

4. Armed conflict and peace processes in Asia and Oceania

Overview

Seven countries in Asia and Oceania experienced active armed conflicts in 2020 (the same as in 2019)—three in South Asia (section II): Afghanistan (major internationalized civil war), India (high-intensity interstate border and subnational armed conflicts) and Pakistan (low-intensity interstate border and subnational armed conflicts); and four low-intensity subnational armed conflicts in South East Asia (section III): Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines and Thailand. Total conflict-related fatalities in Asia and Oceania fell by nearly 50 per cent in 2020 (compared to 2019), mostly as a result of conflict-related fatalities being halved in Afghanistan.

However, three emerging trends remained cause for concern in 2020: (a) the growing Chinese–United States rivalry combined with an increasingly assertive Chinese foreign policy, (b) the growing violence related to identity politics, based on ethnic and/or religious polarization, and (c) the increase in transnational violent jihadist groups.

Only a few of the armed conflicts were being addressed in 2020 by ongoing or new peace processes. Important advances were made in the peace talks in Afghanistan, but there was no noticeable peace process between India and Pakistan with regard to their ongoing interstate armed conflict over Kashmir. Despite China and India signing several border agreements since the 1990s, the status quo broke down in 2020 with a significant uptick in violence and tensions over their border dispute. In South East Asia a Japanese-brokered ceasefire opened up new opportunities for dialogue. There were five multilateral peace operations active in Asia and Oceania in 2020. This was the same number as in 2019.

The Covid-19 pandemic appears to have had a minimal impact on the region's armed conflicts in 2020, despite having profound impacts on human security more generally.

The war in Afghanistan remained the deadliest armed conflict in the world, with nearly 21 000 fatalities in 2020—a 50 per cent reduction on 2019. There were grounds for optimism following a conditional peace agreement between the Taliban and the USA in February 2020 and the commencement of intra-Afghan peace talks in September 2020. The Afghan Government reached a preliminary procedural agreement with the Taliban in December 2020, but by the end of the year the talks had faltered and violence continued. With a conditional deadline for complete US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization military withdrawal

by May 2021, uncertainty over the incoming Biden administration's approach and the Taliban apparently in the ascendancy, the future of the peace process remained uncertain.

In the territorial conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir the situation in 2020 largely reverted to the status quo of relatively low levels of armed violence. This consisted of regular exchanges of artillery fire and other clashes between Indian and Pakistani forces along the line of control, and militant attacks and Indian counter-insurgency operations inside Jammu and Kashmir. However, in June 2020, for the first time in over five decades, the border tensions between China and India in the disputed eastern Ladakh region of Kashmir turned deadly. A violent but gunless confrontation resulted in the deaths of at least 20 Indian soldiers and an unknown number of Chinese soldiers, as well as probable additional Chinese territorial gains.

Some of the most organized Islamist extremist groups were active in South East Asia, most notably in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. In Myanmar an ongoing peace process made little headway during the year against a backdrop of continuing violence, especially in Rakhine state. However, Japan brokered a diplomatic breakthrough between the Arakan Army and the Myanmar military in November 2020 that included a *de facto* ceasefire. The agreement has created a vital space for dialogue and the return of several thousand displaced people. However, the voluntary return of almost a million Rohingya people forcibly displaced in 2017 continued to seem unlikely in the short term, despite worsening humanitarian conditions in refugee camps in Bangladesh. Without reforms to address the discrimination and marginalization of ethnic minorities, in Rakhine state and more widely in Myanmar, the prospects for the peace process remained uncertain.

Two long-running insurgencies in the Philippines continued in 2020 at relatively low levels of violence: one in the Muslim-majority areas of the Mindanao region of the southern Philippines and another involving the New People's Army of the Communist Party of the Philippines. However, it was the 'war on drugs' that appeared to produce the most fatalities in the Philippines during the year.

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