

III. Armed conflict and peace processes in Asia and Oceania

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Seven countries in Asia and Oceania experienced active armed conflicts in 2018: Afghanistan (major internationalized civil war), India (low-intensity interstate border and subnational armed conflict), Indonesia (low-intensity subnational armed conflict), Myanmar (low-intensity subnational armed conflict), Pakistan (low-intensity interstate border and subnational armed conflict), the Philippines (high-intensity subnational armed conflict) and Thailand (low-intensity subnational armed conflict).¹ Most of these were being addressed by ongoing or new peace processes. The three most virulent armed conflicts—in Afghanistan, Myanmar and the Philippines—are discussed in this section.

Alongside these armed conflicts, parts of Asia and Oceania continued to be affected by instability arising from a variety of causes, with no single unifying trend and key subregional differences, as discussed next. Two key peace developments in 2018 were the peace process on the Korean peninsula and the reinstatement of the truce between India and Pakistan in their ongoing interstate armed conflict over Kashmir.²

Key general developments

Asia, especially East Asia, has experienced a dramatic reduction in armed conflict and mass-atrocity crimes in the last 40 years.³ Three structural explanations have been advanced for this reduction: (a) the decrease in the use of mass atrocities as a tool of war (in part, some argue, as a result of the atrocity prevention work of the Association of South East Asian Nations, ASEAN); (b) rising incomes (as a result of several states in the region focusing on economic development to ensure domestic stability); and (c) the spread of democracy.⁴

A reversal of this positive trend may be underway, however. The mass atrocities committed against Rohingya civilians in Myanmar in 2017 and the widespread violence committed by state security forces in the Philippines (both ASEAN members), as well as the long-standing armed conflict in Afghanistan, illustrate that the creation of shared political and human rights

¹ For conflict definitions and typologies, see section I in this chapter.

² On the peace process on the Korean peninsula, see chapter 7, section I, in this volume.

³ United Nations and World Bank, *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches for Preventing Violent Conflict* (World Bank: Washington, DC, 2018), pp. 11–12, 19.

⁴ Frank, D. A., ‘The reduction of mass atrocity crimes in East Asia: The evolving norms of ASEAN’s prevention mechanisms’, *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*, vol. 11, no. 3 (2018), pp. 98–108.

norms is not always a sufficient condition for peace. While these conflicts stand out in contrast with the relatively low violence elsewhere in the region, two emerging trends are cause for concern: (a) the growing violence related to identity politics, based on ethnic and/or religious polarization; and (b) the increase in transnational violent jihadist groups—including the presence of actors linked to the Islamic State in Afghanistan, China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan and the Philippines.⁵ Sexual and gender-based violence is also widespread, but often underreported.⁶

Finally, Asia is particularly vulnerable to disasters; almost half of all global disasters between 2000 and 2017 occurred in Asia.⁷ The impacts of disasters are especially severe in fragile and conflict-affected contexts: between 2012 and 2018 the region's five most fragile countries—Afghanistan, Bangladesh, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, North Korea), Myanmar and Pakistan—suffered an estimated \$8 billion of damage from disasters.⁸ Other estimates suggest that the costs of disasters could be even higher: \$79 billion for the region as a whole in 2016, for example.⁹ Asia is expected to move from 'high' to 'severe' vulnerability by 2030 due to additional deaths from extreme weather.¹⁰

Central Asia

Vulnerabilities in Central Asia include tensions over borders and over access to grazing land and water.¹¹ On 15–16 March, leaders of the five Central Asian countries—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan—met in the Kazakh capital of Astana for their first summit in nearly a decade. Although the joint declaration from the meeting contained

⁵ BBC News, 'Indonesia attacks: How Islamic State is galvanising support', 13 May 2018; Roul, A., 'Islamic State-inspired extremist threat looms large in India', *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 17, no. 3 (8 Feb. 2019); *Straits Times*, 'ISIS claims deadly attack on tribal region in Pakistan', 24 Nov. 2018; and Soliev, N., 'How serious is the Islamic State threat to China?', *The Diplomat*, 14 Mar. 2017. See also Zha, W., 'Ethnic politics, complex legitimacy crisis, and intramural relations within ASEAN', *Pacific Review*, vol. 31, no. 5 (2018), pp. 598–616.

⁶ Rodriguez, B., Shakil, S. and Morel, A., 'Four things to know about gender-based violence in Asia', Asia Foundation, 14 Mar. 2018; and True, J., 'Conflict in Asia and the role of gender-based violence', ed. J. Rieger, *The State of Conflict and Violence in Asia* (Asia Foundation: Washington, DC, 2017), pp. 230–39.

⁷ Peters, K., *Accelerating Sendai Framework Implementation in Asia: Disaster Risk Reduction in Contexts of Violence, Conflict and Fragility* (Overseas Development Institute: London, July 2018), p. 7. Disaster is defined as 'A serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society at any scale due to hazardous events interacting with conditions of exposure, vulnerability and capacity, leading to one or more of the following: human, material, economic and environmental losses and impacts', UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 'Terminology', [n.d.].

⁸ Peters (note 7).

⁹ Guha-Sapir, D. et al., *Annual Disaster Statistical Review 2016* (Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters, Institute of Health and Society and Université catholique de Louvain: Brussels, Oct. 2017).

¹⁰ Peters (note 7).

¹¹ Expert Working Group on Climate-related Security Risks, *Central Asia: Climate-Related Security Risk Assessment*, Dec. 2018.

no new proposals, the leaders agreed to seek understandings on sharing water resources and developing regional trade, and to hold an annual Central Asian summit, with the next one to be held in Tashkent, Uzbekistan.¹²

East Asia

Events in East Asia in 2018 were dominated by the emergent peace process between North Korea and South Korea. By the end of 2017, the rapid development of the North Korean nuclear programme under the leadership of Kim Jong Un and his escalating rhetorical exchanges with United States President Donald J. Trump led many observers to see a marked increase in the risk of a catastrophic military conflict on the Korean peninsula. The situation changed completely in the first months of 2018, however, when two parallel diplomatic processes involving North Korea were initiated. The first was with South Korea and aimed to reconcile the two states. The second was with the USA and sought to achieve both the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula and a peace agreement to formally end the Korean War, whose termination in 1953 is still governed only by a ceasefire agreement.¹³ These developments affect not only the future of all Korean citizens, but also regional and global peace and security, the international nuclear non-proliferation regime, US–China relations and the balance of power in East Asia.

As an aspiring regional hegemon, China is likely to have a major influence on the outcome of that process. China's rapid development has not occurred without internal and external challenges and controversies, including domestic political repression and tensions with neighbours and other powerful states.¹⁴ Domestically there has been growing global censure of a reported large-scale programme for the mass surveillance, incarceration and forced re-education of the Uighurs (Turkic Muslims), Kazakhs and other ethnic minorities in the autonomous region of Xinjiang.¹⁵ At the strategic level, increased economic, military and political competition with the USA, India and other states elevated regional anxieties.

Tensions between China and the USA were at their worst level in decades during 2018, with serious disagreements across economic, political, security and human rights dimensions.¹⁶ The annual Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in Papua New Guinea in November failed to

¹² Gotev, G., 'Astana hosts little-publicised Central Asia summit', Euractiv, 16 Mar. 2018; and Eurasianet, 'Central Asia leaders confab but stop short of binding commitments', 16 Mar. 2018.

¹³ See chapter 7, section I, in this volume.

¹⁴ *The Economist*, 'Why protests are so common in China—masses of incidents', 4 Oct. 2018.

¹⁵ See e.g. Human Rights Watch, 'Eradicating Ideological Viruses': China's Campaign of Repression against Xinjiang's Muslims, 2018; Buckley, C. and Ramzy, A., 'China's detention camps for Muslims turn to forced labor', *New York Times*, 16 Dec. 2018; and *The Guardian*, 'China "to let thousands of ethnic Kazakhs leave Xinjiang"', 9 Jan. 2019.

¹⁶ See e.g. Hudson Institute, 'Vice President Mike Pence's remarks on the administration's policy towards China', 4 Oct. 2018.

agree on a final communiqué for the first time since the initial APEC leaders' meeting in 1993, due to trade disagreements between China and the USA.¹⁷ In addition to their escalating trade war, strategic competition between the two countries intensified in the South China Sea and across the Taiwan Strait.¹⁸ China's militarization of the South China Sea (which is also a concern for other countries in the region) continued with the deployment of anti-ship and anti-aircraft missiles on the disputed Spratly Islands and the test landing of several bombers, including the nuclear-capable H-6K, on an unspecified island.¹⁹

In March, China accused the USA of violating the so-called One China policy, which has been the basis of China–US relations for decades, after President Trump signed the Taiwan Travel Act that formally encourages visits between US and Taiwanese officials.²⁰ The One China policy is deliberately ambiguous, with different versions, and it allows for the existence of two separate Chinese entities: mainland China and Taiwan. A month later, China held its first-ever live-fire exercises in the Taiwan Strait.²¹ Later in the year, the USA increased the frequency of warships transiting the Strait.²² More promisingly, a draft code of conduct in the South China Sea was agreed by ASEAN and China on 2 August. The draft is expected to go through several more iterations before being finalized.²³

While there was no repeat of the 2017 border clashes between China and India, both countries continued to build up their ground forces in the Himalayan region—as part of an emerging and wider strategic rivalry—and a growing environmental dimension added to the unresolved border dispute.²⁴

Relations between Japan and China, and Japan and Russia improved in 2018. In May, after years of negotiations, Japan and China agreed to set up a maritime and aerial communication mechanism for crisis management, and in October the Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, made a historic official

¹⁷ *Straits Times*, 'Apec summit fails to reach consensus as US–China divide deepens', 18 Nov. 2018.

¹⁸ BBC News, 'A quick guide to the US–China trade war', 7 Jan. 2019.

¹⁹ *The Economist*, 'China has put missiles on islands in the South China Sea', 10 May 2018; and Feleke, B., 'China tests bombers on South China Sea island', CNN, 21 May 2018.

²⁰ Brice, M., 'Trump signs Taiwan travel bill that China has opposed', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 Mar. 2018.

²¹ Chan, M., 'China's live-fire Taiwan Strait drill scales down as both sides reduce tensions', *South China Morning Post*, 18 Apr. 2018; and Ramzy, A., 'China conducts war games and Taiwan is the target', *New York Times*, 18 Apr. 2018.

²² Browne, R. and Starr, B., 'US sails warships through Taiwan Strait amid tensions with China', CNN, 23 Oct. 2018.

²³ Thayer, C., 'A closer look at the ASEAN-China Single Draft South China Sea Code of Conduct', *The Diplomat*, 3 Aug. 2018; and CSIS Expert Working Group on the South China Sea, 'A Blueprint for a South China Sea Code of Conduct', 11 Oct. 2018.

²⁴ On the China–India border clashes in 2017, see Smith, D., 'Introduction: International stability and human security in 2017', *SIPRI Yearbook 2018*, p. 13; Marcus, J., 'China-India border tension: Satellite imagery shows Doklam plateau build-up', BBC News, 26 Jan. 2018; and Gamble, R., 'China and India's border dispute is a slow-moving environmental disaster', *The Conversation*, 17 June 2018.

visit to China—the first by a Japanese leader since 2011.²⁵ Abe also had several meetings during the year with Russian President Vladimir Putin to discuss a possible peace accord for the 70-year dispute over the South Kuril Islands (also known in Japan as the Northern Territories). Having met to discuss the issue 23 times since 2012, by the end of 2018 the two leaders appeared to have created a new level of cooperation: it was announced that their foreign ministers would oversee talks for a peace treaty to be discussed at a Japan–Russia summit in Moscow in January 2019.²⁶

South Asia

South Asia has a recent history of frequent intrastate conflict. However, with the exception of the long-running and devastating war in Afghanistan (see below), the region is arguably more stable and democratic than it has been in decades. Major insurgencies have been contained, there is less violence and unrest, and South Asia is experiencing high levels of economic growth. However, major sources of concern remained in 2018, with growing ethnic, religious and political tensions and autocratic tendencies that had the potential to trigger new armed conflicts in several states.²⁷

In Bangladesh, it was feared that political polarization between the ruling Awami League and the main opposition parties might encourage a jihadist resurgence.²⁸ Clashes between supporters of rival political parties ahead of and during Bangladesh's general elections on 30 December left hundreds injured and at least 17 people killed. Although the Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, was re-elected in a landslide victory, the opposition rejected the results, claiming widespread fraud.²⁹ Political unrest looked likely to continue into 2019.

Tensions between India and Pakistan over Kashmir eased during 2018, having surged the previous year.³⁰ In late May, after 18 months of border clashes that killed over 150 civilians and security personnel on both sides, India and Pakistan agreed to restore the 2003 ceasefire agreement along the line of control, which divides the region of Kashmir.³¹ However, sporadic

²⁵ Kovrig, M., 'How a long-awaited hotline could pave the way for calmer China–Japan relations', *South China Morning Post*, 13 May 2018; and Myers, S. L. and Rich, M., 'Shinzo Abe says Japan is China's "Partner", and no longer its aid donor', *New York Times*, 26 Oct. 2018.

²⁶ Reynolds, I. and Krachenko, S., 'Putin, Abe agree to speed talks over 70-year-old island dispute', *Bloomberg*, 14 Nov. 2018; and Kobara, J., 'Abe and Putin designate negotiators for peace treaty and islands', *Nikkei*, 2 Dec. 2018.

²⁷ Staniland, P., 'The future of democracy in South Asia', *Foreign Affairs*, 4 Jan. 2019.

²⁸ International Crisis Group (ICG), *Countering Jihadist Militancy in Bangladesh*, Asia Report no. 295 (ICG: Brussels, 28 Feb. 2018).

²⁹ Safi, M., Holmes, O. and Ahmed, R., 'Bangladesh PM Hasina wins thumping victory in elections opposition reject as "farcical"', *The Guardian*, 31 Dec. 2019.

³⁰ On the reignition of the territorial dispute between India and Pakistan in 2017, see Smith (note 24), pp. 13–14.

³¹ 'Pakistan and India vow to implement 2003 ceasefire agreement', *Al Jazeera*, 29 May 2018.

clashes continued across the line of control throughout the rest of the year. Violence also continued within Indian-administered Kashmir. In April, for example, fighting between alleged separatist militants and security forces left 13 alleged militants and 3 Indian soldiers dead. At least 4 civilians were also killed when police fired on protesters.³² India's counterterrorism tactics have been criticized by human rights advocates, including accusations of extrajudicial killings.³³ In June, the first-ever United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights report on Kashmir detailed violations and abuses on both sides of the line of control and highlighted a situation of chronic impunity for human rights violations by security forces.³⁴

India also continued to face a number of internal security threats, notably from Maoist rebels (known as Naxalites), and intercommunal (mainly Hindu–Muslim) tensions in 2018.³⁵ For example, fighting occurred between Indian security forces and Maoist rebels in the states of Chhattisgarh, Odisha and Maharashtra in November 2018; however, according to official figures, overall violent incidents declined from 2258 in 2009 to about 190 in 2018.³⁶

In 2018, Pakistan eased tensions not only with India but also with Afghanistan. The Pakistani Army took stronger measures to combat cross-border flows of Taliban Movement of Pakistan (Tehreek-e-Taliban) militants—including a fence-building programme along the border with Afghanistan—and introduced reforms to the Federally Administered Tribal Areas.³⁷ However, intermittent intrastate violence involving various armed groups and the Pakistani military continued throughout the year. Balochistan, the largest of Pakistan's four provinces, faced a growing insurgency from a number of militant Baloch groups—including the Balochistan Liberation

³² BBC News, 'Kashmir: Curfew after 20 dead in fierce clashes', 2 Apr. 2018.

³³ *The Economist*, 'India's victories against militants in Kashmir are largely pyrrhic', 12 May 2018; and Ganguly, M., 'Security forces in India engage in extrajudicial killings, then are protected', Human Rights Watch, 20 Mar. 2018.

³⁴ Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'First-ever UN human rights report on Kashmir calls for international inquiry into multiple violations', Press release, 14 June 2018; and Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Kashmir: Developments in the Indian State of Jammu and Kashmir from June 2016 to April 2018, and General Human Rights Concerns in Azad Jammu and Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan', 14 June 2018.

³⁵ Khaleeqe, N., 'Communal violence in India during 2018—a brief report', *People's Voice*, 7 Jan. 2019. For background on the conflict with Maoist rebels, see Davis, I., Ghiasy, R. and Su, F., 'Armed conflict in Asia and Oceania', *SIPRI Yearbook 2018*, pp. 47–48.

³⁶ Nanjappa, V., '2018: How forces took the battle to the Naxalites, but the fight is far from over', One India, 18 Dec. 2018; and Shah, A., "'Sleepwalking" with India's Maoist guerrillas', BBC News, 8 Oct. 2018.

³⁷ See Oztig, L. I., 'Pakistan's Border Policies and Security Dynamics along the Pakistan–Afghanistan Border', *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 2018; Shah, M., 'Pakistan's army is getting serious about defeating domestic terrorism', *The Economist*, 1 Mar. 2018; Lukas, S., 'A change of heart in Pakistan? New developments in counter-terrorism and shifting international influences in Pakistan', German Federal Academy for Security Policy, Security Policy Working Paper no. 1/2018; and International Crisis Group (ICG), *Shaping a New Peace in Pakistan's Tribal Areas*, Asia Briefing no. 150 (ICG: Brussels, 20 Aug. 2018).

Army, which carried out an attack on the Chinese consulate in Karachi in November 2018 that killed at least four people.³⁸ Pakistan's general election on 25 July was also marred by high levels of violence, with over 200 people, including several candidates, killed in attacks ahead of the election and on polling day. Two of the major incidents were perpetrated by the Islamic State.³⁹

Sri Lanka continues to suffer from religious tensions that could overturn its fragile transitional justice process and ignite new conflict.⁴⁰ In March, for example, the worst outbreak of anti-Muslim violence since 2014 led the government to declare a 10-day state of emergency.⁴¹ In October, a constitutional crisis provoked renewed tensions and concerns over the progress of reforms and ethnic reconciliation.⁴² The resolution of the constitutional crisis in December was widely regarded as a triumph for the rule of law and parliamentary democracy.⁴³

South East Asia

The repercussions of the forcible displacement of the Rohingya in Myanmar in 2017 and continuing widespread violence in the Philippines remained the dominant issues in South East Asia in 2018 (see below).

In Cambodia, the two most senior living Khmer Rouge leaders—Nuon Chea (former second-in-command to Pol Pot) and Khieu Samphan (former head of state)—were both sentenced to life imprisonment in November for genocide and crimes against humanity committed in 1977–79.⁴⁴ Almost 40 years after the fall of the Pol Pot regime, these were landmark verdicts from the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia—a court jointly established in 1997 by the UN and Cambodia. However, the Extraordinary Chambers has convicted only three men and cost around \$320 million to run. Most of those responsible for the killings, including Pol Pot, died before they could be tried. With three Khmer Rouge commanders still awaiting trial, the future of the court remains uncertain. This is mainly due to opposition from the Prime Minister, Hun Sen, who has long opposed the trials and was

³⁸ BBC News, 'Karachi attack: China consulate attack leaves four dead', 23 Nov. 2018; and Hashmi, W., "Fierce and warlike": Could the Baloch separatist movement remain Pakistan's longest insurgency?', *Small Wars Journal*, 21 Aug. 2018.

³⁹ Hashim, A., 'Millions vote in Pakistan's violence-marred elections', Al Jazeera, 25 July 2018.

⁴⁰ On the peace process in Sri Lanka, see Davis, Ghiasy and Su (note 35), pp. 57–58; and Herath, D., 'Post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation in Rwanda and Sri Lanka', African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes, 31 May 2018.

⁴¹ *The Economist*, 'Anti-Muslim riots in Sri Lanka signal a new social fissure', 8 Mar. 2018; and International Crisis Group, 'Buddhist militancy rises again in Sri Lanka', 7 Mar. 2018.

⁴² Saif, M. and Perera, A., 'Sri Lankan political crisis could lead to bloodbath, says speaker', *The Guardian*, 29 Oct. 2018.

⁴³ United Nations, 'Secretary-General welcomes peaceful resolution of political crisis in Sri Lanka', Press Release SG/SM/19417, 20 Dec. 2018.

⁴⁴ Ellis-Petersen, H., 'Khmer Rouge leaders found guilty of genocide in Cambodia's "Nuremberg" moment', *The Guardian*, 16 Nov. 2018.

re-elected in July for another five-year term (having already served as Prime Minister for 33 years).⁴⁵

The Islamic State presence in Indonesia continued to grow in 2018, with particular concerns about members who were Indonesian nationals returning from fighting in Iraq and Syria.⁴⁶ The group carried out its deadliest attack in the country on 13–14 May, in and around the city of Surabaya, killing at least 25 people.⁴⁷

In December, the West Papua National Liberation Army (Tentara Pembebasan Nasional Papua Barat, TPNPB) claimed responsibility for killing up to 31 people, mainly civilian construction workers (according to the government) or military personnel (according to the TPNPB), in Nduga, a district in the province of Papua.⁴⁸ The attack came a day after police arrested hundreds of people taking part in demonstrations marking the 57th anniversary of West Papua's short-lived preparations for independence in 1961.⁴⁹

Although Indonesia has become the focal point of the Islamic State in South East Asia, the Government of Malaysia is concerned that the group is spreading over the border. The Malaysian police reported in 2018 that they had prevented nine Islamic State attacks since 2014, arrested more than 300 individuals for suspected links to the group and shut down numerous pro-Islamic State websites. Malaysians have also joined and fought for the Islamic State in Iraq, the Philippines and Syria.⁵⁰ Weapons from the insurgency in southern Thailand are being smuggled to Islamic State-linked extremists in Malaysia.⁵¹

Decades-old, low-intensity conflicts in Thailand between the military government and various secessionist groups in the south simmered and flared again in 2018. Almost 7000 people have been killed in the conflict since 2004, and reports of extrajudicial killings and torture are commonplace.⁵² The most significant insurgent group, the National Revolutionary Front (Barisan

⁴⁵ Hookway, J., 'Cambodian strongman claims victory in election widely criticized as a farce', *Wall Street Journal*, 30 July 2018.

⁴⁶ Sumpter, C., 'Returning Indonesian extremists: Unclear intentions and unprepared responses', Policy Brief, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, July 2018.

⁴⁷ Schulze, K. E., 'The Surabaya bombings and the evolution of the jihadi threat in Indonesia', *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 11, no. 6 (June/July 2018), pp. 1–6; and *The Economist*, 'Islamists in Indonesia deploy their own children in suicide attacks', 17 May 2018.

⁴⁸ Davidson, H., 'West Papua independence leader urges calm after killings', *The Guardian*, 6 Dec. 2018.

⁴⁹ Davidson, H., 'West Papua: Conflicting reports surround attack that killed up to 31', *The Guardian*, 5 Dec. 2018.

⁵⁰ Ellis-Petersen, H., 'Malaysia launches crackdown on ISIS after threats to kill the king and prime minister', *The Guardian*, 20 July 2018. On the rise of the Islamic State in Malaysia, see Mohamed Osman, N. W. and Arosoaie, A., 'Jihad in the bastion of "moderation": Understanding the threat of ISIS in Malaysia', *Asian Security*, 2018.

⁵¹ Bodetti, A., 'How the Thai conflict is boosting Islamic State in Malaysia', *The Diplomat*, 17 Oct. 2018.

⁵² *The Economist*, 'Terrorists in southern Thailand go on a bombing spree', 24 May 2018; and Morch, M., 'The slow burning insurgency in Thailand's deep south', *The Diplomat*, 6 Feb. 2018.

Revolusi Nasional, BRN) continued to boycott Malaysian-brokered peace talks between the government and Mara Patani, an umbrella organization of Thai Malay secessionists groups.⁵³ Towards the end of the year, however, efforts intensified to bring the BRN into the peace talks.⁵⁴

Armed conflict in Afghanistan

The war in Afghanistan was the world's most lethal armed conflict in 2018. With approximately 43 700 combatants and civilians killed—a higher toll than at any time since the Taliban was deposed in 2001—it accounted for 30 per cent of global fatalities reported by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) during the year.⁵⁵ The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan continued to document extreme levels of harm to civilians from the armed conflict, recording 10 993 civilian casualties (3804 deaths and 7189 injuries) in 2018, which represented a 5 per cent increase in overall civilian casualties compared to 2017.⁵⁶ It attributed the majority (63 per cent) of civilian casualties to 'anti-government elements', including the Taliban and the Islamic State. Afghanistan also has one of the world's highest casualty rates from landmines and other explosive remnants of war; use of improvised explosive devices by 'anti-government elements' accounted for 42 per cent of all civilian casualties in 2018.⁵⁷

Ceasefires and concessions by the Afghan Government to the Taliban failed to halt the violence. Some Taliban leaders appeared ready for peace talks, but the group continued to carry out attacks, as did the Islamic State–Khorasan Province (IS-KP) and other insurgent groups.⁵⁸ US President Trump's announcement in mid December of a withdrawal of 7000 US troops, roughly half of US forces in Afghanistan, added to the growing uncertainty.⁵⁹ While the decision might advance diplomatic efforts to end the war, its ad hoc nature—seemingly made without consulting allies or the Afghan Government—may also further embolden the Taliban and other extremist groups.

⁵³ Watcharasakwet, W., 'Thailand wants all of BRN rebel group to join southern peace talks', *Benar News*, 21 Nov. 2018.

⁵⁴ Watcharasakwet, W., Rakkanam, P. and Mustafa, M., 'Southern Thai peace talks: Malaysian broker says violence can end in 2 years', *Benar News*, 4 Jan. 2019.

⁵⁵ Kishi, R. and Pavlik, M., 'ACLED 2018: The year in review', 11 Jan. 2019, Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), p. 20.

⁵⁶ UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan and Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Afghanistan: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict: Annual Report 2018*, Feb. 2019.

⁵⁷ UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan and Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (note 56). On landmines and improvised explosive devices, see chapter 9, sections I and II, in this volume.

⁵⁸ Tisdall, S., 'Afghan leader's offer to Taliban is a last-ditch gamble for peace', *The Guardian*, 28 Feb. 2018. On Islamic insurgent groups in Afghanistan, see Congressional Research Service, 'Al Qaeda and Islamic State affiliates in Afghanistan', 23 Aug. 2018.

⁵⁹ Gibbons-Neff, T. and Mashal, M., 'US to withdraw about 7000 troops from Afghanistan, officials say', *New York Times*, 20 Dec. 2018.

High levels of violence

Violence ebbed and flowed throughout the year as the various non-state actors involved in the conflict competed to gain the upper hand ahead of proposed peace talks and elections in October. On 25 January the Taliban laid siege to a hotel in Kabul, leaving 22 people dead, and on 27 January it set off an explosion in Kabul that killed at least 95 people and injured 158 others.⁶⁰ During the spring, the Taliban stepped up its attacks on rural centres and provincial capitals, while the IS-KP continued its attacks on urban centres across the country, including an attack on a voter registration centre in Kabul on 22 April that killed at least 63 people.⁶¹ On 30 April, Islamic State suicide attacks in Kabul and Kandahar killed more than 50 people.⁶²

The relationship between the Taliban and the IS-KP fluctuates between conflict and cooperation, but in 2018 the emphasis was firmly on conflict.⁶³ At the beginning of August, for example, 200 members of the IS-KP reportedly surrendered to the Afghan Government in order to avoid being captured by the Taliban after two days of fighting between the two groups.⁶⁴ Later in the same month, the IS-KP suffered another setback when its leader, Abu Saad Erhabi, was reportedly killed during a joint US–Afghan military operation.⁶⁵ Erhabi was the third head of the IS-KP to be killed by the US-led international coalition since July 2017. In December, a US air strike killed the highest-ranked Taliban commander in southern Afghanistan, Mullah Abdul Manan.⁶⁶

In 2018, US air strikes increased significantly, with some estimates suggesting that they had reached their highest level since 2001.⁶⁷ This contributed to 536 civilian deaths from air strikes by international military forces and the Afghan Air Force in 2018, representing a 45 per cent increase compared to 2017, although the main cause of casualties remained insurgent attacks

⁶⁰ Mashal, M. and Sukhanyar, J., ‘“It’s a massacre”: Blast in Kabul deepens toll of a long war’, *New York Times*, 27 Jan. 2018.

⁶¹ Al Jazeera, ‘Afghanistan: 63 dead in attacks on voter registration centres’, 22 Apr. 2018.

⁶² Tisdall, S., ‘The US and Afghanistan: Can’t win the war, can’t stop it, can’t leave’, *The Guardian*, 1 May 2018.

⁶³ Ibrahimi, N. and Akbarzadeh, S., ‘Intra-jihadist conflict and cooperation: Islamic State–Khorasan Province and the Taliban in Afghanistan’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 2019.

⁶⁴ Rahim, N. and Nordland, R., ‘Taliban surge routes ISIS in northern Afghanistan’, *New York Times*, 1 Aug. 2018.

⁶⁵ Totakhil, H. K., ‘Islamic State leader in Afghanistan killed in raid’, *Wall Street Journal*, 26 Aug. 2018.

⁶⁶ Shah, T. and Abed, F., ‘US airstrike kills senior Taliban commander in Afghanistan’, *New York Times*, 2 Dec. 2018.

⁶⁷ Air strike metrics are inconsistent over time, making it difficult to make historical comparisons. See UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan and Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (note 56), p. 5; Wellman, P. W., ‘US expands air campaign to northern Afghanistan’, *Stars and Stripes*, 6 Feb. 2018; and Rempfer, K., ‘US airstrikes in Afghanistan continue to climb this month, highest this decade’, *Military Times*, 28 Aug. 2018.

(see above).⁶⁸ The casualty rate among Afghan forces was also thought to be the highest in years, although the Afghan Government stopped releasing detailed casualty figures in May 2017.⁶⁹ In November, President Ashraf Ghani said more than 28 000 Afghan police officers and soldiers had been killed since 2015 (about 25 per day), in an exception to the recent suppression of casualty data.⁷⁰

Despite Taliban attacks on polling stations across the country, Afghanistan's parliamentary elections took place on 20, 21 and 27 October 2018.⁷¹ Out of an estimated population of over 35 million, around 12 million were eligible to take part but only about 8.8 million registered to vote—and fewer than half of those, about 4.2 million, actually voted.⁷²

It is unclear how much of the country the Taliban controls. US estimates tend to understate the group's territorial gains; even so, in its quarterly report in October, the US Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction said the Afghan Government controlled or influenced only 56 per cent of the country's districts, down from 72 per cent in November 2015. Insurgent influence or control had risen to 12.5 per cent of districts from just 7 per cent in 2015, and approximately a third of Afghanistan was a contested area.⁷³ By the end of 2018, by some estimates, the Taliban effectively controlled about half the country and was laying siege to several cities and towns.⁷⁴ In addition to battlefield success, the Taliban also appeared to be winning the battle for some hearts and minds, through its local governance initiatives (such as setting up courts, collecting taxes and providing health services) and localized informal ceasefires.⁷⁵

A protracted displacement and humanitarian crisis

Afghanistan continued to face one of the world's worst refugee and internal displacement crises. By the end of 2017 Afghanistan's refugee population

⁶⁸ Ponniah, K., 'Counting the cost of Trump's air war in Afghanistan', BBC News, 7 June 2018; and Kube, C., 'New US commander in Afghanistan says we're going on offense against the Taliban', NBC News, 31 Oct. 2018.

⁶⁹ Nordland, R., 'The death toll for Afghan forces is secret. Here's why', *New York Times*, 21 Sep. 2018.

⁷⁰ Nordland, R. and Abed, F., 'Afghan military deaths since 2015: More than 28 000', *New York Times*, 15 Nov. 2018.

⁷¹ On election-related violence, see UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, *Afghanistan: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict—Special Report: 2018 Elections Violence*, Nov. 2018.

⁷² UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (note 71); *The Economist*, 'Afghans vote as the war drags on', 25 Oct. 2018; and Felbab-Brown, V., 'Ballots and bullets in Afghanistan', Brookings, 23 Oct. 2018.

⁷³ Nordland, R., Ngu, A. and Abed, F., 'How the US government misleads the public on Afghanistan', *New York Times*, 8 Sep. 2018; and Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress* (SIGAR: Arlington, VA, 30 Oct. 2018).

⁷⁴ Shah, S., Nelson, C. and Yousazai, S., 'US faces newly muscular Taliban in peace-talks efforts', *Wall Street Journal*, 5 Nov. 2018; and Sediqi, A. Q., 'Taliban tax collectors help tighten insurgents' grip in Afghanistan', Reuters, 6 Nov. 2018.

⁷⁵ Jackson, A., 'The Taliban's fight for hearts and minds', *Foreign Policy*, 12 Sep. 2018.

Table 2.2. Key international peace processes in support of Afghanistan, 2010–18

Process	Dates	Participants
Doha process	2010–15 2018–present	United States and Taliban
Murree process (Pakistan platform)	2015	Afghanistan, Pakistan, USA and Taliban
Quadrilateral Coordination Group	2016–17	Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and USA
Kabul process	2017–present	Afghanistan, Australia, Azerbaijan, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Iran, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Korea (South), Norway, Pakistan, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Sweden (Nordic Plus ^a), Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, United Kingdom, Uzbekistan, UAE, USA, EU, NATO and United Nations
Moscow format consultations	2017–present	Afghanistan, China, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, USA (in 2018), Uzbekistan, Afghan Peace Council (in 2018) and Taliban (in 2018)

EU = European Union; NATO = North Atlantic Treaty Organization; UAE = United Arab Emirates.

^a Nordic Plus is a donor group made up of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, in which one country takes the lead on any given issue.

Sources: Khan, I., 'Afghan govt, Taliban resume peace talks in Murree on Friday', Dawn, 29 July 2015; Khan, A., 'Afghanistan–Pakistan–US–China Quadrilateral Coordination Group', Institute of Strategic Studies, Issue Brief, 22 Jan 2016; Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Press release on regional consultations on Afghanistan in Moscow', 14 Apr. 2017; US Embassy in Afghanistan, 'The Kabul Process for Peace & Security Cooperation in Afghanistan declaration', 1 Mar. 2018; Al Jazeera, 'Taliban holds talks with US envoy in Qatar', 19 Nov. 2018.

numbered 2.6 million people, with just over half living in Pakistan and the remainder spread out across 92 other countries, while another 1.8 million people were internally displaced.⁷⁶ Nearly 350 000 people were newly displaced by conflict and large-scale drought in 2018, and by the end of the year Afghanistan was experiencing its worst food insecurity emergency since 2011. In November 2018, the percentage of rural Afghans facing acute food deficits was projected to reach 47 per cent (10.6 million) by February 2019.⁷⁷

The peace processes

Just as the Afghan conflict reflects diverse networks of competing actors in changing alliances, peace efforts have also been multidimensional,

⁷⁶ UN High Commissioner for Refugees, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2017*, 2018, pp. 14, 34.

⁷⁷ UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 'Afghanistan: Operational fact sheet', 31 Dec. 2018; and Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and World Food Programme, 'Monitoring food security in countries with conflict situations: A joint FAO/WFP update for the United Nations Security Council', Jan. 2019.

with numerous actors involved at local, regional and international levels (see table 2.2).⁷⁸ Overall, however, these efforts have had limited success in initiating meaningful negotiations. Nevertheless, hopes were raised during 2018 that this might change.

Former Afghan president Hamid Karzai established the High Peace Council in 2010 as a government vehicle to bring about direct contact with so-called reconciled Taliban.⁷⁹ From 2011 to 2014, international efforts focused on trying to start negotiations through the Taliban's political office in Qatar. The USA has been involved in almost all of the talks that have been arranged with the Taliban, whether the Afghan Government was a part of the process or not. Secret talks between US officials and Taliban representatives began in 2010, facilitated by German and Qatari officials, and more formal discussions started in 2011 in Qatar and became known as the Doha process.⁸⁰ By 2015, this had stalled and was superseded by a detente process between Afghanistan and Pakistan and efforts, facilitated by Pakistan's intelligence agency, to open negotiations between the Afghan Government and the Taliban.⁸¹

Meanwhile, Afghanistan and Pakistan held multiple rounds of high-level bilateral talks through the Afghanistan–Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity, a framework aimed at combatting cross-border flows of militants and boosting economic ties. In April 2018, President Ghani and Pakistan's Prime Minister, Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, agreed to seven key principles to finalize the Action Plan.⁸²

With Pakistan also tightening up on Taliban cross-border movement into Afghanistan (see 'South Asia' above), the Pakistan–Taliban relationship waned. Accordingly, the Taliban pursued diplomatic channels with other states, including China, Iran and Russia. In recent years, most of Afghanistan's neighbours have been positioning themselves as stakeholders in any future formal peace negotiations. In 2016, the Quadrilateral Coordination Group—Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and the USA—was formed and it met five times that year in the search for a viable Afghan peace process.⁸³ Although these

⁷⁸ On the competing actors in the Afghan insurgency, see Münch, P. and Ruttig, T., 'Between negotiations and ongoing resistance: The situation of the Afghan insurgency', *Orient, German Journal for Politics, Economics and Culture of the Middle East*, vol. 55, no. 3 (2014), pp. 25–41.

⁷⁹ See the High Peace Council website, <<http://hpc.org.af/english/>>; and van Bijlert, M., 'Warlords' peace council', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 28 Sep. 2010.

⁸⁰ Wömer, N., 'Exploratory talks and peace initiatives in Afghanistan', *SWP Comment 44*, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Dec. 2012.

⁸¹ Farrell, T. and Semple, M., 'Making peace with the Taliban', *Survival*, vol. 57, no. 6 (2015), pp. 79–110; Bacon, T., 'Slipping the leash? Pakistan's relationship with the Afghan Taliban', *Survival*, vol. 60, no. 5 (2018), pp. 159–180; and Wong, E. and Mashal, M., 'Taliban and Afghan peace officials have secret talks in China', *New York Times*, 25 May 2015.

⁸² TOLONews, 'Ghani, Abbasi agree to 7 key principles for Action Plan', 7 Apr. 2018.

⁸³ Tiezzi, S., 'China joins Afghanistan, Pakistan, and US for talks on Afghan peace process', *The Diplomat*, 12 Jan. 2016.

meetings were plagued with problems, they signalled China's growing participation in the process.⁸⁴

Within Afghanistan itself, some progress was registered in terms of peace discussions. Although 2017 was largely a lost year for peace, an important new strand of talks was started that June when President Ghani launched the Kabul process, which is intended to be Afghan-led and Afghan-owned.⁸⁵ The key regional and international stakeholders—some 30 countries and international organizations, including the European Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the UN—met in Kabul in June 2017 and again in February 2018.⁸⁶ At the latter conference, President Ghani proposed peace talks with the Taliban without preconditions, offered to recognize them as a legitimate political group, and presented a number of significant peace proposals.⁸⁷ The call for the Taliban to accept the peace offer was renewed at a conference in Tashkent on 26–27 March 2018 in support of the Kabul process, which involved 21 countries and intergovernmental organizations.⁸⁸

A three-day ceasefire in June between the Taliban and the Afghan Government—the first in the 17-year conflict—offered a short respite and raised hopes for an end to the conflict, but fighting resumed immediately afterwards.⁸⁹ On 19 August, President Ghani proposed a further three-month conditional ceasefire, which was rejected by the Taliban.⁹⁰ Instead, the group increased its attacks, especially in the eastern provincial capital of Ghazni.⁹¹

Despite the internationalized peace efforts within the Kabul process, the Taliban still preferred to talk directly with the USA, which had been unable, despite many years of effort, to open US–Afghan–Taliban diplomatic talks.

⁸⁴ Ruttig, T., 'In search of a peace process: A "new" HPC and an ultimatum for the Taleban', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 26 Feb. 2016; and Putz, C., 'Can China help mediate between Afghanistan and Pakistan?', *The Diplomat*, 13 June 2017.

⁸⁵ Ruttig, T. and Ali, O., 'Words, no deeds: 2017, another lost year for peace (talks) in Afghanistan', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 24 Jan. 2018; and Office of the President of Afghanistan, 'Press release on the Kabul Process conference', 6 June 2017; and Haidari, M. A., 'The Afghan peace process: An FAQ', *The Diplomat*, 14 May 2018.

⁸⁶ Rasmussen, S. E., 'Afghanistan holds peace conference amid violence and protests', *The Guardian*, 6 June 2017; and Arif, S., 'A way forward for Afghanistan after the 2nd Kabul Process conference', *The Diplomat*, 7 Mar. 2018.

⁸⁷ US Embassy in Afghanistan, 'The Kabul Process for Peace & Security Cooperation in Afghanistan Declaration'; and Eide, K., 'The beginning of a peace process in Afghanistan—finally?', *TOLONews*, 8 Mar. 2018.

⁸⁸ Permanent Mission of the Republic of Uzbekistan to the United Nations, 'Declaration of the Tashkent Conference on Afghanistan: Peace process, security cooperation & regional connectivity', 30 Mar. 2018.

⁸⁹ Shalizi, H., 'Afghanistan announces Eid ceasefire with Taliban until June 20', *Reuters*, 7 June 2018; BBC News, 'Taliban rules out extension of Afghanistan Eid festival ceasefire', 17 June 2018; and International Crisis Group (ICG), *Building on Afghanistan's Fleeting Ceasefire*, Asia Report no. 298 (ICG: Brussels, 19 July 2018).

⁹⁰ Nelson, C., Totakhil, H. K. and Amiri, E., 'Afghan president offers Taliban conditional three-month cease-fire', *Wall Street Journal*, 20 Aug. 2018; and Osman, B., 'As new US envoy appointed, turbulent Afghanistan's hopes of peace persist', *Commentary*, International Crisis Group, 5 Sep. 2018.

⁹¹ *The Economist*, 'Afghanistan's government retakes a strategic town', 18 Aug. 2018.

The Trump administration reopened direct talks with the Taliban in July 2018 and in September appointed Zalmay Khalilzad, who served as ambassador to Kabul in 2003–05, as an envoy for the talks.⁹² At least two preliminary meetings between Taliban officials and Khalilzad took place in Qatar.⁹³ While Taliban leaders appeared to take the talks seriously, the process stalled over their precondition that the USA commit to a timeline for full withdrawal of international forces before wider peace talks involving other Afghan factions.

In mid November, Russia hosted talks with Taliban delegates and members of Afghanistan's High Peace Council.⁹⁴ Two previous rounds of Russian-sponsored talks, in February and April 2017, had mainly been a regional dialogue with neighbouring countries (see table 2.2, 'Moscow format consultations'). Also in November, President Ghani announced a new updated peace plan that builds on earlier Kabul process proposals, which he envisaged would take five years to implement.⁹⁵ A new 12-member negotiating team is to be established (effectively sidelining the High Peace Council), as well as a 'peace advisory board' comprised of nine committees to provide direction to the negotiating team and 'ensure consensus'.⁹⁶

In December, Khalilzad and other US officials met with representatives of the Taliban in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Representatives from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE also participated, but the Taliban continued to refuse to engage with representatives of the Afghan Government.⁹⁷ At the end of 2018, the prospect of a settlement of the Afghan crisis remained distant. The conflict parties were as divided as ever, violence on the ground was rising, and the regional and international powers held divergent positions. If, however, the positions of China (which is putting pressure on Pakistan to restrain the Taliban), Russia and the USA were to converge, the prospects for a serious peace process in 2019 would improve considerably. Afghan presidential elections scheduled for April 2019 and the US troop withdrawals announced in December 2018 add further layers of uncertainty.⁹⁸

⁹² Osman (note 90).

⁹³ Greenwood, M., 'State Dept. official met with Taliban to kick-start Afghanistan peace talks: Report', *The Hill*, 25 July 2018; and Mashal, M., 'US officials meet with Taliban again as Trump pushes Afghan peace process', *New York Times*, 13 Oct. 2018.

⁹⁴ Roggio, B., 'At Moscow conference, Taliban refers to itself as the "Islamic Emirate" 61 times', *Long War Journal*, 9 Nov. 2018; Jain, R., 'Russia reaches out to Afghan leaders for Taliban talks, angering Kabul', *Reuters*, 2 Nov. 2018; and Roth, A., 'Russia hosts talks between Taliban and Afghan peace council', *The Guardian*, 9 Nov. 2018.

⁹⁵ Office of the President of Afghanistan, 'President Ashraf Ghani's remarks at Geneva conference on Afghanistan', 28 Nov. 2018; Office of the President of Afghanistan, 'Achieving peace: The next chapter in the Afghan-led peace process', Summary Document, 28 Nov. 2018.

⁹⁶ Ruttig, T., 'Getting to the steering wheel: President Ghani's new set of peace proposals', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 4 Dec. 2018.

⁹⁷ Nelson, C. and Fitch, A., 'US Envoy, Taliban discuss peace, while Afghan government is sidelined', *Wall Street Journal*, 18 Dec. 2018; and Sediqi, A. Q., 'Afghan Taliban meet US officials, as peace efforts intensify', *Reuters*, 17 Dec. 2018.

⁹⁸ Khaama Press, 'IEC announces final date for Afghan presidential elections', 28 Nov. 2018.

Armed conflict in Myanmar

Insurgencies have persisted for much of the past seven decades in Myanmar's Chin, Kachin, Kayin, Mon, Rakhine and Shan states. Various armed insurgent groups have fought the country's armed forces, known as the Tatmadaw, over political control of territory, ethnic minority rights and access to natural resources.⁹⁹ In Shan state the ethnic conflict is fuelled by a growing drugs trade and in Kachin state by trade in jade.¹⁰⁰ The most visible conflict in 2017, however, was in Rakhine state, with an estimated total of more than 750 000 Rohingya—members of a predominantly Sunni Muslim ethnic group—fleeing to Bangladesh after the Tatmadaw and local Buddhist militias launched attacks on the Muslim minority in August 2017.¹⁰¹ The humanitarian crisis in Rakhine continued into 2018. An ongoing peace process, launched in 2015, made little headway during the year against a backdrop of rising violence especially in the north-eastern states of Kachin and Shan, on the border with China.¹⁰² According to one estimate, 265 combatants and civilians were killed in Myanmar in 2018.¹⁰³

In Kachin and Shan over 120 000 people have been displaced since 2011, and in May the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar warned of a sharp escalation in the fighting between the Tatmadaw and the Kachin Independence Army.¹⁰⁴

The Rohingya humanitarian crisis

In 2018, more than 900 000 Rohingya remained in refugee camps in southern Bangladesh after being driven out by the Tatmadaw in late 2017. It is the largest and densest refugee settlement in the world.¹⁰⁵ With no guarantees of citizenship and security if the Rohingya were to return to Myanmar, repatriation plans were delayed indefinitely, and their future remains uncertain—despite growing diplomatic pressure from China to start

⁹⁹ Hart, M., 'Myanmar's peace process on life support', *Geopolitical Monitor*, 10 Jan. 2019.

¹⁰⁰ International Crisis Group (ICG), *Fire and Ice: Conflict and Drugs in Myanmar's Shan State*, Asia Report no. 299 (ICG: Brussels, 8 Jan. 2019); and Combs, D., 'Myanmar's jade-fueled war', *The Diplomat*, 1 June 2018.

¹⁰¹ On the Rohingya crisis in 2017, see Davis, Ghiasy and Su (note 35), pp. 49–52.

¹⁰² International Crisis Group (ICG), *Myanmar's Stalled Transition*, Asia Briefing no. 151 (ICG: Brussels, 28 Aug. 2018).

¹⁰³ Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 'Myanmar', 2018.

¹⁰⁴ UN News, "'Sharp escalation' in fighting across Myanmar's Kachin state, warns rights expert', 1 May 2018; Combs, D., 'Myanmar's fighting season in Kachin', *The Diplomat*, 18 May 2018; and Nickerson, J., 'The Kachin IDP crisis: Myanmar's other humanitarian disaster', *Al Jazeera*, 2 Dec. 2018. See also Brenner, D., 'Inside the Karen insurgency: Explaining conflict and conciliation in Myanmar's changing borderlands', *Asian Security*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2018), pp. 83–99.

¹⁰⁵ UN High Commissioner for Refugees, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2017*, 2018, pp. 24–25. See also Holloway, K. and Fan, L., *Dignity and the Displaced Rohingya in Bangladesh*, Humanitarian Policy Group Working Paper, Aug. 2018.

repatriation.¹⁰⁶ Decades of political repression and periodic violence, the unprecedented scale of the current crisis and growing attention from jihadi groups make the Rohingya vulnerable to radicalization. So far, however, the main insurgent group, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, does not appear to be associated with any radical Islamist movement, and it only carried out a few low-level attacks in 2018.¹⁰⁷

In March 2017, the UN Human Rights Council established the Independent International Fact-finding Mission (FFM) on Myanmar to investigate allegations of human rights violations by military and security forces in three states: Kachin, Rakhine and Shan. The FFM published its report on 18 September 2018, in which it concluded that the Tatmadaw's actions constituted crimes against humanity, war crimes and possible genocide. At least 10 000 people (a conservative estimate) were killed in 'clearance operations' in Rakhine state committed with 'genocidal intent' and lasting more than two months in 2017.¹⁰⁸

Satellite imagery showed that 40 per cent of the villages in northern Rakhine had been completely or partly destroyed. The report also said that Myanmar's army had committed 'the gravest crimes under international law' and called on the UN Security Council to refer Myanmar to the International Criminal Court (ICC) or to set up an international tribunal to prosecute those, including senior army commanders, identified as responsible for the violence. Further, the report called for an overhaul of the military and for constitutional changes to end the political dominance of Tatmadaw generals.¹⁰⁹ There is also growing evidence that Myanmar's military used social media to spread divisive and inflammatory messages to incite discord between Muslims and Buddhists and to fuel attacks on the Rohingya.¹¹⁰

In August, more than 130 members of parliament in five ASEAN countries demanded that Myanmar be investigated by the ICC.¹¹¹ On 18 September, the same day as the FFM report was published, the ICC announced that it had launched a preliminary examination to establish whether there was

¹⁰⁶ *The Economist*, 'Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh refuse to go back to Myanmar', 22 Nov. 2018; and International Crisis Group (ICG), *Bangladesh-Myanmar: The Danger of Forced Rohingya Repatriation*, Asia Briefing no. 153 (ICG: Brussels, 12 Nov. 2018).

¹⁰⁷ Fair, C. C., 'Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army: Not the jihadis you might expect', *Lawfare*, 9 Dec. 2018.

¹⁰⁸ United Nations, Human Rights Council, Report of the detailed findings of the Independent International Fact-finding Mission on Myanmar, A/HRC/39/CRP.2, 17 Sep. 2018. On the difficulty of quantifying the number of deaths, see pp. 241–42 of the report.

¹⁰⁹ Cumming-Bruce, N., 'Myanmar's "gravest crimes" against Rohingya demand action, UN says', *New York Times*, 18 Sep. 2018.

¹¹⁰ Mozur, P., 'A genocide incited on Facebook, with posts from Myanmar's military', *New York Times*, 15 Oct. 2018; and Douek, E., 'Facebook's role in the genocide in Myanmar: New reporting complicates the narrative', *Lawfare*, 22 Oct. 2018.

¹¹¹ Ellis-Petersen, H., 'Rohingya crisis: 132 MPs across region call for Myanmar to be referred to ICC', *The Guardian*, 24 Aug. 2018.

enough evidence to merit a full investigation.¹¹² The Myanmar Government rejected the FFM's findings, while action in the UN Security Council was expected to be blocked by Russia and China.¹¹³ In October, the chair of the FFM, Marzuki Darusman, claimed that thousands of Rohingya were still fleeing to Bangladesh, and the estimated 250 000 to 400 000 who remained in Myanmar continued to suffer severe restrictions and repression in an 'ongoing genocide'.¹¹⁴

The peace process

The Myanmar Government has been attempting to push forward a complex peace process, the core of which is the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement, originally signed by eight rebel groups. Two more groups signed in February 2018—the New Mon State Party and Lahu Democratic Union—but the country's most powerful militias, including the Kachin Independence Army and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, still refused to join the accord.¹¹⁵ Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's de facto leader (officially known as State Counsellor), attended the latest dialogue session in July 2018, with the aim of persuading more rebel groups to join the initiative.¹¹⁶ However, little meaningful progress was made and the peace process—which has very low participation by civil society and has largely excluded women from formal negotiations—appeared to be stalling.¹¹⁷

In November, the Karen National Union/Karen National Liberation Army and the Restoration Council of Shan State/Shan State Army-South, two key signatories to the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement, suspended their participation in formal peace negotiations.¹¹⁸ On 21 December, the Tatmadaw announced a four-month ceasefire in Kachin and Shan states (but not Rakhine state) in an effort to reactivate the stalled talks.¹¹⁹

¹¹² Wintour, P., 'Myanmar Rohingya crisis: ICC begins inquiry into atrocities', *The Guardian*, 19 Sep. 2018. For a discussion of the views supporting and opposing the ICC decision, see Davies, S. E. and Hall, I., 'Commentaries on the International Criminal Court decision on Bangladesh and the Rohingya people', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 73, no. 1 (2019).

¹¹³ Nichols, M., 'Nine UN Security Council members ask to discuss Myanmar inquiry', Reuters, 17 Oct. 2018; and Nichols, M., 'UN Security Council mulls Myanmar action; Russia, China boycott talks', Reuters, 17 Dec. 2018.

¹¹⁴ *The Guardian*, 'Rohingya genocide is still going on, says top UN investigator', 24 Oct. 2018.

¹¹⁵ *Jakarta Post*, 'Two ethnic groups sign up to Myanmar's "broken" peace process', 13 Feb. 2018.

¹¹⁶ On the 2 earlier rounds of talks in Aug. 2016 and May 2017, see Davis, Ghiasy and Su (note 35), pp. 48–50; *The Mainichi*, 'Myanmar peace conference reaches more agreements for future union', 17 July 2018.

¹¹⁷ Pepper, M., 'Ethnic minority women, diversity, and informal participation in peacebuilding in Myanmar', *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, vol. 13, no. 2 (2018), pp. 61–75.

¹¹⁸ Nyein, N., 'KNU reiterates hiatus in peace talks', *The Irrawaddy*, 12 Nov. 2018.

¹¹⁹ Naing, S. and Aung, T. T., 'Myanmar army pauses operations in north in rare conciliatory action', Reuters, 21 Dec. 2018.

Armed conflict in the Philippines

One of Asia's longest and deadliest conflicts is the Moro insurgency in the Mindanao region of the southern Philippines. Over the years, the web of actors involved in this conflict has coalesced into two main separatist groups: the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and the Moro Nationalist Liberation Front. In 2014, the latter group signed a peace agreement with the Philippine Government.¹²⁰

In the meantime, the Mindanao region has also become fertile ground for the emergence of violent pro-Islamic State groups, which were involved in a violent insurgency in the city of Marawi in 2017.¹²¹ In 2018, reconstruction in the city proceeded slowly and tensions remained high, especially as martial law was extended in Mindanao by President Rodrigo Duterte in December.¹²²

On 26 July 2018, President Duterte signed the Bangsamoro Organic Law, which is based on the 2014 peace agreement.¹²³ Among the key features of the law is the replacement, pending approval in a plebiscite, of the current Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao with the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. The new entity is expected to include additional provinces and its government is expected to have greater devolved powers. At the end of 2018, the change had still to be approved (a plebiscite was scheduled for early 2019), but it is possible that a satisfactory peace deal will be enough to encourage the Moro Islamic Liberation Front to join the Moro Nationalist Liberation Front and the government in the fight against pro-Islamic State groups.¹²⁴

Equally elusive, despite sporadic peace talks, has been the goal of ending the nearly six decades-old insurgency by the New People's Army (NPA)—the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines and its political umbrella organization, the National Democratic Front.¹²⁵ Talks due to take place between the government and the National Democratic Front in Oslo, Norway in June 2018 were cancelled, and by end of the year, despite some

¹²⁰ On the peace process with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, see Svensson, I. and Lundgren, M., 'Mediation and peace agreements', *SIPRI Yearbook 2014*, pp. 51–52; and Sombatpoonsiri, J., 'Securing peace? Regime types and security sector reform in the Patani (Thailand) and Bangsamoro (the Philippines) peace processes, 2011–2016', *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 42, no. 4, 2018, pp. 377–401.

¹²¹ On the conflict in Marawi, see Davis, Ghiasy and Su (note 35), pp. 54–55; and Franco, J., 'Philippines: Addressing Islamist militancy after the battle for Marawi', *Commentary, International Crisis Group*, 17 July 2018.

¹²² Millar, P., 'Whatever happened to the liberation of Marawi City', *Southeast Asia Globe*, 17 Oct. 2018; and Beltran, M. and Tobin, M., 'Duterte's martial law extension renews fears of authoritarianism in the Philippines', *South China Morning Post*, 8 Dec. 2018.

¹²³ Cook, E., 'What does Duterte's signing of the Bangsamoro Law mean?', *The Diplomat*, 1 Aug. 2018.

¹²⁴ Ximenes, F. B., 'Bringing peace to the Philippines' troubled south: The Bangsamoro Organic Law', *The Diplomat*, 2 Oct. 2018; and Ellis-Petersen, H. and Fonbuena, C., 'Philippines: Scores of Islamic State fighters on Mindanao island', *The Guardian*, 11 Nov. 2018.

¹²⁵ For further detail on the peace talks see 'Timeline: The peace talks between the government and the CPP-NPA-NDF, 1986–present', *GMA News Online*, 6 Dec. 2017.

fruitful local negotiations, all the national trust- and confidence-building measures appeared to have collapsed as leaders on both sides resorted to bellicose rhetoric.¹²⁶ According to the Philippine armed forces, the NPA insurgency was being severely degraded—including the surrender of 326 NPA fighters in January 2018—and later in the year its threat level was officially downgraded on several fronts in Mindanao.¹²⁷ However, other reports suggested that the NPA was still a major threat.¹²⁸

While the number of civilians killed in the Philippines in 2018 is uncertain and disputed, indications are that the government's 'war on drugs', initiated when President Duterte took office in 2016, has resulted in more deaths than the insurgencies. Government statistics place the death toll from July 2016 to the end of November 2018 at 5050, while estimates from human rights groups suggest the figure could be between 12 000 and 27 000.¹²⁹ ACLED has much lower figures, recording over 1000 civilian fatalities in 2018, mostly as a consequence of the war on drugs.¹³⁰ In February 2018, the ICC began an examination of whether the drug war involved crimes against humanity.¹³¹

¹²⁶ Clapano, J. R., 'Joma Sison hits cancellation of peace talks', *Philippine Star*, 16 June 2018; and Regalado, E., 'Duterte warns NPA: Blood will flow', *Philippine Star*, 20 Dec. 2018.

¹²⁷ Punongbayan, M., 'AFP sees NPA threat being degraded', *Philippine Star*, 5 Feb. 2018; *Sun Star*, 'NPA threat reduced in Bukidnon', 9 Aug. 2018; and Crismundo, M., 'Threat level of 5 NPA fronts downgraded', *Manila Bulletin*, 25 Aug. 2018.

¹²⁸ Lischin, L., 'The escalating violence of the New People's Army in Mindanao', New Mandala, 19 Sep. 2018.

¹²⁹ Ellis-Petersen, H., 'Duterte's Philippines drug war death toll rises above 5 000', *The Guardian*, 19 Dec. 2018.

¹³⁰ Kishi and Pavlik (note 55), p. 11. See also Kishi, R., Pavlik, M. and La Vina, R., 'Duterte's war: Drug-related violence in the Philippines', Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), [n.d.]; and Davis, Ghiasy and Su (note 35), p. 54.

¹³¹ *The Guardian*, 'ICC launches crimes against humanity inquiry into Duterte's war on drugs', 8 Feb. 2018.