

I. Key general developments in the region

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Seven countries in Asia and Oceania experienced active armed conflicts in 2020 (the same as in 2019)—three in South Asia: Afghanistan (major internationalized civil war), India (high intensity as a result of combined interstate border and subnational armed conflicts) and Pakistan (low-intensity interstate border and subnational armed conflicts), as discussed in section II; and four low-intensity subnational armed conflicts in South East Asia: Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines and Thailand, as discussed in section III.¹ In the Philippines fatalities in the subnational armed conflict were likely surpassed by those arising from the high levels of violence against civilians in a ‘war on drugs’. All seven armed conflicts had lower conflict-related fatalities in 2020 than in 2019, and overall the reduction was close to 50 per cent as a result of conflict-related fatalities being halved in Afghanistan (see table 4.1).

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 (other than the Chinese–United States rivalry, discussed below), and important subregional differences.

While Asia, especially East Asia, has experienced a dramatic reduction in armed conflict in the last 40 years, a reversal of this positive trend appears to be under way.² Two trends remained cause for concern in 2020: (a) the growing violence related to identity politics, based on ethnic and/or religious polarization (some of which has long-term roots)—such as the Hindu-nationalist paramilitant group, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, in India and Buddhist extremist groups operating in Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand; and (b) the increase in transnational violent jihadist groups—including the presence of actors linked to the Islamic State in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippines and Sri Lanka.³ In some countries (such as India) Islamic State presence is minimal, while in others (such as Afghanistan) the presence is more entrenched and groups are more capable of carrying out armed attacks.

¹ For conflict definitions and typologies see chapter 2, section I, in this volume.

² World Bank Group and United Nations, *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches for Preventing Violent Conflict* (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank: Washington, DC, 2018), pp. 11–12, 19; and Bellamy, A. J., *East Asia's Other Miracle: Explaining the Decline of Mass Atrocities* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2017).

³ Ramachandran, S., ‘India: Fanning the flames of extremism and terror at home’, *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 18, no. 1 (14 Jan. 2020), pp. 7–9; Gunasingham, A., ‘Buddhist extremism in Sri Lanka and Myanmar: An examination’, *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, vol. 11, no. 3 (Mar. 2019), pp. 1–6; and United Nations, Security Council, ‘Eleventh report of the secretary-general on the threat posed by ISIL (Da’esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of member states in countering the threat’, S/2020/774, 4 Aug. 2020, pp. 6–7.

Table 4.1. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Asia and Oceania, 2017–20

Country	2017	2018	2019	2020
Afghanistan	36 606	43 278	41 680	20 938
India	1 420	2 100	1 526	1 288
Indonesia	49	167	219	117
Myanmar	1 253	225	1 495	654
Pakistan	1 725	1 226	1 157	813
Philippines	4 088	1 790	1 622	1 448
Thailand	94	231	172	102
Total	45 235	49 017	47 871	25 360

Note: Includes only countries with armed conflicts with 25 or more deaths in a given year.

Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, ‘Data export tool’, accessed 23–24 Jan. 2021.

Only a few of the armed conflicts discussed in this chapter were being addressed in 2020 by ongoing or new peace processes. Important advances were made in the peace talks in Afghanistan (see section II), but there was no noticeable peace process between India and Pakistan with regard to their ongoing interstate armed conflict over Kashmir. Despite India and China 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 (see section II). In South East Asia, a Japanese-brokered ceasefire between Myanmar’s military and the Arakan Army opened up new opportunities for dialogue at the end of the year (see section III).

There were five multilateral peace operations in Asia and Oceania in 2020. This was the same number as in 2019. Although none of these operations started or ended during the year, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-led Resolute Support Mission (RSM) is expected to withdraw from Afghanistan in 2021. The number of personnel in multilateral peace operations in Asia and Oceania decreased by 42 per cent in 2020, from 17 086 on 31 December 2019 to 9941 on 31 December 2020. This was mainly due to a partial drawdown of the RSM during the year, which was driven by major reductions of the number of US forces in Afghanistan in accordance with a new agreement between the USA and the Taliban (see section II).

Growing geopolitical tensions in East Asia

In East Asia, North Korea, South Korea and Taiwan are all unrecognized by at least one other East Asian state due to ongoing political tensions in the region, specifically the division of Korea, the political status of Taiwan and developments in the quasi-dependent territory of Hong Kong. These tensions are exacerbated by the geopolitical rivalry between China and the USA, and an increasingly assertive Chinese foreign policy. The latter is a general trend based on domestic developments in China (regime legitimacy) and only partially connected to the relationship with the USA. Nonetheless,

a growing number of analysts and officials believe China and the USA are on the edge of a new cold war.⁴ These Chinese–US tensions were played out in a ‘battle of narratives’ in at least four areas: the Covid-19 pandemic response; trade and technology; human rights (especially regarding the treatment of ethnic minorities in the Xinjiang region and the introduction of a new security law in Hong Kong); and military competition in the South China Sea and across the Taiwan Strait.⁵ In addition, an alliance to counter China’s growing influence—known as the Quadrilateral Initiative, or the Quad—deepened its cooperation during 2020. Consisting of an informal alliance between Australia, India, Japan and the USA, the first Quadrilateral Security Dialogue was held in 2007, but the idea cooled until being revived in 2017. Since then it has met regularly at the working level, and held its second ministerial level meeting in October 2020 but failed to agree on a joint communiqué.⁶

The impact of Covid-19

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, although many of these broader consequences were still to be felt or identified. In response to the UN secretary-general’s March call for a Covid-19-related global ceasefire, the Communist Party of the Philippines announced a unilateral ceasefire by its armed wing, the New People’s Army, until 15 April (see section III) after the government announced a temporary international ceasefire.⁷ Although some other armed groups in Indonesia, Myanmar and Thailand also proposed ceasefires, these were largely ignored

⁴ See e.g. Campbell, K. M. and Wyne, A., ‘The growing risk of inadvertent escalation between Washington and Beijing’, *Lawfare*, 16 Aug. 2020; Garton Ash, T., ‘China: Lessons for Europe from the cold war’, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 22 June 2020; and Rachman, G., ‘A new cold war: Trump, Xi and the escalating US–China confrontation’, *Financial Times*, 5 Oct. 2020. On the different perspectives within the USA on US foreign policy towards China see Sitaraman, G., ‘Mapping the China debate’, *Lawfare*, 26 May 2020. Also see the discussion in chapter 1 of this volume.

⁵ See e.g. Marquardt, A. and Hansler, J., ‘US push to include “Wuhan virus” language in G7 joint statement fractures alliance’, *CNN*, 26 Mar. 2020; Maizland, L. and Chatsky, A., ‘Huawei: China’s controversial tech giant’, *Council on Foreign Relations Background*, 6 Aug. 2020; Buckley, C. and Ramzy, A., ‘China is erasing mosques and precious shrines in Xinjiang’, *New York Times*, 25 Sep. 2020; and Wong, E., ‘Hong Kong has lost autonomy, Pompeo says, opening door to US action’, *New York Times*, 27 May 2020. On Chinese strategy in the South China Sea see Zhang, F., ‘China’s long march at sea: Explaining Beijing’s South China Sea strategy, 2009–2016’, *Pacific Review*, vol. 33, no. 5 (2020), pp. 757–87. On US military strategy towards China see Simón, L., ‘Between punishment and denial: Uncertainty, flexibility, and US military strategy toward China’, *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 41, no. 3 (2020), pp. 361–84. On US arms sales to Taiwan see chapter 9, section III, in this volume.

⁶ Madan, T., ‘What you need to know about the “Quad,” in charts’, *Brookings*, 5 Oct. 2020; Lee, L., ‘Assessing the Quad: Prospects and limitations of quadrilateral cooperation for advancing Australia’s interests’, *Lowy Institute*, 19 May 2020; and Rich, M., ‘Pompeo’s message in Japan: Countering China is worth meeting face to face’, *New York Times*, 6 Oct. 2020.

⁷ On the global ceasefire call by the UN secretary-general see chapter 2, section I, in this volume.

by governments (also see section III). The Myanmar Government declared a ceasefire in May, but military operations continued against some of the major armed groups. In early April 2020 Maoist rebels in India also offered a unilateral ceasefire to enable health workers to address the spread of Covid-19 (see section II).

There is evidence that the pandemic exacerbated some existing identity-based divisions, such as the targeting of Muslims in India and Sri Lanka, fuelled by Covid-19-related hate speech.⁸ Regional bodies, namely the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, made several commitments to improve cooperation among states in addressing Covid-19-related concerns, but translating such pledges into concrete action often proved difficult.⁹ More generally, the pandemic is likely to unravel decades of economic and social progress in some of the more fragile parts of Asia, with the Asian Development Bank predicting the first regional recession in 60 years.¹⁰

⁸ Yadav, K. et al., 'Old hatreds fuel online misinformation about Covid-19 in South Asia', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 25 Nov. 2020.

⁹ Political Settlements Research Programme, 'Responding to Covid-19: The coming of age of regionalism in Asia?', 4 June 2020.

¹⁰ 'Asia sees first regional recession in 60 years', BBC News, 15 Sep. 2020. Also see Ingram, S., *Lives Upended: How Covid-19 Threatens the Futures of 600 Million South Asian Children* (UNICEF: June 2020); and Perrigo, B. and Bagri, N. T., 'How the pandemic is reshaping India', *TIME*, 19 Aug. 2020.