6. Armed conflict data trends

Overview

In recent years there has been a major growth in the availability and validity of data sets on various forms of violence. Section I reviews the major advances in the collection and availability of data, with a particular focus on the widening of conceptual ambitions, increased precision in the recording of the occurrence of violence and innovations in source-mining techniques. It also discusses major ongoing problems, such as remaining data gaps and issues of data collection.

Major questions remain unanswered about the scope of and trends in violence. Perhaps the most important is the question of whether there has been a general, progressive decline in the level of human-inflicted violence in recent decades; and, if so, whether the trends in armed conflict in recent years indicate a reversal of that peace. This is discussed in section III.

In section II, the Uppsala Conflict Data Program provides an overview of the past ten years of active armed conflicts, with a focus on 2015. The number of active armed conflicts increased from 41 in 2014 to 50 in 2015, largely due to the expansion of the Islamic State into new territories. Of the 50 active conflicts, only one was fought between states (India–Pakistan). The rest were fought within states and concerned government (19), territory (29) or both (1). However, the authors conclude that the levels of violence linked to armed conflict remain much lower than they were during the cold war, in part because the international community has developed better mechanisms for dealing with violence.

Section III examines what it would take for the current upsurge in armed conflict to translate into a reversal of peace. The decline in the number of battle-related deaths in recent decades is mainly the result of the transformation in East Asia since 1979 from the most belligerent region in the world to one of the most peaceful—largely driven by the decreasing trend for foreign involvement in the armed conflicts of the region. Security guarantees, economic development and structural factors relating to the regional and global order also help to explain the East Asian Peace. However, on this evidence, whether the current worldwide escalation in armed conflict will turn into a reversal of peace is contingent on how foreign actors choose to intervene in today's armed conflicts. An exacerbation of the pattern of foreign involvement in armed conflict in the Middle East is the most realistic potential driver of a reversal of peace.

One particular conflict can account for a large proportion of the number of battle-related deaths, as was the case in the 1967–75 and 1978–98 Cambodian Civil War and is currently the case in Syria. Many parallels can be drawn

between the two conflicts, as well as insights for peacemaking, most notably that a negotiated settlement to the Cambodian conflict was possible only after the foreign backers had settled their differences.

Section IV explores what is known about the spectrum of conflict and violence at the time of the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It describes the complex, changing, interactive and networked characteristics of modern violence and concludes by suggesting some ways in which international and national actors can address these changing patterns. One of the most promising avenues is to bolster the authority and capacity of local institutions and groups to collect, code, store, manage and analyse conflict data in a systematic way. Collecting multiple types of data will ensure that the information gathered is: (a) useful for comparative analysis and global tracking of progress towards achieving SDG 16; (b) locally defined, relevant and applicable to contexts in which the specific dynamics and strategies of violence vary; and (c) effective in shaping the degree to which people feel their society is just, peaceful and inclusive.

Section V shows how records of the dead are being created in situations of armed conflict and also sets out the components of international law that make casualty recording a legal obligation on states, particularly in relation to the protection of civilians. There is a growing call, including from the United Nations Secretary-General, for every casualty to be recorded in situations of armed conflict. Civil society organizations have shown that highly useful and effective recording is already possible and is being practiced in many conflicts. At its heart is the humanization of victims, their recognition and the protection of those who remain after them—a principle that is in itself already universal.

Section VI presents the Global Peace Index for 2015, which uses 23 indicators to rank 163 nations and territories by their relative states of peace. In 2016 the Index demonstrated the continuing decline in global peacefulness since 2008. Only minor deteriorations were recorded in Europe, the Asia-Pacific region and sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East and North Africa accounted for the main deterioration in global peace. A large regional improvement was recorded in Central America and the Caribbean. The overall deterioration continues to be primarily driven by negative changes in indicators measuring: (a) the number of refugees and displaced people; (b) the impact of terrorism; and (c) the number of internal and external conflicts, and the associated number of battle-related deaths.

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