1. Armed conflict

Overview

In 2011–12 conflict continued to be a major concern for the international community, most notably in the Middle East, western Asia and Africa, but also with increased levels of interstate tension in East Asia. Nevertheless, deaths resulting from major organized violence worldwide remained at historically low levels.

At the same time, the decline in both numbers of conflicts and fatalities that has characterized post-cold war international security has largely levelled off, albeit with spikes in some years (see section III in this chapter). Indeed, there are indications of a possible reversal of some of the key trends of recent decades. These indications include rises in the numbers of state-based and non-state conflicts as well as fatalities in 2011, although it is too early to identify a trend.

A key issue in understanding the changing patterns of conflict over recent decades and their likely future evolution is the relationship of states, and notably the major powers, to armed conflict. Perhaps the biggest single factor that has shaped the significant global decline in the number of armed conflicts and casualty rates since the end of the superpower confrontation of the cold war has been the dramatic reduction in major powers engaging in proxy conflicts

However, the relationship between states and conflict may be changing once again. In recent years there has been an increase in the number of intrastate conflicts that are internationalized—that is, that have another state supporting one side or another. Such involvement often has the affect of increasing casualty rates and prolonging conflicts.

During 2011 there were several significant internationalized intrastate conflicts, notably in Africa, some of them long-standing conflicts. The Middle East, however, presented one of the most challenging environments as the civil war in Syria increasingly manifested the characteristics of a regional conflict in which neighbouring states became parties to the conflict (see section I). At the same time, the escalation of the conflict in 2012—against the backdrop of concerns about weapons of mass destruction, growing religious radicalism and sectarianism—threatened to draw in major extra-regional powers.

The growing international aspects of the Syrian conflict raised broader questions about the ability of the international community to contain, manage and end the violence in the country. Another key factor in the overall reduction in levels of armed conflict following the end of the cold war has been

the rising incidence of intervention in conflicts and for post-conflict reconstruction by the international community, in the form of peace and stabilization missions. The stalemate within the United Nations Security Council on how to respond to the Syria conflict has raised concern about whether the consensus among leading powers necessary to respond to major conflicts can still be found in an increasingly multipolar international security system.

The challenges represented by conflict in the Middle East also highlighted the complex pattern of armed conflict found around the world. While the civil war in Syria became one of the bloodiest conflicts in the world in 2011–12, Africa continued to experience the vast majority of non-state conflicts, and those in the Americas had the highest average number of deaths per conflict and the highest proportions of non-state conflict between formally organized groups.

Even though East and South East Asia were the sites of some of the most destructive state-based conflicts from the 1950s to the 1970s, they have become among the world's most peaceful regions (see section II). Only one interstate conflict has been registered in South East Asia since 1989, and none in East Asia. However, with important questions emerging about the global distribution of organized violence and the role of regional and major powers in conflicts, the situation in these regions has become a key issue. In recent years, tensions associated with shifting power balances in East Asia, notably involving China and the United States and its allies, have risen, sometimes to potentially dangerous levels. In South East Asia a set of bloody localized conflicts remain unresolved and some even flared up in 2012. There are thus real concerns that the East and South East Asian peace may evaporate.

With the increase in conflict numbers, evidence of an intensification of armed violence in terms of fatality rates, rising interstate tensions in some regions, and major disagreements among major powers about the appropriate international response to key conflicts, international security may have entered a period of transition. A central question in this context is whether change will bring rising levels of interstate conflict.

Shifting interests and changing capabilities as a result of a weakening of the unipolar post-cold war security balance and the emergence of elements of multipolarity are clearly affecting the overall international order, even while levels of conflict remain relatively low. Nevertheless, some developments in 2011–12 could be seen as warning signs that if the positive trends in conflict that emerged in recent decades are to be sustained, new ways need to be found to build cooperative international relations to manage the changing global security order.

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