

III. A reversal of peace? The role of foreign involvement in armed conflict: a case study on East Asia

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Introduction

Do the trends in armed conflict in recent years indicate a reversal of peace? Although the intense warfare in the Middle East represents a massive escalation compared to just a few years ago the number of battle-related deaths is still far below the peak years of the cold war—and of course even much further below the numbers killed in the two World Wars of the 20th century. At the same time, however, current developments are very worrying. This section examines what it would take for the current upsurge in armed conflict to translate into a reversal of peace, in the sense that the total number of battle-related deaths would again approach the peak years of the cold war. We seek to understand the decline in war fighting since the end of World War II and to identify signs that these factors are changing in such a way that a reversal of peace might be possible.

It is widely accepted that the decline in the number of battle-related deaths in recent decades is mainly the result of a transformation in patterns of war in East Asia. The overwhelming majority of battle-related deaths since World War II have occurred in East Asia, primarily in the 1927–50 Chinese Civil War; the 1950–53 Korean War and the 1946–89 Indochina wars. However, East Asia in particular has seen a drastic decline in war since 1979, transforming from the most belligerent region in the world to one of the most peaceful.² This was largely driven by the decreasing trend for foreign involvement in the armed conflicts of the region. 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.³

The greatest risk linked to the role of foreign involvement is that regional or even great powers will escalate their military involvement on opposing sides in a complex armed conflict, such as the current conflict in Syria and Iraq. The comparatively less intense conflict in Ukraine and the continuing

¹ The research on which this section is based was carried out within the framework of the East Asian Peace programme at the Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University, with the support of the Riksbankens Jubileumsfond.

² Tønnesson, S., 'What is it that best explains the East Asian peace since 1979? A Call for a research agenda', *Asian Perspective* vol. 33, no. 1 (Jan.–Mar. 2009), pp. 111–36; and Tønnesson, S. et al., 'The fragile peace in East and South East Asia', *SIPRI Yearbook 2013: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2013), pp. 28–40.

³ See also the discussion on external support in civil wars in chapter 4 of this volume, including case studies on the current conflicts in Syria and Ukraine.

maritime tensions in East Asia also represent worrying hotspots, mainly because of the risk of foreign involvement and the potentially catastrophic consequences.

This section takes a regional perspective. Regions other than East Asia have also seen important reductions in war, most notably Latin America, whereas other regions have seen relatively few wars throughout the post-1945 period (North America and Europe). Nonetheless, the magnitude of the change in East Asia means that an understanding of how that region transformed from the most war-torn region in the world to a zone of widening and deepening peace could make substantial inroads into explaining the general decline in war globally.⁴

This dramatic transformation is often referred to as the East Asian Peace. Before 1979, East Asia was one of the most violent regions in the world, with extremely intensive international conflicts as well as intra-state conflicts in which different countries participated on either the rebel or the government side. After 1979 there was a dramatic reduction in the number of battle-related deaths in the region, as East Asia experienced a remarkable decline in the number of wars and the intensity of armed conflicts. This is all the more striking since it is the conflicts in East and South East Asia that have killed most people in terms of battle-related deaths since 1945.⁵ Many studies have examined the regional politics of and conflicts in and between East Asian countries, but research has paid little attention to the region's relative peacefulness since 1979.⁶

Previous research has identified external intervention as an important factor in a decline in battle-related deaths. An expanding field of research is examining the shift in East Asia from the region with some of the most intensive armed conflicts in the world to a region with relative peace. Seen in terms of battle-related deaths, the change is dramatic and calls out for an explanation.⁷ Kivimäki suggests that the East Asian Peace has a wider basis than just a negative trend in conflict intensity in the form of decreasing battle-related deaths over time.⁸ Examining conflicts rather than battle-related deaths, Svensson argues that the East Asian Peace is about a change

⁴ Human Security Report Project, *Human Security Report, 2009/2010: The Causes of Peace and the Shrinking Costs of War* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2011).

⁵ Lacina, B., Gleditsch, N. P. and Russett, B., 'The declining risk of death in battle', *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 50, no. 3 (2006), pp. 673–80, p. 279.

⁶ Kivimäki, T., 'The long peace of ASEAN', *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 38, no. 1 (Jan. 2001), pp. 5–25; Goldsmith, B. E., 'A liberal peace in Asia?' *Journal of Peace Research* vol. 44, no. 1 (Jan. 2007), pp. 5–27; Ross, R., 'The US–China peace: great power politics, spheres of influence, and the peace of East Asia', *Journal of East Asian Studies*, vol. 3, no.3 (Dec. 2003), pp. 351–75; and Tønnesson (note 2).

⁷ Tønnesson (note 2), pp. 111–36.

⁸ Kivimäki, T., 'East Asian relative peace: does it exist? What is it?' *Pacific Review*, vol. 23, no. 4 (Sep. 2010), pp. 503–26.

in conflict management rather than conflict settlement.⁹ Other explanations for the East Asian Peace include informal mechanisms; the self-constructed norms, identities and common interests within Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) regional cooperation; a shift in the strategies of opposition movements from taking up arms to utilizing peaceful methods of protest; China's rise as a regional power, creating relative stability; and increased economic interdependence in the East Asia region.¹⁰ Taking an elite-focused, learning-based approach, Tønnesson suggests that leaders' shifts in political priorities are the most historically important explanation.¹¹ This shift occurred after national traumas led leaders to shift from policies based on coercion, territorial irredentism and nationalist or communist ideologies, to a focus on economic growth.

This section draws on detailed data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). Support to one side in a conflict can take many different forms in addition to 'boots on the ground', and supporters might be non-state actors. This section employs a broader conceptualization of secondary support to examine the extent to which direct foreign involvement and secondary support can account for the decline in conflict intensity. This unique data shows how changes in these patterns largely account for the decline in war in East Asia, and therefore account for a large part of the general decline in war globally.

This section presents three levels of intervention that had a critical impact on conflict dynamics in East Asia. The most substantial form of foreign intervention was great power intervention, which resulted in conflicts with the greatest intensity. At the aggregate level there is no trend for decreasing great power support in East Asia around or after 1979. In fact, the level of support *increased*, driven by the dynamics of continuing external involvement in the 1967–75 and 1978–98 Cambodian Civil War. Great power rivalry linked to cold war dynamics accounted for the main shifts in battle-related deaths in the region. Thus, a large part of the secondary support given by governments to other countries was linked to cold war logic, meaning conflicts between the Soviet Union, China and the USA as part of the global military campaign of influence, and the ideological contest between socialism

⁹ Svensson, I., 'East Asian peacemaking: exploring the patterns of conflict management and conflict settlement in East Asia', *Asian Perspective*, vol. 2 (2011), pp. 163–85.

¹⁰ Weissmann, M., *The East Asian Peace: Conflict Prevention and Informal Peacebuilding* (Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2012); Kivimäki, T., 'Sovereignty, hegemony, and peace in Western Europe and in East Asia', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, vol. 12, no. 3 (2012), pp. 419–47; Svensson, I., 'East Asian peacemaking: exploring the patterns of conflict management and conflict settlement in East Asia', *Asian Perspective*, vol. 2 (2011), pp. 163–85; Ross, R. (2003). 'The US-China peace: great power politics, spheres of influence, and the peace of East Asia', *Journal of East Asian Studies*, vol. 3, pp. 351–75; and Ross, R. S., 'The geography of the peace: East Asia in the twenty-first century', *International Security*, vol. 23, no. 4 (1999), pp. 81–118; and Goldsmith, B. E., 'A liberal peace in Asia?', *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 44, no. 1 (Jan. 2007), pp. 5–27.

¹¹ Tønnesson (note 2).

and liberal-capitalism. When this is taken out of the picture, the remaining trend in secondary support was almost constant over time. Third, secondary support by non-state actors has been a largely marginal phenomenon in the region throughout the period.

Previous research has established a relationship between external intervention and the intensity of conflicts, but the direction of causality in that relationship is contested. Lacina suggest that conflicts where the parties receive external assistance are more likely to be higher in intensity as measured by the number of battle-related deaths.¹² On the other hand, Elbadawi and Sambanis argue that causality is in the opposite direction: conflicts of higher intensity are more likely to attract external actors, who select themselves into the most intense armed conflicts.¹³ Alternatively, Regan argues that because intensity decreases the likelihood of a successful external intervention, it can serve to reduce the likelihood of external actors engaging.¹⁴

The close association between external involvement and conflict intensity is particularly relevant in East Asia. As Kivimäki notes, there has been a dramatic shift in foreign involvement: 'Before 1979, East Asian States were engaged in 35 conflict dyads after the Second World War in which they supported the enemy (domestic or international) of another East Asian state with military troops. . . . However, after 1979 this stopped, and there was no longer a single dyad in which one East Asian State lent military support to an enemy of another East Asian state'.¹⁵ Thus, there has been no military intervention on the rebel side since 1979.¹⁶ Analysing the East Asian Peace, the Human Security Report notes that: 'the dramatic decline in the numbers of people killed in conflicts in the region since the mid-1970s was caused by the ending of major power interventions (indirect as well as direct) in regional conflicts'.¹⁷

Mapping the empirical landscape of foreign involvement in East Asia

The mapping below uses the most recent UCDP dataset on secondary support.¹⁸ As in section II, an armed conflict is defined as a contested incompat-

¹² Lacina, B., 'Explaining the severity of civil wars', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 50, no. 2 (Apr. 2006), pp. 276–89.

¹³ Elbadawi, I., 'External interventions and the duration of civil wars', *World Bank Policy Research Working Paper* 2433/2000.

¹⁴ Regan, P. M., 'Choosing to intervene: outside interventions in internal conflicts', *Journal of Politics*, vol. 60, no., 3 (1998), pp. 754–79, p. 771.

¹⁵ Kivimäki, T., 'East Asian relative peace and the ASEAN Way' *International Relations of Asia Pacific*, vol. 11, no. 1 (2011), p. 69.

¹⁶ Kivimäki (note 15).

¹⁷ Human Security Report Project (note 4), p. 60.

¹⁸ Pettersson, T., 'Pillars of strength: external support to warring parties', eds T. Pettersson and L. Themnér, *States in Armed Conflict 2010*, Research Report no. 94 (Universitetstryckeriet: Uppsala, 2011).

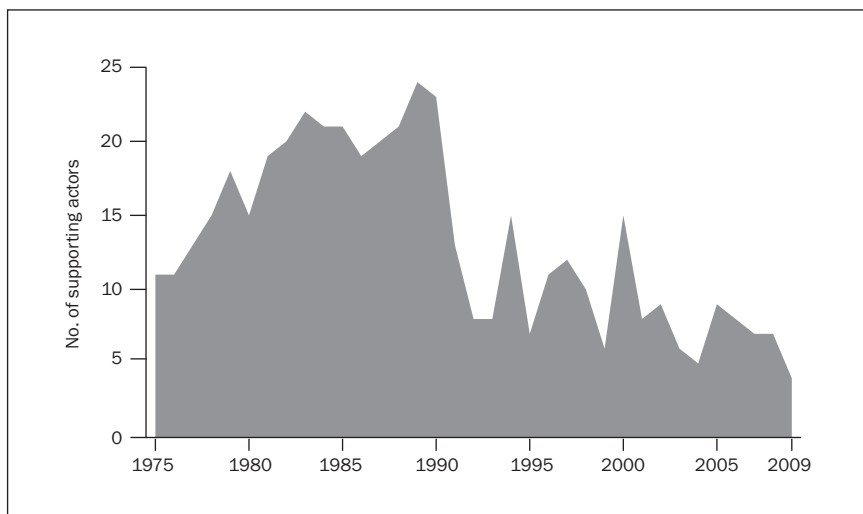


Figure 6.2. Number of actors offering secondary support to conflicts in East Asia, 1975–2009

Sources: UCDP External Support Dataset v 1.0; and Pettersson, T., ‘Pillars of strength: external support to warring parties’, eds. T. Pettersson and L. Themnér, *States in Armed Conflict 2010*, Research Report 94 (Universitetstryckeriet: Uppsala, 2011).

ibility—in which the parties are aspiring to the same scarce resources, such as territory or government power—between two or more parties, where at least one side is a government of a state, and the conflict behaviour results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in a given year. The secondary support dataset is organized in an actor-year format. Each row represents a party in an armed conflict that receives secondary support from one external actor. This support can be either warring—where the support is through the supply of troops that take part in the fighting—or non-warring support.¹⁹ Non-warring support is defined as ‘support to a primary party that is given to assist it in an ongoing conflict’. It can take many different forms, such as financial assistance, arms, logistics and military support (short of troops), as well as the provision of sanctuary, military training, military intelligence and economic support.²⁰

Trends for external involvement in East Asia

Figure 6.2 sets out the general trend for the provision of secondary support in East Asia.²¹ No distinction is made between the type of support and the

¹⁹ It should be noted that military advisers or technicians are not part of the category of external support provided by troops.

²⁰ Pettersson (note 18).

²¹ The East Asian region consists of Brunei, Cambodia, China with Hong Kong and Taiwan, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar (Burma), North Korea, the Philippines,

identities of the supporting actors. At this aggregate level, secondary support increases in the post-1979 period. The large shift occurs in the 1990s, as is discussed further below.

The main types of secondary support in East Asia are training, funding, weapons and logistical support but troops on the ground are rare. The case of Viet Nam in Cambodia is the only instance of a state intervening using its own military forces to fight on one side of an intra-state armed conflict in East Asia since 1975.

In the case of secondary support, in the period 1975–79 state support to rebels in the East Asian region revolved around the civil war in Cambodia and the great power rivalry between China and the Soviet Union, and the latter's local ally Viet Nam. The collapsing Lon Nol Government in Cambodia was supported with weapons and logistics from the USA in early 1975, following several years of deep military and political US-Cambodian cooperation during the latter stages of the 1955–75 Second Indochina War. North Vietnamese troops initially fought alongside the Khmer Rouge against the Lon Nol Government in early 1975. Immediately after the Khmer Rouge capture of Phnom Penh, however, a rivalry between the Khmer Rouge regime and Viet Nam erupted in fighting along the disputed border between the two countries. In 1978 the Kampuchean National United Front for National Salvation (KNUFNS) was formed on Vietnamese territory to fight the Government of Cambodia, and Viet Nam invaded Cambodia soon after, ostensibly in support of the KNUFNS. Vietnamese troops fought with the KNUFNS against the Government of Cambodia in 1978, and the new pro-Vietnamese government that was installed in Cambodia was also provided with training and money by the Soviet Union. Following Viet Nam's removal of the Khmer Rouge regime, China became its foremost supporter. Backed by China, the Khmer Rouge waged a guerrilla war against the government installed by Vietnamese occupying forces. In 1978 and 1979, China supported the Khmer Rouge with weapons, logistical support and money. The Cambodian Civil War was greatly exacerbated by the line-up of great powers and regional powers on opposing sides, and by the amount and type of secondary support provided.

The pattern of external support established in the late 1970s continued for the next decade. Vietnamese troops fought in support of the pro-Vietnamese regime in Cambodia until 1989. Viet Nam's patron, the Soviet Union, offered training, weapons, logistical support and money to the government side in the Cambodian Civil War throughout this period. The various rebel groups active in Cambodia were supported with weapons, access to territory, logistical support and money from China, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and the USA. Thus, the civil war in Cambodia totally dominates the picture as far as

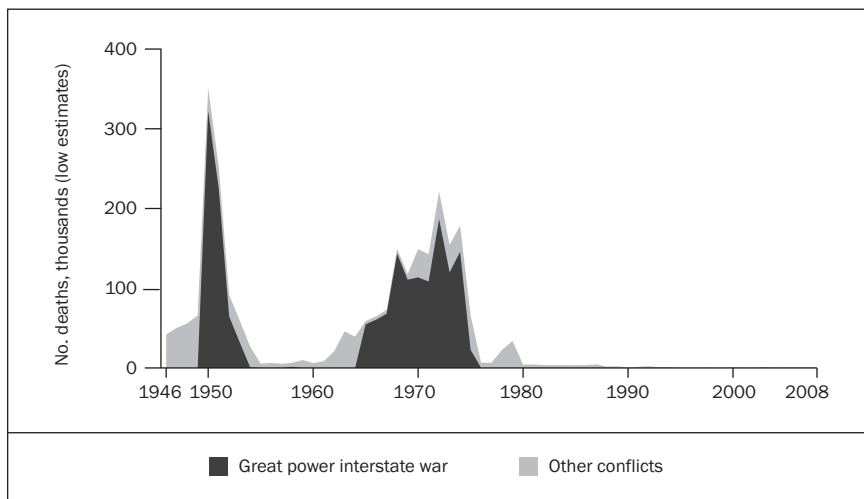


Figure 6.3. Number of battle deaths in great power interstate war and other conflicts in East Asia, 1946–2008

Sources: PRIO Battle Deaths Dataset, 1946–2008 Version 3.0; and Lacina, B. and Gleditsch, N. P., 'Monitoring trends in global combat: a new dataset of battle deaths', *European Journal of Population*, vol. 21, no. 2/3, (June 2005), pp. 145–66.

support by states to rebels is concerned in the period 1980–91. At the same time, the USA continued to support the governments of Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand, while the Soviet Union provided weapons, training and money to the Government of Laos in its fight against the Laos Resistance Movement (LRM) in 1989. China supported the Government of Myanmar with weapons, logistics and training against several rebel groups in 1989–91.

It is noteworthy the Cambodian Civil War was the only East Asian intrastate armed conflict in which two states provided substantial support to opposing sides during this period. The closest would be the Libyan and Iranian monetary support to the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the US support to the Government of the Philippines, but the level of external involvement was comparatively limited.

There were also other instances of external support to communist rebels in East Asia during this period. China supported the rebel Communist Party of Burma (CPB) with training and money throughout the period 1975–79. Chinese support was also provided to the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) in the form of weapons and access to territory in 1975–78. Viet Nam and Laos supported the CPT in 1975–79, with weapons, logistical support and training. In the internal conflict over government power in Thailand, the adversaries China and Viet Nam were thus supporting the same side—the communist rebels challenging the government. Meanwhile, the USA supported its allies in the region—the governments of Thailand, Indonesia

and the Philippines—with weapons, logistical support, training and money, in their fight against internal challengers.

Outside this cold war logic and great power rivalry, Libya and Iran supported the MNLF rebels in the Philippines with money during the period 1975–88. India gave money to two rebel organizations in Myanmar in 1989: the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) and the Karen National Union (KNU). The USA continued to support its allied governments in fighting insurgencies in Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand. China continued to support the Government of Myanmar, which also received support from India and Pakistan in some years, illustrating how Myanmar faced East Asia and South Asia at the same time. Outside of the Cambodian Civil War, however, it remains noteworthy how low the degree of direct foreign involvement was in East Asia.

Since the 1991 Paris Agreement, which marked the official end of the Cambodian Civil War, states have almost completely ceased supporting the rebel side in intra-state armed conflicts in the East Asia region. In the period 1992–2009 there were only three cases in which a government gave external support to East Asian rebels: (a) in 1994 Thailand provided weapons to the Khmer Rouge, which was still fighting the Government of Cambodia; (b) in 1994 Libya and Pakistan trained the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) fighting the Government of the Philippines in Mindanao; and (c) in 2000 Thailand allowed access to Thai territory to the Shan State Army–South Command, which was fighting the Government of Myanmar. According to UCDP data, no rebel group in East Asia received any support from a government in the nine-year period 2001–09. It is also noteworthy that of all the East Asian countries, only Thailand provided any support to rebels in the region following the Paris Agreement, and this only in the two years 1994 and 2000 (as noted above). This near total absence of state support to rebel groups is probably an important factor in the generally very low level of battle-related deaths in the armed conflicts that still linger in East Asia.

The consequences of foreign involvement in East Asian conflicts

With regard to the effects of secondary support on armed conflicts in East Asia, the focus is on the impact on battle-related deaths. The shifting pattern of the effect on battle-related deaths was to a large degree a function of cold war logic. State-based support largely ended with the ending of cold war dynamics, but non-state support to governments and rebel-groups in East Asia continues to play a role in the region.

Figure 6.3 shows total battle-related deaths (low estimates) in East Asia, 1945–2008 for all types of conflict. The darker area is the proportion of total battle-related deaths that pertain to interstate conflicts with reciprocated great power involvement as warring partners. It therefore refers to wars with either: (a) great powers fighting on both sides, such as the Korean War

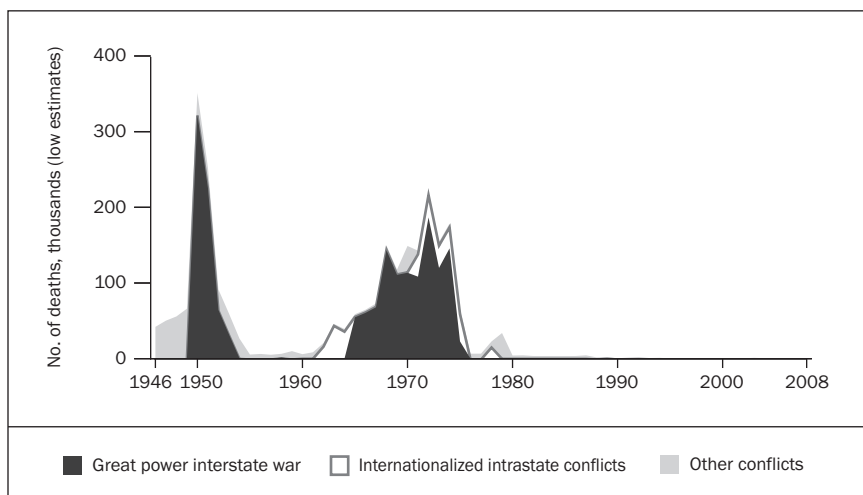


Figure 6.4. Number of battle deaths in great power interstate war, internationalized intrastate conflicts and other conflicts in East Asia, 1946–2008

Sources: PRIO Battle Deaths Dataset, 1946–2008 Version 3.0; and Lacina, B. and Gleditsch, N. P., 'Monitoring trends in global combat: a new dataset of battle deaths', *European Journal of Population*, vol. 21, no. 2/3, (June 2005), pp. 145–66.

and the 1969 China-Soviet border conflict; or (b) great powers fighting on one side and another non-great power state fighting as a secondary warring party on the other side, such as the Viet Nam War when the USA and others supported South Viet Nam against North Viet Nam and North Korea. The figure shows that the overwhelming majority of battle-related deaths were inflicted in conflicts with reciprocated great power involvement.

In figure 6.4 all battle-related deaths that pertain to internationalized intrastate armed conflicts, that is internal conflicts that have foreign troops involved in the conflict as secondary warring actors, are shown in white. A substantial proportion of the remaining variation in battle-related deaths in East Asia can be attributed to this type of conflict. Hence, the interstate wars with reciprocated great power involvement and the internationalized intrastate armed conflicts account for the overwhelming majority of the battle-related deaths in East Asia. In addition, almost all battle-related deaths were sustained in these two categories of East Asian conflict. T-tests were used to test for significant differences in mean battle-related deaths for various more fine-grained subcategories of conflict, but the main result stood. Thus, the type of external support most associated with higher numbers of battle-related deaths is when a state fights with troops as a secondary warring party to aid one of the primary parties. Hence, the changing pattern of conflict intensity appears to be driven by the level of external involvement in armed conflicts. For example, the average annual number of battle-related

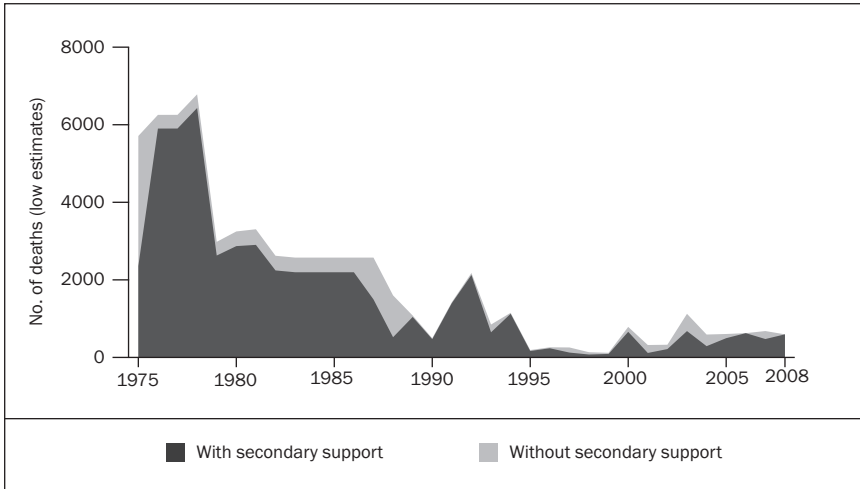


Figure 6.5. Number of battle deaths in non-internationalized intrastate conflicts with and without secondary support in East Asia, 1975–2008

Sources: PRIO Battle Deaths Dataset, 1946–2008 Version 3.0; and Lacina, B. and Gleditsch, N. P., ‘Monitoring trends in global combat: a new dataset of battle deaths’, *European Journal of Population*, vol. 21, no. 2/3, (June 2005), pp. 145–66.

deaths inflicted in an East Asian conflict year with external support in the form of weapons is more than 4400, but for conflict years without weapons support it is less than 2000. The Cambodian Civil War, as noted above, accounts for most of the observations of secondary support in the period 1975–2009. At the same time, this war was also the most deadly of all the armed conflicts in East Asia during the studied time period.²²

The intra-state armed conflicts without internationalization account for only a small fraction of all battle-related deaths (The remaining grey area represents colonial conflicts and non-internationalized intrastate armed conflicts.) Even if the non-internationalized intrastate armed conflicts have relatively few battle-related deaths it is interesting to ask whether external support in forms other than fighting troops has anything to do with the lethality of these conflicts. Figure 6.5 shows only battle-related deaths in non-internationalized intrastate armed conflicts in East Asia, 1975–2008. The lighter area is the total. The dark area represents the battle-related deaths incurred in the non-internationalized intrastate armed conflicts that exhibit external support in the form of weapons, funds, logistics or access to territory. The figure shows that in the period 1975–2008, looking only at non-internationalized intrastate armed conflicts, the conflicts with external support account for almost all the battle-related deaths. Thus, wars with

²² In individual years, the Cambodian Civil War was rivalled in terms of battle-related deaths by the last year of the Viet Nam War and the China–Viet Nam War.

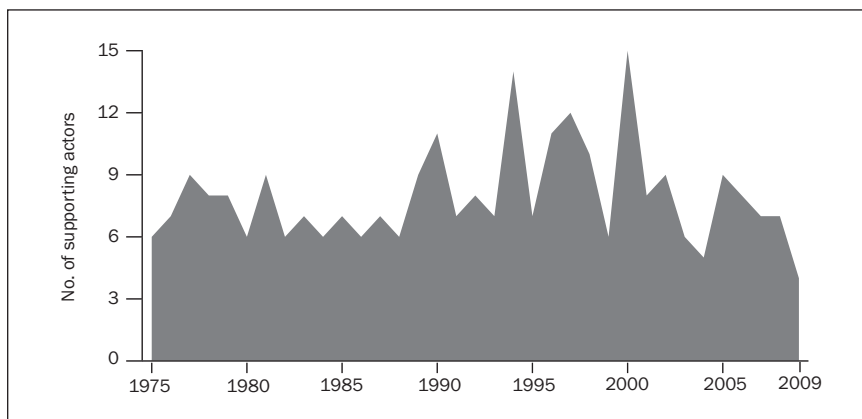


Figure 6.6. Number of actors offering secondary support to conflicts in East Asia, excluding cases of cold war logic, 1975–2009

Sources: UCDP External Support Dataset Version 1.0; and Pettersson, T., ‘Pillars of strength: external support to warring parties’, eds. T. Pettersson and L. Themnér, *States in Armed Conflict 2010*, Research Report 94 (Universitetstryckeriet: Uppsala, 2011).

active great power fighting and internationalized intrastate armed conflict are the most dangerous. Figure 6.5 shows that in the less dangerous conflicts, external support is associated with much higher battle-related deaths (also significant in a t-test).

What explains the patterns of great power involvement, internationalization of intrastate armed conflict and external support to non-internationalized intrastate armed conflict? There is strong evidence that most of the interference of this kind was associated with cold war logic and its aftermath. The enormous rise and then decline in battle-related deaths which constitutes the East Asian Peace phenomenon is closely related to the cold war conflict and great power rivalry. The extent to which the patterns of secondary support in East Asia are correlated with cold war logic is examined below. For this purpose, the following conflicts are counted as part of the cold war logic in the period 1975–2009: the conflict over government power in Cambodia, 1975–98; Cambodia–Viet Nam, 1975–77; China–Viet Nam, 1978–88; the Communist Party of Thailand vs the Government of Thailand, 1975–82; and the Lao Resistance Movement vs the Government of Laos, 1989–90.

Figure 6.6 shows the secondary support provided to actors engaged in armed conflict in East Asia in 1975–2009 with all the fighting related to cold war logic removed. The y-axis shows the number of external actors providing external support to active conflicts in East Asia. As can clearly be seen, if cold war logic is taken out of the picture, there is no trend in the external support in East Asia.

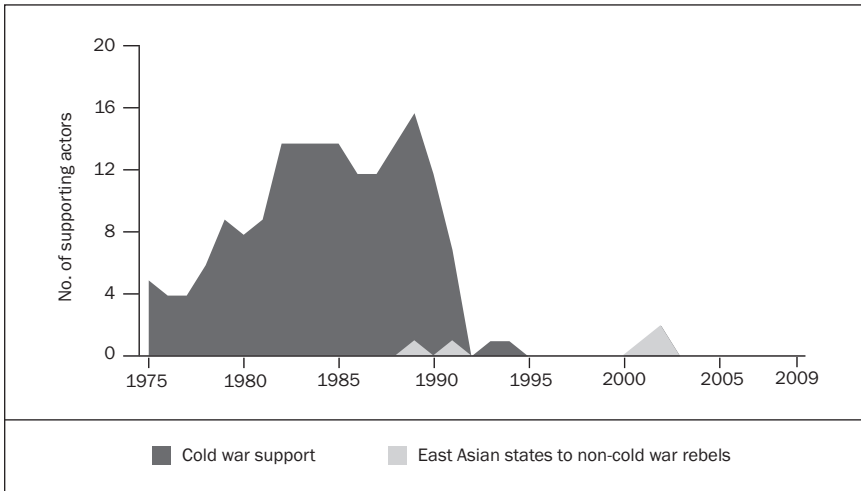


Figure 6.7. Number of actors offering secondary support as part of the cold war and East Asian states supporting non-cold war rebels in East Asia, 1975–2009

Sources: UCDP External Support Dataset Version 1.0; and and Pettersson, T., ‘Pillars of strength: external support to warring parties’, eds. T. Pettersson and L. Themnér, *States in Armed Conflict 2010*, Research Report 94 (Universitetstryckeriet: Uppsala, 2011).

In figure 6.7 all the secondary support provided in conflicts linked to cold war logic is shown in the darker area, and all the support given by states in East Asia to parties active in East Asian conflicts outside of the cold war logic is shown in the lighter area. Again, the y-axis is the number of providers of external support to active conflicts in East Asia. The figure shows how cold war logic dominates the picture. The decline in secondary support in East Asia was obviously linked to the mitigation of cold war logic, and the Paris Peace Agreement on the Cambodian Civil War in particular.

The support provided by non-state actors—typically rebel groups—has been fairly limited in East Asia, and always to the rebel side. Throughout the observed period this type of non-state actor support occurs in relation to conflicts fought in two countries: Myanmar and the Philippines. In Myanmar, the KIO was supported by the CPB in 1977–79 and 1985. The support took the form of joint operations or access to military or intelligence infrastructure. In the Mindanao conflict in the Philippines, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) received money from al-Qaeda in 1990; and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) was supported by Sabah, one of the Malaysian states, in 1975–88. The latter support involved logistics and military materiel. The MNLF in turn provided support to the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) in 1977, 1981 and 1983, consisting of joint operations or access to military and intelligence infrastructure.

Although states have almost ceased supporting rebels in East Asia in recent years, some rebel groups receive external support from other rebel groups and non-state actors. This type of lingering external support involves almost exclusively the Mindanao conflict in the Philippines, and support to the MILF and the ASG. In the years since 1993, the militant Islamist entities al-Qaeda and Jeemah Islamiya have provided money and training, as well as access to military or intelligence infrastructure, or participation in joint operations. In 2008, the MILF also cooperated with the CPP, and external support went both ways including weapons, logistical support and training. Beyond this cluster of support involving Islamist rebels in the Philippines, the only other case of a non-state actor offering external support to a rebel organization in East Asia during the period was the Democratic Kayin Buddhist Army sharing intelligence with the KNU in Myanmar in 2005.²³

Conclusions

The type of foreign involvement is a major factor in the intensity of conflict. The level of battle-related deaths is linked to three types of foreign involvement. First, interstate wars with reciprocated great power involvement stand out as the form of armed conflict associated with the highest levels of battle-related deaths. As the great powers were able to disengage themselves from the East Asian conflicts, the region became a substantially less violent place. Second, internationalized intrastate armed conflicts were an intense type of warfare in East Asia after 1975, accounting for the vast majority of battle-related deaths in the region. Behind these numbers the Cambodian conflict stands out in particular. When it was brought to a negotiated end, battle-related deaths in the region decreased dramatically. Third, among non-internationalized intra-state armed conflicts, those with external support account for the largest share of battle-related deaths.

This regional analysis has implications for our thinking about the risk that there will be a reversal of peace globally. The East Asia region has transformed from a regional trajectory characterized by violent interactions between and within states to a region with relatively more peaceful interactions. We do not suggest that this transformation was driven only by shifts in foreign interventions. Security guarantees, economic development and structural factors relating to the regional and global order are explanatory factors that should be taken into account in explaining the East Asian Peace. Yet, it cannot be understood unless the patterns of foreign involvement are taken into account. Evidence from East Asia reveals that when great powers disengage from interstate conflicts, and when they disengage from internationalized intrastate conflicts in particular, the intensity of conflict drops

²³ All instances of external support are drawn from the UCDP External Support Dataset.

dramatically. Thus, a major predicament for other regions in the world, not least the Middle East, is how to limit foreign involvement in armed conflicts. Worryingly in this regard, the number of internationalized armed conflicts seems to be on the increase. In 2014 there were more internationalized intra-state conflicts in the world than in any year since the end of World War II.²⁴

One particular conflict can account for a large proportion of the number of battle-related deaths, as was the case in Cambodia and is currently the case in Syria. Many parallels can be drawn between the two cases, and the Cambodian Civil War resembles several features of the ongoing Syrian conflict. Three stand out in particular. First, there is the existence in the midst of a complex political conflict of an extreme group that seeks to establish a utopian state-formation while targeting civilians and minorities. In Cambodia in the mid-1970s, the Khmer Rouge established Democratic Kampuchea and implemented a genocide against its own population, targeting dissidents and ethnic-religious minorities (Vietnamese, Chinese and Cham Muslims). In Syria IS has proclaimed a caliphate, exhibits extreme intolerance of dissidents and deliberately targets religious and ethnic minorities (Christians, Yazidiz and Shias). Second, support for extreme ideologies cannot be understood unless the effects of foreign intervention are taken into account. Thus, the Cambodian countryside was bombed by US forces in the 1970s as part of US tactics in the Second Indochina War, resulting in the deaths of over 100 000 Cambodians. This increased the support for and even drove survivors into the ranks of the Khmer Rouge.²⁵ Similarly, the 2003 invasion of Iraq is commonly seen as a major contributory factor in the rise of IS.

Third, both conflicts are highly internationalized. In Cambodia, this resulted in a long-running civil war between different Khmer factions. China and Thailand gave support to the Khmer Rouge, Viet Nam and the Soviet Union to the Hun Sen regime in Phnom Penh, and the USA and the ASEAN countries to some smaller, non-communist resistance groups. These external backers exploited Indochina as a battleground for their own geopolitical and ideological ends, following the ideological lines of the cold war and the Sino-Soviet split. The Cambodian civil war was intensively internationalized. In many ways it was a proxy war between global and regional powers exploiting domestic differences in the country. By supplying the different Khmer factions, international actors were able to maintain their capacity to make war, thereby increasing the intensity and duration of the conflict. In the case of the Syrian conflicts, global tensions, such as those

²⁴ Pettersson, T. and Wallensteen, P., 'Armed conflicts, 1946–2014', *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 52, no. 4 (July 2015), pp. 536–50.

²⁵ Kiernan, B., 'Introduction: conflict in Cambodia, 1945–2002', *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 34, no. 4 (Dec. 2002), pp. 483–95.

between Russia and the USA, and regional rivalries, such as between Saudi Arabia and Iran, are being played out using Syria as a battleground.

There are, of course, many differences between the two conflicts as well, most notably the presence and dynamics of foreign fighters in Syria. Nonetheless, it is useful to take the insights from the Cambodian case into account, not at least the implications for peacemaking. The settlement in Cambodia in 1991 was brought about in a two-stage process. The first stage was the creation of unity between the global and regional powers, in which they agreed on the contours of a settlement for Cambodia. Changes in the international landscape made possible the dramatic changes on the Indochina peninsula. The end of the Civil War in Cambodia came amid the changing dynamics of the cold war, in particular the gradual demise of the Soviet Union, its shifting priorities and new priorities in China that emphasized economic development. The resulting improvement in relations between the global powers reduced interest in supporting countries to continue the costly combat in Cambodia. The external powers were thus able to agree on a framework or formula that was then, to a large extent, imposed on their protégés. For example, Viet Nam and China sorted out their differences in bilateral negotiations, after which both countries exerted influence by applying ‘irresistible pressure’ on their Cambodian partners—Hun Sen for the Vietnamese and the Khmer Rouge for the Chinese—in a way that led them grudgingly to make concessions and accept compromises.²⁶ The peace agreement was followed by a low intensity conflict with the Khmer Rouge, which continued until it was finally defeated in 1998. Thus, the Cambodian case shows that once the foreign backers were able to settle their differences, they were able to bring about a negotiated settlement to the conflict. The external backers could put pressure on ‘their’ faction.

The study of East Asia shows that secondary support did not end after 1979, but changed its nature. Support continued to be provided by both states and non-state actors. It also shows that one conflict stands out in the pattern of secondary support in East Asia after 1975. The Cambodian Civil War represents most of the instances of support and its end explains most of the variations in the data. One reason for this is that several rebel groups and several supporters were active. After the 1990s, the secondary support was supportive of rather than challenging the government. Thus, in terms of secondary support patterns, there were more peaceful relationships after the end of the Cambodian Civil War. This is in line with the conclusion drawn by Tønnesson that ‘the East Asian Peace came in stages’.²⁷ Again the parallels with the Syria-Iraq conflict are worrying. The intricate web of different state

²⁶ Short, P., *Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare* (Henry Holt and Company: New York, 2007), p. 427.

²⁷ Tønnesson, S., ‘Explaining East Asia’s developmental peace: the dividends of economic growth’, *Global Asia*, vol. 10, no. 4 (2015), pp. 8–15.

and non-state actors has the potential to draw regional powers, in particular Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, as well as great powers—above all the USA but also Russia, France and the United Kingdom—deeper into the conflict on at least partly opposing sides. 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. Thus, the world could once again see levels of battle-related deaths similar to those during the peak years of the cold war.