U.S. FOREIGN POLICY CRISES, 1989–2019

The Center for Preventive Action (CPA) at the Council on Foreign Relations compiled the following list of U.S. foreign policy crises since the end of the Cold War (November 1989) according to these criteria:

- The triggering event or series of events is perceived as a threat to U.S. interests or values such that it may warrant the use of U.S. armed forces to protect them.

- The perception of threat is sufficient to attract high level U.S. government attention (deputies level and above) principally, but not exclusively, in the executive branch.

- Decision-making is driven by a strong sense of urgency based on the belief that there is a finite or optimal time frame to respond. It can also be accompanied by considerable uncertainty about the nature of the threatening event(s) and what action to take in response, owing to doubts about efficacy and cost.

An initial list of crises was produced using datasets generated by Duke University's International Crisis Behavior project, the Correlates of War project, and the U.S. government-sponsored Political Instability Task Force, as well as conflict background briefs and lists from the Congressional Research Service and RAND Corporation that tabulate cases of U.S. military deployments since the Cold War.[1] Additional sources were also consulted, including U.S. government press releases and other communiques, as well as the memoirs of presidents and senior government officials. This list runs to the beginning of October 2019, but because CPA relied on publicly available press

releases and unclassified reports to determine whether an event merited inclusion in its list of crises, the final list may not include recent or still classified events.

The final list clearly reflects CPA's judgment about which crises to include or exclude. In particular, CPA included certain humanitarian crises and natural disasters for which the deployment of U.S. military personnel was deemed important to securing U.S. interests. However, CPA did not include crises that were precipitated by economic events, even though they might have had an international dimension; in almost all such cases, the use of military force was irrelevant or uncalled for. CPA also excluded many terrorist attacks and related incidents involving U.S. forces as well as U.S. allies and partners, assessing that these events were part of the global war on terror following the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States. These events are already covered comprehensively in other databases.[2]

Deciding whether some events are discrete enough to warrant being listed individually or should be classified as part of a single, prolonged crisis, is also a subjective call. For example, some experts could justifiably argue that the various events related to the Balkans in the 1990s constituted one long crisis. The same rationale applies to episodic events related to North Korea's development of nuclear weapons and long-range missiles and for the ongoing conflict in Syria. For some crises, CPA chose to distinguish between different events of the same provenance because they triggered an urgent reassessment of U.S. policy and thus justified treatment as separate crises. In addition, for crises that could be linked to multiyear events, such as the European refugee crisis, CPA selected the year of the crisis based on when it triggered the most urgent alarm in the U.S. government.

Figure 2. U.S. FOREIGN POLICY CRISES, 1989–2019

George H.W. Bush

1989	Attempted coup in the Philippines against Corazon Aquino
	U.S. invasion of Panama
1990	India-Pakistan nuclear crisis
	First Liberian Civil War
	Iraq's invasion and occupation of Kuwait
1991	Bosnian and Croat independence movements
	Uprisings in northern and southern Iraq
	Breakup of Yugoslavia
	Attempted coup against Mikhail Gorbachev
	Coup in Haiti
1992	Coup in Sierra Leone
	Coup and famine in Somalia

Bill Clinton

1993	Terrorist bombing attack on World Trade Center in New York
	Assassination attempt on George H.W. Bush in Kuwait
	Russian constitutional crisis
	First Battle of Mogadishu, Somalia
	Coup in Burundi
1994	Siege of Sarajevo
	Rwandan genocide
	North Korean nuclear crisis
	Iraqi threats to Kuwait
	Chechnya secession and First Chechen War
1995	Attack on UN safe haven in Srebrenica and Srebrenica massacre
	China-Taiwan crisis
1996	Unrest in Liberia
	Israeli military intervention in Lebanon
	Armed mutinies in Central African Republic
	Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia
	Iraqi offensive in Kurdistan
	North Korean submarine infiltration

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Bill Clinton (cont.)

1997	Rebellion in Albania
	Civil war in Sierra Leone
	Coup in Cambodia
	Armed conflict in Congo-Brazzaville
1998	Serbian invasion of Kosovo
	Eritrea-Ethiopia border war
	India and Pakistan nuclear tests
	Second Congo War
	U.S. embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania
	North Korean missile test over Sea of Japan
	Violent unrest in Liberia
	Hurricane Mitch in Central America
1999	Atrocities in Kosovo
	India-Pakistan conflict in Kargil
	Second Chechen War
	Independence of East Timor
	Flash floods in northern Venezuela
2000	Ethiopian offensive against Eritrea
	Bombing of the USS *Cole*

George W. Bush

2001	Hainan Island incident in the South China Sea
	9/11 attacks
	Twin Peaks crisis between India and Pakistan
2002	Insurgency in southern Philippines
	Military unrest in Ivory Coast
2003	Genocide in Darfur, Sudan
	Alleged Iraqi violations of weapons of mass destruction prohibitions
	Second Liberian civil war
2004	Coup in Haiti
	Indian Ocean tsunami
2005	Earthquake in Kashmir

George W. Bush (cont.)

2006	Iranian nuclear enrichment
	Second Lebanese War
	First North Korean nuclear test
2007	Construction of Syrian nuclear reactor
	Electoral violence in Kenya
2008	Sri Lankan Civil War
	Russia-Georgia War
	Conflict in Gaza

Barack Obama

2009	North Korean nuclear test
	Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula threats in Yemen
2010	Earthquake in Haiti
	Sinking of the South Korean naval ship *Cheonan*
	Second Kyrgyz Revolution
	Flooding in Pakistan
	Bombardment of Yeonpyeong Island in the South China Sea
2011	Violent unrest in Egypt
	Post-election violence in Ivory Coast
	Threat of mass atrocities in Libya
	Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster in Japan
	Violent crackdown in Syria
2012	Coup in Mali
	Scarborough Shoal standoff in the South China Sea
	Attack on U.S. embassy in Benghazi, Libya
	Conflict in Gaza
	Seizure of Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo
2013	North Korean nuclear test
	Mass atrocities in Central African Republic
	Chemical weapons attack in Damascus, Syria
	Civil war in South Sudan
2014	Russia-Ukraine conflict
	Boko Haram attacks in northern Nigeria
	Islamic State operations in Iraq and Syria

Preparing for the Next Foreign Policy Crisis

Barack Obama (cont.)

2014   Conflict in Gaza

Ebola outbreak in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone

Islamic State mass atrocities against Yazidis

2015   Boko Haram attacks in Cameroon

Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen

Violent unrest in Burundi

European refugee crisis

Russian intervention in Syrian civil war

2016   North Korean nuclear test

Russian interference in U.S. presidential elections

Violent clashes in Juba, South Sudan

Coup attempt in Turkey

North Korean nuclear test

Missile attacks against USS *Mason*

Donald J. Trump

2017   Chemical weapons attack in Khan Shaykhun, Syria

WannaCry ransomware attack

Islamic State seizure of Marawi, Philippines

Saudi-led blockade of Qatar

North Korean intercontinental ballistic missile test

Mass atrocities in Rakhine State, Myanmar

North Korean nuclear test

Ambush of U.S. soldiers in Niger

2018   Turkish offensive in Afrin, Syria

Chemical weapons attack in Douma, Syria

2019   Political and social unrest in Venezuela

India-Pakistan border skirmishes

Violent unrest in Sudan

U.S. confrontation with Iran