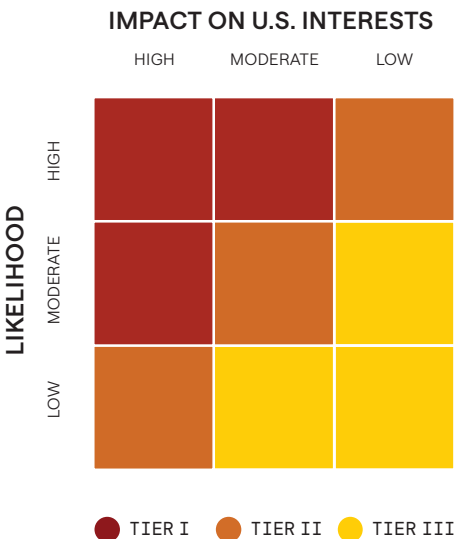
In November 2025, the survey was sent to approximately 15,000 U.S. government officials,

foreign policy experts, and academics, of whom approximately 620 responded. Each was asked to estimate the impact on U.S. interests and likelihood of each contingency according to general guidelines (see risk assessment matrix 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 and 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 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 2026

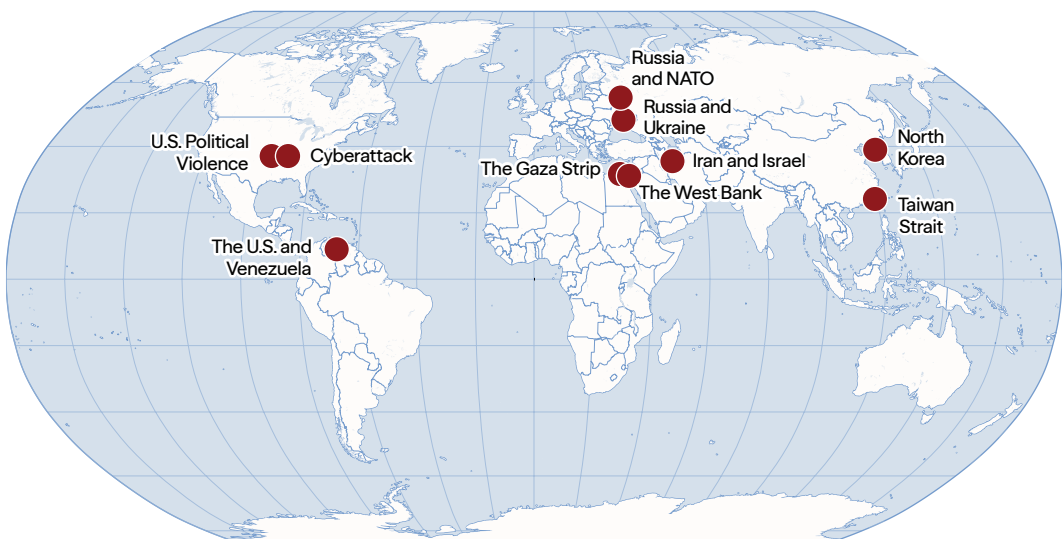
Moderate: contingency has an even chance of occurring in 2026

Low: contingency is improbable to highly unlikely to occur in 2026

TIER I

High Likelihood; High Impact

- Increased conflict between Israeli security forces and Palestinians in the **West Bank** over Israeli settlement construction, Palestinian political rights, and the war in Gaza
- Renewed fighting in the **Gaza Strip**, triggered by increasing clashes between Hamas militants and Israeli security forces, deepens the humanitarian crisis and exacerbates regional instability
- An intensification of the **Russia-Ukraine** war, caused by expanding attacks on each side's critical infrastructure and population centers
- U.S. military operations targeting transnational criminal groups escalate to direct strikes in **Venezuela**, destabilizing the Maduro government
- Growing political violence and popular unrest in the **United States**, exacerbated by heightened political antagonism and domestic security deployments



Moderate Likelihood; High Impact

- Renewed armed conflict between **Iran** and **Israel**, caused by Iranian efforts to reconstitute its nuclear program and rebuild its regional network of anti-Israel proxy groups
- A state or nonstate entity undertakes a highly disruptive, artificial intelligence-enabled cyberattack on **U.S. critical infrastructure**
- Intensified military, economic, and political pressure by **China** on **Taiwan** precipitates a severe cross-strait crisis involving other countries in the region and the United States
- Armed clashes between **Russia** and one or more **NATO** member countries, precipitated by increasing Russian provocations toward European states
- A resumption of **North Korean** nuclear weapons tests heightens tensions on the Korean Peninsula, triggering an armed confrontation involving other regional powers and the United States



TIER II

High Likelihood; Low Impact

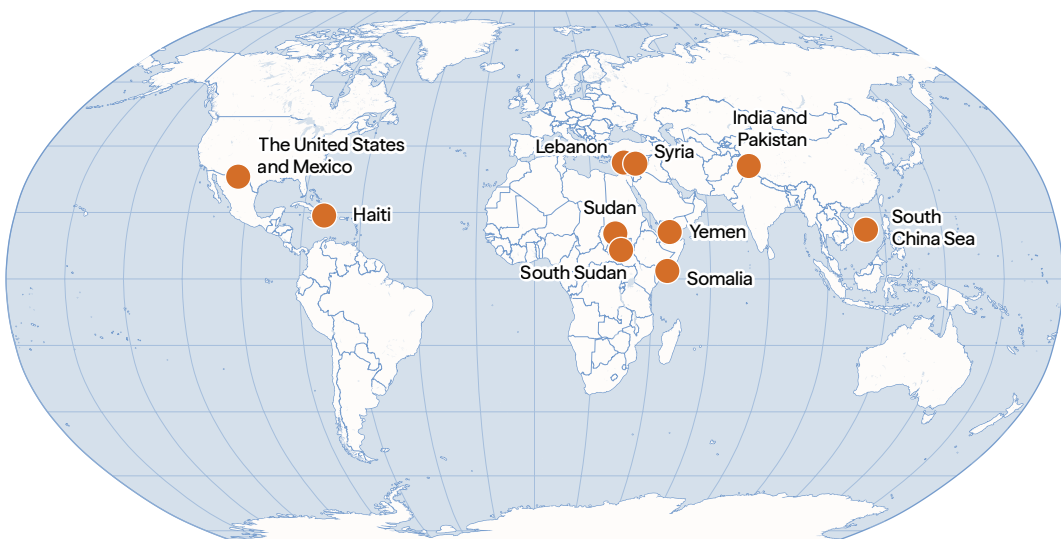
- An escalation of the civil war in **Sudan** leads to further mass atrocities, civilian displacement, and spillover violence in neighboring countries
- Violent clashes between armed groups and security forces escalate in **Haiti**, aggravated by political dysfunction and the failure of international stabilization efforts
- Further election delays in **South Sudan** trigger renewed fighting between armed ethnic and political factions, destabilizing the central government
- Failed efforts to disarm Hezbollah and continued Israeli military strikes in **Lebanon** destabilize the central government and ignite a wider sectarian conflict
- Growing sectarian violence and a resurgence of ISIS in **Syria**, exacerbated by Israeli and Turkish military interventions, weaken the central government and accelerate state fragmentation
- Renewed armed conflict between **India** and **Pakistan** due to heightened terrorist activity and repression in Indian-administered Kashmir

Moderate Likelihood; Moderate Impact

- The withdrawal of U.S. security assistance from **Somalia** leads to increased terrorist attacks and expanded territorial control by Al-Shabaab and ISIS
- Houthi attacks on Israel and international shipping provoke retaliatory actions that further degrade state capacity and deepen the humanitarian crisis in **Yemen**

Low Likelihood; High Impact

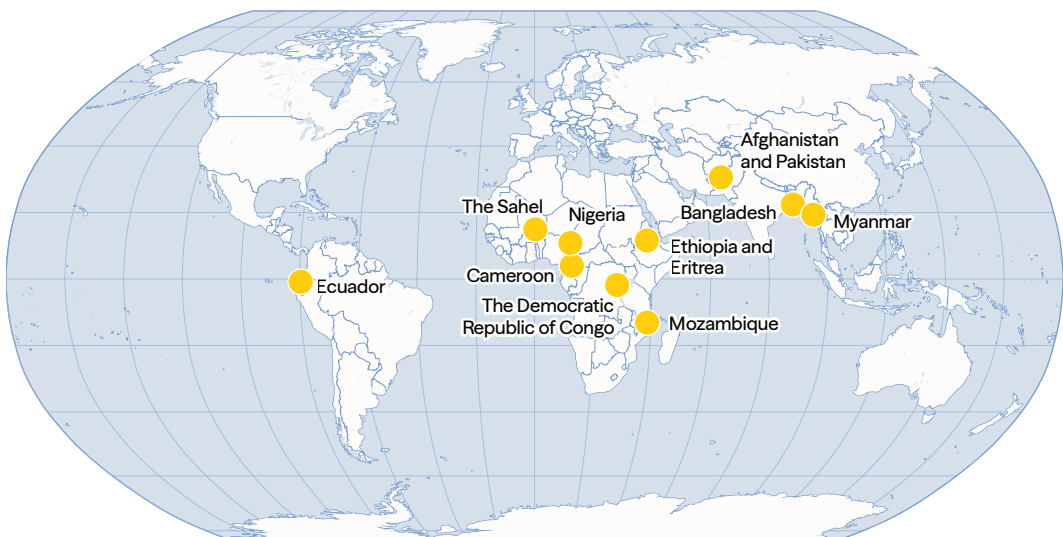
- Heightened concerns in the **United States** over illicit drug production and trafficking by transnational criminal groups lead to direct U.S. military strikes in **Mexico**
- Aggressive Chinese actions in the **South China Sea**, especially toward the Philippines, lead to an armed confrontation involving China, the United States, and U.S. allies



TIER III

Moderate Likelihood; Low Impact

- Growing insurgencies across the **Sahel** (especially in Mali) exacerbate regional instability and human suffering
- Heightened Islamist terrorism and persistent state weakness in northeastern **Nigeria** increase nationwide insecurity and political instability
- Ethnic and political conflict over territory and natural resources intensifies between the **Democratic Republic of Congo** and armed groups, including **Rwanda**-backed militias
- Political and religious violence grows in **Bangladesh**, aggravated by the postponement of national elections and a worsening governance crisis
- Intensified criminal activity and conflict between the military junta and armed groups in **Myanmar** accelerate state collapse and increase civilian displacement, further exacerbating regional tensions
- Rising criminal violence and political repression in **Ecuador** increase civilian casualties and popular unrest
- Armed clashes between the **Ethiopian** military and **Eritrea**-backed militias, aggravated by Ethiopia's efforts to gain Red Sea port access, reignite war in the border region
- The insurgency in northern **Mozambique** intensifies, causing widespread civilian casualties and accelerating displacement
- Renewed armed conflict between **Afghanistan** and **Pakistan**, triggered by resurgent cross-border militant attacks
- Political unrest and strengthening insurgencies in northern and western **Cameroon** destabilize the central government and lead to wider civil conflict



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 additional contingencies were proposed by several survey respondents:

- Increased Chinese and Russian military activities in the **Arctic** trigger an armed confrontation involving the United States or other NATO allies
- Renewed hostilities over unresolved territorial claims between **Armenia** and **Azerbaijan** draw in Turkey and other regional powers
- Resurgent border clashes between **Cambodia** and **Thailand** lead to a worsened refugee crisis and regional political instability
- Tensions between **China** and **Japan** over the sovereignty of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, aggravated by disputes over the status of Taiwan, lead to armed clashes in the East China Sea
- Growing armed group activity and political polarization in **Colombia**, compounded by instability and criminal violence in Venezuela, further derail Colombia's peace process and lead to resurgent civil war
- An increase in ethnic violence and political instability in the **western Balkans** triggers an armed confrontation necessitating foreign intervention



A man adds a tire to a burning barricade during a protest against insecurity in the Pétion-Ville neighborhood of Port-au-Prince, Haiti, on April 2, 2025. (Fildor Pq Egeder/Reuters)



A member of the M23 group carries weapons during an enrollment of civilians, police officers, and former members of the Democratic Republic of Congo's armed forces in Bukavu, Democratic Republic of Congo, on February 22, 2025. (Luis Tato/AFP via Getty Images)

TAKEAWAYS

- Last year's unprecedented level of anxiety about the rising risk of violent conflict in the world remains undiminished. Once more, five contingencies are rated as high-likelihood, high-impact events. Also, of the thirty contingencies surveyed, twenty-eight were again judged to be either highly or moderately likely to occur in the next twelve months. Seventeen of the contingencies, moreover, would have a high or moderate impact on U.S. interests, according to survey respondents.
- This year, the thirty contingencies are spread evenly across the three tiers of relative priority. Although much of the world is represented in the 2026 PPS, the Middle East continues to figure prominently in the top-ranked concerns. Six Middle Eastern conflicts are rated as either Tier I or Tier II priorities, with each involving Israel to some degree. However, the largest number of contingencies (nine) involve African countries. Although six of them are assessed to be Tier III priorities, the risk of escalating war in Sudan was judged as the most likely to occur in 2026 among *all* the PPS contingencies surveyed.
- While several 2025 Tier I contingencies remain comparably ranked in 2026 (Gaza, Ukraine, Iran-Israel, and a cyberattack on the United States), one rose in the rankings to Tier I (North Korea) whereas four fell to Tier II (Haiti, Lebanon, Mexico, and the South China Sea). Notably, the possibility of growing political violence and popular unrest in the United States—the leading risk in the 2024 survey—is once again a high-likelihood, high-impact contingency after being rated as moderately likely to occur in the 2025 PPS.
- As has been true for the last several years, the risk of great power war persists. This year, contingencies such as a crisis in the Taiwan Strait and Russia-NATO clashes are given an even chance of occurring in 2026 and are rated as high impact due to their potential to draw the United States into a direct military conflict with China or Russia. The risk of a conflict in the South China Sea carries similar potential risk but was rated as having a low likelihood for 2026.



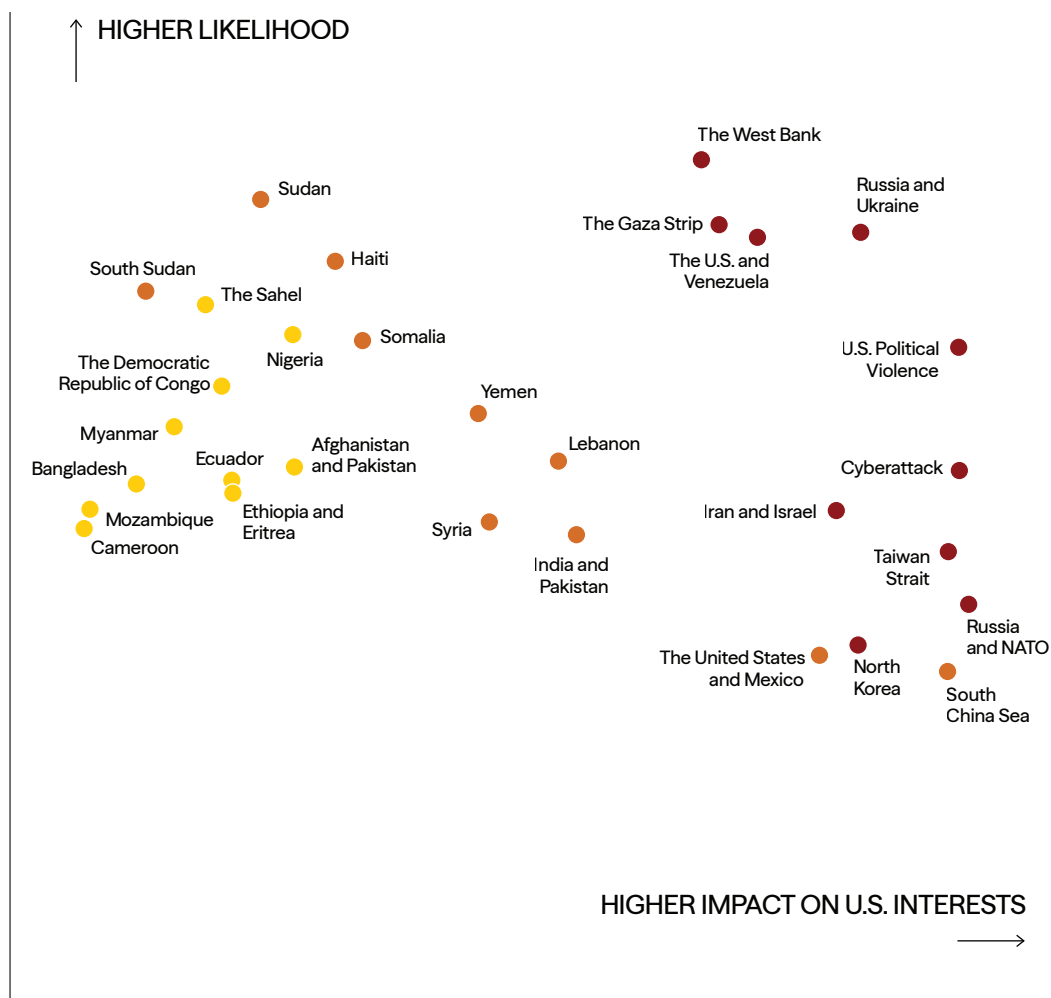
A Sudanese Armed Forces soldier walks on the damaged Shambat Bridge in Khartoum, Sudan, on April 27, 2025. (Giles Clarke/Avaaz via Getty Images)



A Kashmiri resident reacts to his damaged house following cross-border shelling in Salamabad, a village near the Line of Control in Uri, Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir, on May 8, 2025. (Faisal Bashir/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images)

How Experts Assessed the Contingencies

● Tier I (High Priority) ● Tier II (Moderate Priority) ● Tier III (Low Priority)



Additional observations warrant mention:

- *Six contingencies from the 2025 survey were not included in the 2026 survey.* For the first time, the possibility of widespread conflict in Afghanistan did not appear in a PPS survey, though the risk of further cross-border clashes with Pakistan was included. Due to a promising disarmament process involving the main Kurdish armed group in Turkey, the related contingency was also eliminated from the 2026 survey. Likewise, civil conflicts in Ethiopia and Libya, as well as the possibility of Russian provocations against non-NATO countries in eastern Europe, did not merit inclusion. The risk of armed confrontation in the western Balkans is listed as an “Other Noted Concern” this year.
- *Six new contingencies were included in the 2026 survey.* By far the most prominent new addition is the possibility of direct U.S. military action against Venezuela, which was ranked as a high-likelihood, high-impact contingency. Due to the growing number of provocations by Russia against NATO countries in 2025, the potential for those tensions to escalate into an armed clash was judged to be sufficiently plausible for inclusion in the 2026 survey. Following a year of dramatic political change and sectarian violence in Syria, resurgent civil war in that country was also added. South Sudan, a 2025 “Other Noted

Concern,” likewise returned to the survey after another year of election delays and factional violence. Rising violence and unrest in Ecuador and growing insurgent activity and political instability in Cameroon were new additions as well.

- *Eight contingencies in the 2025 survey were revised significantly for 2026.* The Ukraine war–related contingency is now focused on the risk that Russia and Ukraine will intensify attacks on each other’s infrastructure and cities. The possibility of renewed fighting between Iran and Israel reflects new concerns following the June 2025 twelve-day war. Similarly, the prospect of direct U.S. strikes targeting criminal groups in Mexico accounts for the Trump administration’s heightened concern over the illicit drug trade. The Sudan contingency emphasizes the growing risk of mass atrocities, and the Somalia contingency addresses the potential U.S. withdrawal of security assistance and a resulting increase in terrorism. The risk of war between Ethiopia and its neighbors focuses more narrowly on conflict with Eritrea and Eritrea-backed groups in the border region. The contingency regarding Yemen centers on the deepening internal crisis, and the Lebanon contingency centers on the government’s struggle to disarm Hezbollah.



The U.S. Navy’s Gerald R. Ford Carrier Strike Group sails toward the Caribbean Sea under F/A-18E and F/A-18F Super Hornets and a B-52 Stratofortress on November 13, 2025. (Gladjimi Balisage/U.S. Navy/Handout via Reuters)



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un inspects a new missile production line at a military enterprise at an undisclosed location on September 1, 2025. (Korean Central News Agency via Reuters)

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONFLICT PREVENTION AND RESOLUTION

In this year’s survey, 336 experts suggested dozens of contingencies under two broad categories: conflicts in which the United States has exceptional leverage over one or more parties and conflicts for which the United States can partner with other countries and international institutions to bolster peace efforts.

Respondents overwhelmingly identified these contingencies as the best opportunities for the United States to use its influence to mitigate conflict:

Contingency	Priority
An intensification of the Russia-Ukraine war, caused by expanding attacks on each side’s critical infrastructure and population centers	Tier I Likelihood: High Impact: High 112 experts highlighted this opportunity for preventive action
Renewed fighting in the Gaza Strip , triggered by increasing clashes between Hamas militants and Israeli security forces, deepens the humanitarian crisis and exacerbates regional instability	Tier I Likelihood: High Impact: High 49 experts highlighted this opportunity for preventive action
Intensified military, economic, and political pressure by China on Taiwan precipitates a severe cross-strait crisis involving other countries in the region and the United States	Tier I Likelihood: Moderate Impact: High 31 experts highlighted this opportunity for preventive action
Increased conflict between Israeli security forces and Palestinians in the West Bank over Israeli settlement construction, Palestinian political rights, and the war in Gaza	Tier I Likelihood: High Impact: High 20 experts highlighted this opportunity for preventive action
A resumption of North Korean nuclear weapons tests heightens tensions on the Korean Peninsula, triggering an armed confrontation involving other regional powers and the United States	Tier I Likelihood: Moderate Impact: High 10 experts highlighted this opportunity for preventive action

Experts identified these contingencies as ripe opportunities for the United States to increase its support for international efforts toward peace:

Contingency	Priority
An escalation of the civil war in Sudan leads to further mass atrocities, civilian displacement, and spillover violence in neighboring countries	Tier II Likelihood: High Impact: Low 30 experts highlighted this opportunity for preventive action
Growing sectarian violence and a resurgence of ISIS in Syria , exacerbated by Israeli and Turkish military interventions, weaken the central government and accelerate state fragmentation	Tier II Likelihood: Moderate Impact: Moderate 17 experts highlighted this opportunity for preventive action
Violent clashes between armed groups and security forces escalate in Haiti , aggravated by political dysfunction and the failure of international stabilization efforts	Tier II Likelihood: High Impact: Low 15 experts highlighted this opportunity for preventive action
Ethnic and political conflict over territory and natural resources intensifies between the Democratic Republic of Congo and armed groups, including Rwanda -backed militias	Tier III Likelihood: Moderate Impact: Low 8 experts highlighted this opportunity for preventive action



A Multinational Joint Task Force military escort accompanying an excavator passes through a checkpoint at the entrance to Monguno, Borno state, Nigeria, on July 4, 2025. (Joris Bolomey/ AFP via Getty Images)



Members of the Baggara tribe pose for a photo after announcing that the tribe has launched a fight against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and People's Protection Units (YPG) in Tell Abyad, Syria, on August 14, 2025. (Abdulrhman El Ali/Anadolu via Getty Images)

ABOUT THE CENTER FOR PREVENTIVE ACTION

The Center for Preventive Action 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, or to access CPA's latest work, please visit our website at www.cfr.org/programs/center-preventive-action.

ABOUT THE COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

The mission of the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) is to inform U.S. engagement with the world. Founded in 1921, CFR is a nonpartisan, independent national membership organization, think tank, educator, and publisher, including of *Foreign Affairs*. It generates policy-relevant ideas and analysis, convenes experts and policymakers, and promotes informed public discussion—all to have impact on the most consequential issues facing the United States and the world.

The Council on Foreign Relations takes no institutional positions on policy issues and has no affiliation with the U.S. government. All views expressed in its publications and on its website are the sole responsibility of the author or authors.

For further information about CFR or this publication, please write to the Council on Foreign Relations, 58 East 68th Street, New York, NY 10065, or call Communications at 212.434.9888. Visit CFR's website, www.cfr.org.



Cover: A Ukrainian artilleryman uses a portable rocket launcher in Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia region on May 23, 2025. (Dmytro Smolienko/Ukrinform/NurPhoto via Getty Images)