

## I. Key general developments in the region

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Nine countries in Asia and Oceania experienced active armed conflicts in 2021 (two more than in 2020). These consisted of three in South Asia, namely Afghanistan (major internationalized civil war), India (low-intensity interstate border and subnational armed conflicts) and Pakistan (interstate border and subnational armed conflicts that when combined amount to high-intensity violence), as discussed in section III; four in South East Asia, namely a major armed conflict in Myanmar and low-intensity subnational armed conflicts in Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand, as discussed in section IV; and a new low-intensity interstate armed conflict in Central Asia between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, as discussed below.<sup>1</sup> After a significant decline in total conflict-related fatalities in the region in 2020 (compared to 2019), the situation was reversed in 2021 with a 59 per cent increase (compared to 2020). This was largely due to a rise in fatalities in Afghanistan prior to the war ending, a large increase in fatalities in Myanmar following the military coup in February 2021 and a spike in violence in Pakistan (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, often with important subregional differences. Moreover, while the region—especially East Asia—has experienced a dramatic reduction in armed conflict over the past 40 years, a reversal of this positive trend appears to be underway.<sup>2</sup> Three trends remained a cause for concern in 2021. First, the Chinese–United States rivalry continued to fester and expand in 2021, drawing in other countries and provoking increased tensions in East Asia, especially in relation to Taiwan and the South China Sea (see section II). Second, a range of complex threats and conflicts falling within the broad terrorism/counterterrorism rubric, involving both states and non-state actors, continued to have far-reaching consequences across many parts of Asia. Under the umbrella of this second trend, at least three key strands could be discerned: (a) violence related to identity politics, based on ethnic and/or religious polarization (some of which has long-term roots), such as the Hindu-nationalist paramilitary group, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, in India, and Buddhist extremist groups operating in Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand;<sup>3</sup> (b) violence involving

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

<sup>2</sup> World Bank Group and United Nations, *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches for Preventing Violent Conflict* (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/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: 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Ramachandran, S., 'India: Fanning the flames of extremism and terror at home', *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 18, no. 1 (14 Jan. 2020), pp. 7–9; and 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.

**Table 4.1.** Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Asia and Oceania, 2017–21

Country	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Afghanistan	36 618	43 295	41 279	31 327	42 031
India	1 403	2 149	1 533	1 289	989
Indonesia	49	167	212	124	124
Kyrgyzstan	–	4 <sup>a</sup>	8 <sup>a</sup>	2 <sup>a</sup>	32 <sup>b</sup>
Myanmar	1 407	264	1 495	659	11 061
Pakistan	1 725	1 226	1 157	825	1 378
Philippines	4 367	2 106	1 703	1 486	1 139
Tajikistan	–	64 <sup>a</sup>	66 <sup>a</sup>	22 <sup>a</sup>	20 <sup>b</sup>
Thailand	94	231	172	102	66
<b>Total</b>	<b>45 663</b>	<b>49 506</b>	<b>47 625</b>	<b>35 816</b>	<b>56 840</b>

– = not applicable.

<sup>a</sup> Battle-related deaths were below 25.

<sup>b</sup> Combined battle-related deaths exceeded 25.

*Note:* Fatality figures are collated from four event types: battles; explosions/remote violence; protests, riots and strategic developments; and violence against civilians—see Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), ‘ACLED definitions of political violence and protest’, 11 Apr. 2019. A country is treated as being in an armed conflict if there were 25 or more battle-related deaths in a given year—see chapter 2, section I, in this volume.

*Source:* ACLED, ‘Dashboard’, accessed 26–27 Jan. 2022.

transnational violent jihadist groups, including the presence of actors linked to the Islamic State in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines and Sri Lanka;<sup>4</sup> and (c) the use (and abuse) by several states of the terrorism narrative, counterterrorism laws and anti-Covid measures in order to stifle genuine dissent, civil society groups and minorities.<sup>5</sup>

The third trend is the growing impact of weather and climate hazards—especially floods, storms and droughts—in many of the region’s countries.<sup>6</sup> For example, of the 11 climate-exposed ‘highly vulnerable countries of concern’ (i.e. those least likely to be able to adapt to climate change) identified in the latest US National Intelligence Assessment on climate change, 5 are in South and East Asia: Afghanistan, India, Myanmar, Pakistan and North Korea.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Menon, P., ‘Police in New Zealand kill “extremist” who stabbed six in supermarket’, Reuters, 3 Sep. 2021; Chew, A., ‘Isis supporters in Indonesia, Malaysia call for more violence after attack during holy period for Muslims and Christians’, *South China Morning Post*, 30 Mar. 2021; and United Nations, Security Council, ‘Twelfth 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/2021/98, 29 Jan. 2021, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Omelicheva, M. Y. et al., ‘Asia and the “Global War on Terror”’, *The Diplomat*, 1 Sep. 2021.

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. World Meteorological Organization (WMO), *State of the Climate in Asia 2020*, WMO-no. 1273 (WMO: Geneva, Oct. 2021); and ‘China floods: Nearly 2 million displaced in Shanxi province’, BBC News, 11 Oct. 2021.

<sup>7</sup> National Intelligence Council, ‘National intelligence estimate: Climate change and international responses increasing challenges to US national security through 2040’, Oct. 2021, pp. 11–15. On Afghanistan’s vulnerability to the effects of climate change see Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) and SIPRI, ‘Afghanistan’, Climate, peace and security fact sheet, Feb. 2022.

Only a few of the armed conflicts discussed in this chapter were being addressed by ongoing or new peace processes in 2021. South and North Korea, China and the USA agreed ‘in principle’ to declare a formal end to the Korean War (1950–53), almost 70 years after the conflict ended in an armistice on 27 July 1953 (see section II). In Afghanistan the war effectively ended after the Taliban took control of the country following the final withdrawal of US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces (see section III), and in February 2021 a United Arab Emirates-brokered ceasefire was agreed between India and Pakistan regarding their ongoing interstate armed conflict over Kashmir. The status quo between India and China in Kashmir broke down in 2020 and tensions over their border dispute continued in 2021, albeit with a slight thaw in their relations (see section III). In South East Asia Myanmar was excluded from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in October 2021 for failing to adhere to a regional peace process agreed in April, following a military coup in February (see section IV).

There were five multilateral peace operations in Asia and Oceania in 2021—the same number as in 2020. The NATO-led Resolute Support Mission (RSM) officially closed in September 2021; there were no new operations in Asia or Oceania in 2021. The number of personnel in multilateral peace operations in Asia and Oceania decreased by 97 per cent in 2021, from 9941 on 31 December 2020 to 337 on 31 December 2021. By and large, this was due to NATO’s withdrawal from Afghanistan and the closing of the RSM (see section III).<sup>8</sup>

### **Interstate armed conflict in Central Asia**

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991, Central Asia has seen a broad spectrum of violence, including several armed conflicts. One of the main sources of tension has been the complex range of territorial, border and water disputes that have persisted in the region.<sup>9</sup> In 2021 the picture was mixed: while a territorial agreement was reached between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, a new outbreak of border clashes flared between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The latter resulted in more than 25 battle-related deaths, taking it above the armed conflict threshold.

The most complicated border negotiations involved the Ferghana Valley, where a myriad of enclaves exist and all three countries sharing it—Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan—have both historical claims

<sup>8</sup> For a full list of multilateral peace operations see chapter 2, section III, table 2.6.

<sup>9</sup> International Crisis Group, *Central Asia: Border Disputes and Conflict Potential*, Asia Report no. 33 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 4 Apr. 2002); Murzakulova, A., ‘The Soviet water legacy in Central Asia’, *The Diplomat*, 1 Sep. 2021; and Helf, G., ‘Looking for trouble: Sources of violent conflict in Central Asia’, United States Institute of Peace, Special Report no. 489, Nov. 2020.

and economic interests. In March 2021 Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan finally reached agreement on their long-standing border disputes, including those in the Ferghana Valley.<sup>10</sup> However, the border conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which is particularly tense due to over a third of the 1000 kilometre border being disputed, flared up again in late April 2021. The four days of armed clashes over a water dispute killed at least 55 people and displaced about 10 000 before a ceasefire was agreed on 1 May.<sup>11</sup> To further ease tension both sides withdrew troops from the border area and agreed to joint security controls.<sup>12</sup>

Another clash occurred on the Kyrgyzstan–Tajikistan border in July, with tensions remaining high throughout the remainder of 2021.<sup>13</sup> By the end of the year the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) had recorded 32 fatalities in Kyrgyzstan and 20 in Tajikistan.<sup>14</sup>

### **The impact of Covid-19**

As was the case in 2020 the Covid-19 pandemic appears to have had minimal impact on the region's armed conflicts in 2021. More generally, the pandemic is likely to unravel decades of economic and social progress in some of the more fragile parts of Asia. For example, India's economy contracted by 6.6 per cent in the fiscal year 2020–21, its worst performance in over four decades and among the worst performances globally.<sup>15</sup> One study suggested that the pandemic led to a staggering rise in inequality across Asia in 2020, destroying 147 million jobs and pushing 148 million people into poverty, while the region's billionaires grew their wealth by \$1.46 trillion.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>10</sup> 'Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan sign deal to end border disputes', Eurasianet, 26 Mar. 2021.

<sup>11</sup> 'Deadly fighting on Kyrgyzstan–Tajikistan border kills at least 31', BBC News, 30 Apr. 2021; Abdülkerimov, B., 'Death toll rises to 55 from Kyrgyz–Tajik border clashes', Anadolu Agency, 5 May 2021; and 'Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan agree new ceasefire after border clashes', Al Jazeera, 1 May 2021.

<sup>12</sup> 'Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan agree to joint security controls along disputed border', RFE/RL, 18 May 2021.

<sup>13</sup> AFP, 'Kyrgyz border guard killed in shootout with Tajik forces', *Times of India*, 9 July 2021; and Imanaliyeva, A., 'Kyrgyzstan fortifies border as negotiations with Tajikistan drag on', Eurasianet, 26 Oct. 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 'Dashboard', accessed 25 Jan. 2022.

<sup>15</sup> National Statistical Office, Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation, Government of India, 'Press note on first revised estimates of national income, consumption expenditure, saving and capital formation for 2020–21', 31 Jan. 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Seery, E., *Rising to the Challenge: The Case for Permanent Progressive Policies to Tackle Asia's Coronavirus and Inequality Crisis* (Oxfam: Oxford, Jan. 2022).