

III. Armed conflict and peace processes in South Asia

IAN DAVIS AND JINGDONG YUAN

Security challenges in South Asia—Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka—include interstate rivalry, border disputes, nuclear weapon risks, terrorism, and internal threats arising from a combination of ethnic, religious and political tensions, often exacerbated by oppressive state security forces. Environmental and climate-related challenges include high levels of water stress, floods and droughts, and moderate to severe food insecurity.¹

This section focuses on Afghanistan, and the armed conflicts between and within India and Pakistan. The long-running and devastating war in Afghanistan, and the territorial disputes involving India and Pakistan (as well as China) over the Kashmir region are crucial barometers for peace and stability in South Asia. The war in Afghanistan was set to end in time for the 20th anniversary of the terrorist attacks on the United States of 11 September 2001 with the agreed withdrawal of US troops. However, the withdrawal precipitated the rapid collapse of the Afghan government and the Taliban's triumphant return to power in Kabul. In terms of Kashmir, an uneasy stalemate largely prevailed in 2021. South Asia remains one of the regions most affected by armed conflicts involving non-state groups and/or state security forces.

Armed conflict in Afghanistan

The current phase of the war in Afghanistan (2001–21) effectively ended in August 2021 with the departure of foreign troops and the return to power of the Taliban.² However, some limited violence continued and the scale of fighting earlier in the year meant that it remained the deadliest armed conflict in the world in 2021 (in terms of conflict-related fatalities), and the humanitarian outlook continued to be stark. There were over 42 000 estimated fatalities over the course of the year, a 34 per cent increase from 2020 (see table 4.2). Most of these were combat related and involved Afghan government forces and the Taliban. Meanwhile, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) continued to document high levels of violence against civilians. It recorded 5183 civilian casualties (1659 fatalities and 3524 injuries) in the first half of 2021, a 47 per cent increase compared to

¹ Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP), *Ecological Threat Register 2020: Understanding Ecological Threats, Resilience and Peace* (IEP: Sydney, Sep. 2020).

² The Taliban, or 'students' in the Pashto language, is an ultraconservative political and religious faction that emerged in the early 1990s in Afghanistan (and northern Pakistan) following the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan. For more on the Taliban see chapter 4, section III.

Table 4.2. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Afghanistan, 2017–21

Event type	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Battles	26 325	31 744	26 251	22 566	31 769
Explosions/remote violence	9 596	10 894	14 445	7 545	9 027
Protests, riots and strategic developments	259	287	198	409	309
Violence against civilians	438	370	385	807	926
Total	36 618	43 295	41 279	31 327	42 031

Notes: The first available year for data on Afghanistan in the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) database is 2017. For definitions of event types, see ACLED, 'ACLED definitions of political violence and protest', 11 Apr. 2019.

Source: ACLED, 'Dashboard', accessed 25 Jan. 2022.

the first six months of 2020. This reversed the trend seen over the past four years of decreasing civilian casualties in the first six months of the year.³

The US withdrawal and the Taliban's return to power

Only days after the US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) military forces withdrew from Afghanistan, the Taliban took control of major cities and installed themselves in the presidential palace in Kabul. In a televised speech on the 14 April 2021 President Biden announced that a US troop withdrawal from what he called the 'forever war' in Afghanistan would begin on 1 May and be completed by 11 September 2021—the 20th anniversary of the terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001 (see timeline in box 4.1).⁴ Following an agreement between the USA and the Taliban in February 2020, both the United States and NATO had been gradually reducing their troop presence.⁵ Under that process a deadline of 1 May 2021 had initially been agreed for a full troop withdrawal. However, with various further rounds of peace discussions and proposals in February–April 2021 failing to yield results, and violence escalating, Biden extended it to the 11 September 2021 (later adjusted to 31 August 2021).⁶ Given that the mission was unsustainable

³ United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), 'Afghanistan: Protection of civilians in armed conflict midyear update: 1 January to 30 June 2021', July 2021.

⁴ White House, 'Remarks by President Biden on the way forward in Afghanistan', 14 Apr. 2021.

⁵ 'Agreement for bringing peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America', 29 Feb. 2020. For more information on the various international peace processes in Afghanistan see *SIPRI Yearbook 2019*, chapter 2, section III, pp. 62–65. For the main developments in Afghanistan in 2019–20 see *SIPRI Yearbook 2020*, pp. 92–94; and *SIPRI Yearbook 2021*, pp. 95–101.

⁶ See e.g. Isachenkov, V., 'Russia hosts Afghan peace conference, hoping to boost talks', AP News, 18 Mar. 2021; Shalizi, H., 'Afghan leader proposes peace road map in three phases—document', Reuters, 4 Apr. 2021; and Gannon, K., 'US-backed Afghan peace meeting postponed as Taliban balk', ABC News, 21 Apr. 2021. On the US internal debate about extending the deadline see Afghanistan Study Group, *Afghanistan Study Group Final Report: A Pathway for Peace in Afghanistan* (United States Institute of Peace: Washington, DC, Feb. 2021); and Cooper, H., Schmitt, E. and Sanger, E., 'Debating exit from Afghanistan, Biden rejected generals' views', *New York Times*, 17 Apr. 2021.

without US forces, NATO and other troop-contributing countries agreed to follow suit.⁷

As the 1 May deadline passed, the Taliban launched a major offensive against Afghan security forces, prompting a rural collapse and a series of negotiated surrenders by Afghan government forces.⁸ In June 2021, as the Taliban gained control of several more districts across the country, a US intelligence assessment suggested that the Afghan government could fall to the Taliban earlier than had previously been anticipated—as soon as six months after US troops withdrew.⁹ Similarly, General Austin Miller, the US military commander in Afghanistan, warned that the country could descend into civil war after the withdrawal of US troops.¹⁰ On 2 July 2021 US troops handed over Bagram Air Base, the hub of the US war effort inside Afghanistan, to the Afghan government, and on 8 July President Biden specified a new completion date of 31 August for the US withdrawal.¹¹ Talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban in Doha continued to be deadlocked, with an ascendant Taliban now having little incentive to negotiate a settlement.¹²

By early August 2021, amidst allegations of Taliban war crimes and further assassinations of government officials and military personnel, journalists and civil society activists, the Taliban reportedly controlled over half of Afghanistan, including many of the country's 34 provincial capitals.¹³ With new intelligence assessments that the Afghan government could fall within 30 days, the Biden administration and other Western governments began preparing for a potential evacuation of their embassy staff and nationals.¹⁴ The Taliban's rapid takeover of the country continued: by 13 August Kandahar

⁷ Aburakia, M. N., 'Germany and UK to follow US out of Afghanistan', *Deutsche Welle*, 14 Apr. 2021; and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), 'North Atlantic Council Ministerial Statement on Afghanistan', Press release, 14 Apr. 2021.

⁸ Zucchio, D. and Rahim, N., 'A wave of Afghan surrenders to the Taliban picks up speed', *New York Times*, 27 May 2021.

⁹ Schnell, M., 'Intel analysis: Afghan government could collapse six months after troops withdraw', *The Hill*, 23 June 2021.

¹⁰ Mitchell, C., 'Troop withdrawal from Afghanistan could lead to "civil war", says top US commander', *The Times*, 30 June 2021.

¹¹ 'Afghanistan: US troops depart Bagram Airfield after nearly 20 years', *Deutsche Welle*, 2 July 2021; and Miller, Z. and Madhani, A., "'Overdue": Biden sets Aug.31 for US exit from Afghanistan', *AP News*, 8 July 2021.

¹² 'Afghan rivals agree to meet again after inconclusive Doha talks', *Al Jazeera*, 18 July 2021; and Gannon, K., 'To reach a peace deal, Taliban says Afghan president must go', *AP News*, 24 July 2021.

¹³ Varshalomidze, T. and Siddiqui, U., 'US, UK accuse Taliban of "war crimes" in south Afghan town', *Al Jazeera*, 2 Aug. 2021; Sediqi, A. Q., 'Gunmen kill two female Supreme Court judges in Afghanistan: Police', *Reuters*, 17 Jan. 2021; Stewart, P., Ali, I. and Shalizi, H., 'Afghan pilots assassinated by Taliban as US withdraws', *Reuters*, 9 July 2021; and Gannon, K. and Akhgar, T., 'Taliban kill Afghan media chief in Kabul, take southern city', *AP News*, 6 Aug. 2021.

¹⁴ Gibbons-Neff, T. et al., 'US is sending 3,000 troops back to Afghanistan to begin evacuations', *New York Times*, 12 Aug. 2021.

Box 4.1. Timeline of key Afghanistan-related events, 1979–2021

<i>1979–89</i>	Occupying Soviet forces battle loosely allied US-backed insurgents, many of whom seek competing outcomes for Afghanistan when the Soviet withdrawal occurs, giving way to civil war.
<i>1989–96</i>	Civil war among Afghan warlords destroys the capital, Kabul, with the Taliban emerging as the most powerful faction.
<i>1996</i>	The ultraconservative Taliban seize power in Afghanistan.
<i>11 Sep. 2001</i>	Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaida network attack targets in the USA using commercial aircraft, killing 2997 people.
<i>7 Oct. 2001</i>	US President George W. Bush announces the US-led military intervention in Afghanistan (Operation Enduring Freedom), which leads to the eventual toppling of the Taliban.
<i>Dec. 2001</i>	The Bonn Agreement provides a foundation for US and NATO-backed state-building efforts, including the establishment of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), as authorized by the UN Security Council, and the installation of Hamid Karzai as Afghan president.
<i>Mar. 2003</i>	US-led coalition invades Iraq, beginning another lengthy military engagement (Iraq War 2003–11) parallel to the Afghanistan conflict.
<i>11 Aug. 2003</i>	Amid increasing violence, NATO takes over lead of ISAF, which is mandated by the UN. The effort is NATO's first-ever commitment outside of Europe.
<i>2006</i>	NATO expands its peacekeeping operation to the southern portion of the country.
<i>2009</i>	US President Barack Obama announces a temporary 'troop surge' to Afghanistan.
<i>2011</i>	Responsibility for security is gradually transitioned from ISAF to Afghan forces. On 2 May Barack Obama announces the death of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan following a raid by US Special Forces.
<i>Summer 2013</i>	Afghan forces take the lead for security operations across the country.
<i>2014–15</i>	The security transition process is completed and Afghan forces assume full security responsibility at the end of 2014 (and the end of the ISAF mission). NATO launches a new, smaller non-combat mission ('Resolute Support') on 1 January 2015 to provide further training, advice and assistance to Afghan security forces and institutions.
<i>2017</i>	President Obama abandons plans to withdraw US forces by the end of his presidency and maintains 5500 troops in Afghanistan when he leaves office.
<i>July 2018</i>	The USA enters official negotiations with the Taliban without involving the elected Afghan government or NATO partners.
<i>Feb. 2020</i>	The USA and the Taliban sign the Doha Agreement, in which the former promises to fully withdraw its troops by May 2021 and the latter commits to conditions, including stopping attacks on US and coalition forces (but not Afghan government forces). The agreement receives unanimous backing from the UN Security Council and is welcomed by NATO.
<i>Sep. 2020</i>	Intra-Afghan peace talks begin in the Qatari capital, Doha, but soon stall.

14 Apr. 2021	President Joe Biden says the USA's longest war will end and troops will be withdrawn by 11 September, the 20th anniversary of the terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001.
June–Aug. 2021	The Taliban make rapid battlefield gains across the country and the takeover is completed on 15 August with the capture of Kabul. The US troop withdrawal is completed on 30 August, marking the end of the 2001–21 war in Afghanistan.

and Herat, two of Afghanistan's largest cities, had fallen, and by 14 August only Kabul and Jalalabad remained under Afghan government control.¹⁵

On 15 August the Taliban captured Kabul and claimed victory after President Ashraf Ghani fled the country.¹⁶ President Biden defended the Afghanistan withdrawal and blamed the rapid Taliban takeover on the Afghan army's unwillingness to fight.¹⁷ Subsequent reporting suggested that the Afghan government's collapse was accelerated by an undercover network of Taliban operatives that had infiltrated government ministries and other state-backed organizations.¹⁸ In the days and weeks that followed, the USA and its NATO allies and partners sought to evacuate thousands of their personnel and partners from Kabul International Airport, which was overrun with thousands of Afghans attempting to flee. Around 6000 US soldiers were deployed to the airport to provide security and restore order. In chaotic scenes reminiscent of the US withdrawal from Saigon at the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, Afghans were seen clinging to a US Air Force plane as it attempted to take off.¹⁹ President Biden rejected requests by European allies to extend the withdrawal deadline for US troops beyond 31 August.²⁰

With this final deadline looming, two final tragic incidents occurred to bookend the war: first, attacks on Kabul airport on 26 August by the Islamic State's Afghan affiliate, Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), killed as many as 200 Afghans seeking to flee the country, as well as 13 US soldiers; and second, three days later, the USA carried out a drone strike that killed

¹⁵ 'Kandahar falls, Taliban on way to Kabul's gates' *Hindustan Times*, 14 Aug. 2021; and Graham-Harrison, E. and Savage, M., 'Last major Afghan city in the north falls to the Taliban', *The Guardian*, 14 Aug. 2021.

¹⁶ 'Afghanistan conflict: Kabul falls to Taliban as president flees', BBC News, 16 Aug. 2021; and 'Afghan president says he left country to avoid bloodshed', Reuters, 15 Aug. 2021.

¹⁷ White House, 'Remarks by President Biden on Afghanistan', 16 Aug. 2021. On the rapid disintegration of the Afghan Airforce see Stewart, P., 'Special report: Pilots detail chaotic collapse of the Afghan Air Force', Reuters, 29 Dec. 2021.

¹⁸ Trofimov, Y. and Stancati, M., 'Taliban covert operatives seized Kabul, other Afghan cities from within', *Wall Street Journal*, 28 Nov. 2021.

¹⁹ Harding, L. and Doherty, B., 'Kabul airport: Footage appears to show Afghans falling from plane after takeoff', *The Guardian*, 16 Aug. 2021. On analogies between Afghanistan and Vietnam see Gawthorpe, A., 'Afghanistan and the real Vietnam analogy', *The Diplomat*, 18 Aug. 2021.

²⁰ Landler, M. and Shear, M. D., 'Biden sticks to Afghan deadline, resisting pleas to extend evacuation', *New York Times*, 24 Aug. 2021.

10 civilians—not Islamic State militants as US officials initially claimed²¹ (the Pentagon later acknowledged a ‘breakdown in process’ in the errant strike but nothing that called for ‘personal accountability’).²² The last US plane departed from Kabul on 31 August and President Biden declared the war ‘over’, while repeating his earlier vow to continue to ‘hunt down’ the Islamic State. He also framed the evacuation effort as an historic accomplishment that resulted in more than 120 000 people being evacuated from Afghanistan.²³ Nonetheless, hundreds of US and allied citizens, as well as tens of thousands of vulnerable Afghans who worked with the international community, remained in the country and faced an uncertain fate.²⁴

The Taliban announced their interim government on 7 September—an all-male, mostly Pashtun assortment of veterans from the 1990s Taliban governance and leaders in the 20-year war—and also seized Panjshir province, the last armed opposition in Afghanistan.²⁵ By the end of 2021 no government had formally recognized the Taliban, although several states were expected to do so in the near future.²⁶ Moreover, several official inquiries were underway within the USA and NATO to assess the lessons learnt from the intervention, and there was a growing literature on the causes of the Western nation-building failures in Afghanistan.²⁷ An inquiry by the International Criminal Court into alleged crimes committed by the Taliban and the Islamic State was also pending.²⁸ One area of uncertainty was the potential impact of the Taliban’s success on other Islamist insurgents around the world and the wider ‘global war on terrorism’.²⁹

²¹ Sprunt, B., ‘Biden pledges to strike back after attack kills 13 US service members in Kabul’, NPR, 26 Aug. 2021; Smith, D., ‘US admits Kabul strike killed 10 civilians and not Islamic State militants’, *The Guardian*, 17 Sep. 2021; and Borger, J., ‘“Honest mistake”: US strike that killed 10 Afghan civilians was legal—Pentagon’, *The Guardian*, 4 Nov. 2021.

²² Schmitt, E., ‘No US troops will be punished for deadly Kabul strike, Pentagon chief decides’, *New York Times*, 13 Dec. 2021.

²³ White House, ‘Remarks by President Biden on the end of the war in Afghanistan’, 31 Aug. 2021.

²⁴ Pikulicka-Wilczewska, A., ‘Under Taliban rule: Calm chaos prevails in Kabul’, *The Diplomat*, 18 Sep. 2021.

²⁵ ‘In power, the Taliban’s divisions are coming to the fore’, *The Economist*, 2 Oct. 2021; Bahiss, I., ‘Afghanistan’s Taliban extend their interim government’, International Crisis Group, 28 Sep. 2021; and ‘Hardliners get key posts in a new Taliban government’, BBC News, 7 Sep. 2021.

²⁶ Anderson, S. R., ‘History and the recognition of the Taliban’, *Lawfare*, 26 Aug. 2021; and ‘Afghan embassies don’t recognise the Taliban’, *The Economist*, 2 Oct. 2021.

²⁷ See e.g. Lamb, C., ‘Chronicle of a defeat foretold: Why America failed in Afghanistan’, *Foreign Affairs*, July/Aug. 2021; Miller, L., ‘Biden’s Afghanistan withdrawal: A verdict on the limits of American power’, *Survival*, vol. 63 no. 3 (2021), pp. 37–44; Mehra, T. and Coleman, J., ‘The fall of Afghanistan: A blow to counter-terrorism and rule of law efforts’, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), 23 Aug. 2021; and Coll, S. and Entous, A., ‘The secret history of the US diplomatic failure in Afghanistan’, *New Yorker*, 10 Dec. 2021.

²⁸ Wintour, P., ‘ICC asked to relaunch inquiry into Taliban and IS “war crimes”’, *The Guardian*, 27 Sep. 2021.

²⁹ See e.g. International Crisis Group, ‘How Islamist militants elsewhere view the Taliban’s victory in Afghanistan’, ICG Commentary, 27 Oct. 2021; and ‘America’s flight from Afghanistan will embolden jihadists around the world’, *The Economist*, 28 Aug. 2021. On the implications for the future of international peace operations see chapter 2, section II, in this volume.

Consequences of the 20-year war and the outlook

Four multilateral peace operations were deployed to Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021, with the failure to deliver the planned political transformation proving immensely costly to the Afghan population.³⁰ During the 20-year conflict there were an estimated 176 000 direct war deaths (including 69 000 Afghan security forces, 53 000 opposition fighters, 46 000 Afghan civilians, 3500 coalition forces, 4000 US contractors, and 500 journalists and humanitarian workers). While an accurate accounting of the monetary cost of the war is difficult to determine, reliable estimates suggest around \$2 trillion.³¹

The fallout from the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan left several lingering questions at the end of 2021 about the group's ability to govern and unify the country, the future of human rights and the role of women, and the likely response of regional powers and the rest of the international community. First, the Taliban faced a growing economic and humanitarian crisis driven by displacement, drought, the Covid-19 pandemic and an extreme dependency on external funds, much of which was suspended following their takeover. The beginning of 2022 saw 24.4 million people in Afghanistan requiring humanitarian need—more than half the population and four times greater than the number in 2019.³² Moreover, more than 8 million people were on the cusp of famine.³³

Second, the Taliban faced a rising threat from ISKP. In October and November 2021 ISKP carried out a series of attacks against Taliban security forces and civilian targets, and there remained a real possibility of these attacks mutating into a more widespread and powerful ISKP insurgency that could both challenge Taliban rule and threaten the USA.³⁴

³⁰ See Pfeifer, C. and van der Lijn, J., 'Multilateral peace operations in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021', SIPRI Topical Background, 16 Sep. 2021.

³¹ Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University, 'US costs to date for the war in Afghanistan', Aug 2021; and 'Afghanistan: What has the conflict cost the US and its allies?', BBC News, 3 Sep. 2021.

³² UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), *Humanitarian Response Plan: Afghanistan 2022* (UN OCHA: Jan. 2022); Jamal, U., 'A humanitarian crisis looms over Afghanistan', *The Diplomat*, Issue 85, Dec. 2021; and International Crisis Group, *Beyond Emergency Relief: Averting Afghanistan's Humanitarian Catastrophe*, Asia Report no. 317 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 6 Dec. 2021). On the impact of the pandemic in Afghanistan see Mercy Corps, *A Clash of Contagions: The Impact of COVID-19 on Conflict in Nigeria, Colombia and Afghanistan* (Mercy Corps: Portland, OR, June 2021).

³³ Carpenter, C., 'Western sanctions are condemning Afghanistan to famine', *World Politics Review*, 10 Dec. 2021; and Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), 'IPC Acute Food Insecurity Analysis, Sept. 2021–Mar. 2022', Oct. 2021.

³⁴ Gibbons-Neff, T., Sahak, S. and Shah, T., 'Dozens killed in ISIS attack on military hospital in Afghanistan's capital', *New York Times*, 2 Nov. 2021; Reuters, 'Islamic State in Afghanistan could have capacity to strike US next year', *The Guardian*, 26 Oct. 2021; and Giustozzi, A., 'The Taliban's homemade counterinsurgency', *Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) Commentary*, 4 Jan. 2022.

Third, the Taliban faced an ongoing challenge in terms of gaining international recognition. Although the group tried to project a more restrained image of its new government compared to its first time in power (1996–2001), promising rights for women and girls and some freedom of expression, reports suggested that such rights were in fact under attack and receding.³⁵ In turn, the international community was divided on how to deal with the Taliban. Western governments, for example, faced the dilemma of how to deliver humanitarian aid to the country without being seen to endorse the Taliban government, especially since economic support from some other regional powers—such as Russia and China—was likely to be less conditional.³⁶ The US government threatened to undertake ‘over the horizon’ attacks on ISKP in Afghanistan, while not ruling out cooperation with the Taliban in addressing the ISKP threat.³⁷ Hence, a spectrum of responses can be expected from the international community: from aid engagement and dialogue with the Taliban at one end to isolation, sanctions and even assistance to certain (non-ISKP) opponents at the other. During the Group of Twenty (G20) virtual summit in October 2021, for example, President Biden stressed that aid should be provided via independent international organizations and not directly to the Taliban, while the European Union stated any aid would be conditional on the Taliban’s behaviour.³⁸

Overall, therefore, many of the underlying causes and drivers of conflict in Afghanistan are likely to continue, with the prospects for peace in the country remaining low.

Territorial disputes in Kashmir between China, India and Pakistan

China–India border disputes

After the deadliest clashes in decades between China and India in Galwan Valley in June 2020, 2021 marked a year of relative stability in territorial disputes along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). Bilateral trade registered a historic high of \$125 billion despite unresolved border disputes, the Covid-19

³⁵ See e.g. Nader, Z. and Ferris-Rotman, A., ‘They stayed to fight the Taliban. Now the protesters are being hunted down’, *The Guardian*, 4 Nov. 2021; and AFP, ‘West condemns Taliban over “summary killings” of ex-soldiers and police’, *The Guardian*, 5 Dec. 2021.

³⁶ On the agendas of regional powers, especially Russian and Chinese, vis-à-vis Afghanistan see International Crisis Group, ‘With the Taliban back in Kabul, regional powers watch and wait’, ICG Commentary, 26 Aug. 2021; Girard, B., ‘The myth of China’s “value-free” diplomacy: Afghanistan and beyond’, *The Diplomat*, Issue 83, Oct. 2021; and Graham-Harrison, E., ‘Russia holds high-profile Afghanistan talks with Taliban’, *The Guardian*, 20 Oct. 2021.

³⁷ Burke, J., ‘Biden’s “over the horizon” counter-terrorism strategy comes with new risks’, *The Guardian*, 18 Aug. 2021.

³⁸ ‘Afghanistan crisis: G20 leaders pledge to avert economic catastrophe’, BBC News, 12 Oct. 2021; and Council of the European Union, ‘Council conclusions on Afghanistan’, 15 Sep. 2021.

pandemic, Indian bans on Chinese apps and calls to boycott Chinese goods.³⁹ At the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) meeting in the Tajik capital of Dushanbe in September, the Chinese and Indian foreign ministers agreed on the importance of maintaining stability in the border region.⁴⁰ While periodic small-scale skirmishes occurred over the course of the year, no major border clashes took place. The 13th round of India–China Corps Commander level meeting was held on 10 October 2021—though little progress was made, both sides agreed to maintain communication and stability on the ground.⁴¹ There were some indications that the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) began a partial pull back from the Pangong Lake area in January–February, with satellite images showing forward positions being dismantled. However, a complete drawdown of forces has yet to be achieved.⁴² The standoff at the Depsang Plains—where the PLA is also building infrastructure—continued, with each side seeking to block the other’s access to key patrol points.⁴³

Meanwhile, both China and India increased deployment of troops along the western (Ladakh) and eastern (Arunachal Pradesh) sectors of the disputed border. India tripled its troop numbers in the contentious eastern area of Ladakh to 50 000, including re-deploying an entire strike corps from its border with Pakistan. For its part, China maintained over 60 000 troops opposite Ladakh and continued to build up infrastructure allowing faster movement of its forces to the LAC.⁴⁴

Perhaps the most significant development was the infrastructural construction on both sides of the LAC. China has maintained the lead in building roads, bridges, outposts and villages. A new bridge was built over the Pangong Lake linking the northern and southern banks, cutting the time for troop movements from about 12 to 3–4 hours.⁴⁵ Across from Arunachal Pradesh on the Chinese side of the LAC, enclaves of buildings have been constructed near the Doklam area, which in 2017 witnessed over 70 days of standoff between Chinese and Indian troops in the Bhutan–China–India

³⁹ Krishnan, A., ‘India’s trade with China crosses \$125 billion, imports near \$100 billion’, *The Hindu*, 15 Jan. 2022; Bhalla, K., ‘One year of Chinese apps ban—Indian alternatives take over TikTok’, *Business Insider India*, 29 June 2021; and Nair, R., ‘India’s imports from China rise despite boycott calls, pandemic. But this may not last’, *The Print*, 9 Aug. 2021.

⁴⁰ ‘Chinese, Indian FM’s agree to safeguard border peace, tranquility’, *Xinhuanet*, 17 Sep. 2021.

⁴¹ Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, ‘13th round of India–China Corps Commander Level Meeting’, 11 Oct. 2021.

⁴² Pollock, J., ‘Eyeball to eyeball at Pangong Tso: Why Sino–Indian tensions will continue’, *South Asian Voices*, 6 May 2021.

⁴³ Peri, D., ‘Patrol blocking in Depsang by both sides will take time to resolve’, *The Hindu*, 27 July 2021.

⁴⁴ Mashal, M. and Kumar, H., ‘For India’s military, a juggling act on two hostile fronts’, *New York Times*, 24 Sep. 2021; and ANI, ‘China maintaining around 60,000 troops opposite Ladakh, Indian preparedness also at high level’, *Times of India*, 3 Jan. 2022.

⁴⁵ Bhalla, A., ‘Chinese construction of bridge on Pangong Lake on for two months, extremely close to LAC’, *India Today*, 3 Jan. 2022.

trijunction area.⁴⁶ India, on the other hand, has also been constructing a network of tunnels, bridges and roads in Ladakh to enable rapid troop movements to the contested border areas.⁴⁷ The Modi government planned to develop sparsely populated areas through the roll-out of the Vibrant Villages Programme to counter similar efforts on the Chinese side, as well as to strengthen India's claims to disputed territories. According to Indian reports, under Phase 2 of the India–China Border Roads (ICBR) project, 32 roads will be built. The Indian defence minister recently inaugurated 63 bridges along the Sino–Indian border regions.⁴⁸

In late December 2021 Beijing announced its decision to ‘standardize’ names of 15 places in Arunachal, which China calls ‘Zangnan’ (Southern Tibet), to reinforce its legitimate claims to an area currently under Indian administration.⁴⁹ Spanning over 90 000 square kilometres, the eastern sector is the largest disputed territory between the two countries and is increasingly assuming greater geopolitical significance for China.⁵⁰ In recent years China has sped up infrastructure construction in the border regions, including building over 600 ‘model Xiaokang villages’ (moderately prosperous villages) since 2017 and providing \$1 billion in subsidies to residents living in the border region, as well as for regional development.⁵¹ In response India stepped up its infrastructure development in Arunachal, with \$150 million allocated in 2021.⁵² Clearly, both Beijing and New Delhi have sought to keep open conflicts under control, while at the same time continuing—even intensifying—efforts to improve infrastructure in the border regions and strengthen military deployments. This has become the new normal in how the two countries manage their territorial disputes.

India–Pakistan disputes over Kashmir

India and Pakistan began 2021 with a United Arab Emirates (UAE)-brokered ceasefire announced in late February. For the first time the two countries’

⁴⁶ ‘Satellite images show Chinese infrastructure in Arunachal Pradesh and near Doklam: Reports’, Scroll.in, 18 Nov. 2021.

⁴⁷ ‘India hastens to build strategic Ladakh tunnel amid China conflict’, Deutsche Welle, 15 Nov. 2021.

⁴⁸ Singh, J., ‘India to accelerate construction of roads along Chinese border: Sources’, *India Today*, 17 June 2020; Bhaumik, A., ‘India to have “vibrant” border villages to counter China’s territorial claims’, *Deccan Herald*, 1 Feb. 2022; and Rajagopalan, R. P., ‘Unabating tension with China spurs India’s border infrastructure efforts’, *The Diplomat*, 1 Jul 2021.

⁴⁹ Liu, C., ‘China standardizes names of 15 more places in Zangnan “based on sovereignty, history”’, *Global Times*, 30 Dec. 2021.

⁵⁰ Panda, J., ‘Arunachal Pradesh in Beijing’s security calculus: Watching the Eastern Sector of the Sino–Indian border’, *South Asian Voices*, 27 Jan. 2022.

⁵¹ Press Trust of India, ‘China increases subsidies for residents living close to Indian border in Tibet’, *Hindustan Times*, 10 Sep. 2017.

⁵² Singh, V., ‘Centre clears over ₹ 1,100 crore for more roads in Arunachal’, *The Hindu*, 18 Feb. 2021.

militaries issued a joint statement after talks,⁵³ agreeing to the ‘strict observance of the truce along the Line of Control’ and to use the hotline to communicate and ‘resolve potential misunderstandings’.⁵⁴ Subsequent reports suggested that senior intelligence officers from the two countries held secret talks in Dubai in January 2021,⁵⁵ with this back-channel diplomacy facilitating dialogue on a roadmap towards normalization after two years of intense conflict and confrontation.⁵⁶ The UAE’s mediation role between the two nuclear-armed South Asian states was further confirmed when the Gulf country invited the Indian and Pakistani foreign ministers for separate talks in April.⁵⁷

The February ceasefire was the first such agreement since 2003, although analysts doubted its sustainability given the many failures over the past seven decades of conflict. One promising sign was the significant drop in the number of ceasefire violations along the Line of Control (LOC), from more than 4645 in 2020 to around 592 in 2021.⁵⁸ The thaw also resulted in India and Pakistan issuing assignment visas to each other’s diplomats after a gap of 28 months.⁵⁹ There were also reports that, having undergone a diplomatic downgrading in 2019, their respective high commissioners could be reinstated to the other’s capital.⁶⁰ The Permanent Indus Commission held its first meeting in three years on water-related issues, as mandated by the 1960 Indus Water Treaty, and for the first time in history there was discussion of Indian armed forces participating in the SCO-sponsored joint military exercises in Pakistan.⁶¹

The ceasefire also appeared to open further dialogue opportunities. Both Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan and Pakistani Chief of Army Staff General Bajwa called for peace and trade with India, emphasizing that the two countries needed to bury the past and move forward. However,

⁵³ Sen, S. R., ‘UAE brokering secret India–Pakistan peace roadmap: Officials’, Bloomberg, 22 Mar. 2021; and ‘For first time in 18 years, India, Pakistan agree to “strictly” observe LoC ceasefire’, The Wire, 25 Feb. 2021.

⁵⁴ Masood, S., Mashal, M. and Humar, H., ‘Pakistan and India renew pledge cease-fire at troubled border’, *New York Times*, 7 Oct. 2021.

⁵⁵ Reuters, ‘Indian and Pakistani intelligence officials held secret talks in Dubai to break Kashmir stand-off’, *South China Morning Post*, 15 Apr. 2021.

⁵⁶ Reuters, ‘India and Pakistan held secret talks to try to break Kashmir impasse’, CNBC, 14 Apr. 2021.

⁵⁷ Basu, N., ‘Jaishankar, Qureshi in Abu Dhabi as UAE seeks “functional” ties between India, Pakistan’, The Print, 17 Apr. 2021.

⁵⁸ Shah, K., ‘Will the ceasefire on India Pakistan border sustain?’, Observer Research Foundation, 29 Sep. 2021; and Pande, A., ‘The new “thaw” between Pakistan and India in context’, The Hill, 22 Mar. 2021.

⁵⁹ ANI, ‘India, Pakistan issue diplomatic visas to each other after 28 months’, *Economic Times*, 24 Aug. 2021.

⁶⁰ Basu, N., ‘India, Pakistan could upgrade diplomatic ties, Delhi may let SAARC meet happen in Islamabad’, The Print, 25 Feb. 2021.

⁶¹ Chakravarty, P., ‘Signs of thaw between India, Pakistan as border ceasefire holds’, RFI, 13 Apr. 2021; and Rej, A., ‘India–Pakistan ceasefire details emerge—along with possibility of joint military exercises’, *The Diplomat*, 23 Mar. 2021.

Table 4.3. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in India, 2016–21

Event type	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Battles	1 008	811	1 216	576	660	468
Explosions/remote violence	69	64	157	114	15	37
Protests, riots and strategic developments	282	209	240	309	320	193
Violence against civilians	303	319	536	534	294	291
Total	1 662	1 403	2 149	1 533	1 289	989

Notes: The first available year for data on India in the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) database is 2016. For definitions of event types, see ACLED, 'ACLED definitions of political violence and protest', 11 Apr. 2019.

Source: ACLED, 'Dashboard', accessed 26 Jan. 2022.

Bajwa put the onus on India to 'take the first step' and 'create a conducive environment, particularly in occupied Kashmir'.⁶² While the reaction of Indian analysts to Pakistan's calls for reconciliation were lukewarm, there were strong economic and political reasons for this approach.⁶³ Pakistan's chronic economic malaise and the financial difficulties it faces after the USA cut its financial support by \$440 million in 2019, alongside growing domestic unrest, have led to Pakistan's political and military leadership reassessing the importance of economic security. This may explain the growing interest in pursuing peace and trade with India, even without resolution of their territorial disputes, a model adopted by India and China in the late 1980s.⁶⁴

Even so, deep-seated mistrust between India and Pakistan, and the two countries' diametrically opposed views of the Kashmir issue continue to be major obstacles to the improvement of bilateral relations.

India's internal armed conflicts and intercommunal tensions

In addition to the armed conflict zone in Kashmir, 2021 saw an ongoing non-international armed conflict in India between the Indian government and the Naxalites (Maoist rebels in rural areas of central and eastern India). The Maoist insurgency started in 1967 and entered its current phase in 2004.⁶⁵ While Maoist violence usually remains low intensity, a large-scale attack in central Chhattisgarh state in April 2021 killed 22 and injured over 30 security

⁶² 'Read: Full text of Gen Bajwa's speech at the Islamabad Security Dialogue', *Dawn*, 18 Mar. 2021; and 'Time to bury the past and move forward: COAS Bajwa on Indo-Pak Ties', *Dawn*, 18 Mar. 2021.

⁶³ Asthana, S. B., 'Pakistan seeking peace with India: Is it for real?', *WION*, 2 Apr. 2021.

⁶⁴ Raghavan, P., 'Explained: Why is Pakistan lifting its ban on Indian imports?', *Indian Express*, 3 Apr. 2021.

⁶⁵ On the history of the conflict see Sahoo, N., *Half a Century of India's Maoist insurgency: An Appraisal of State Response*, ORF Occasional Paper 198 (Observer Research Foundation: New Delhi, June 2019).

forces personnel in the deadliest Naxalite attack on Indian security forces since 2017.⁶⁶

While there were several low-level insurgencies in the north-east of India in 2021, attacks by insurgent groups were rare. In Nagaland, peace talks were initiated in 1997 between the Indian government and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM)—the main separatist group in Nagaland—and the Naga National Political Groups. A framework agreement was reached in 2015, but talks stalled in 2020 and the deadlock remained unbroken in 2021.⁶⁷ The killing of 14 civilians by the Indian army in Nagaland on 4 December 2021 increased tensions and led to calls for the repeal of the 1958 Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act.⁶⁸

Intercommunal (mainly Hindu–Muslim) tensions remained a key security issue in India in 2021, with discrimination against Muslims reportedly having increased significantly in recent years.⁶⁹ In addition, a wave of farmers' protests over reforms to the agricultural sector led to periodic violence during the year (and the subsequent repeal of the farm laws).⁷⁰ Overall, conflict-related fatalities in India in 2021 fell for the third year in a row (see table 4.3), with almost 50 per cent of battle-deaths occurring in Jammu and Kashmir (see above).

Pakistan's internal armed conflicts

The Pakistan government is involved in low-level non-international armed conflicts with various armed groups acting within its territory, particularly Taliban-affiliated groups in the north-western Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and Baloch separatist fighters in the south-western province of Balochistan. In both these provinces violence increased in 2021, indicating a resurgence of both the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Baloch separatist movement. Battle-related fatalities and deaths in Pakistan have declined considerably since the 2013–15 period (when total annual conflict-

⁶⁶ 'Indian security personnel killed after ambush by Maoists', *Al Jazeera*, 4 Apr. 2021.

⁶⁷ Tiwary, D. and Roy, E., 'Explained: Why has peace process for Naga Accord been stuck, what is the way forward?', *Indian Express*, 13 Oct. 2021.

⁶⁸ The 1958 Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act is in force in Jammu and Kashmir, Nagaland and parts of Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. It gives extra-judicial powers to the Indian security forces in designated disturbed areas. Kalita, P., 'After killing of civilians, chorus against "draconian" armed forces law gets louder', *Times of India*, 6 Dec. 2021.

⁶⁹ See e.g. Maskara, S., 'Cow protection legislation and vigilante violence in India', *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)*, 3 May 2021; and Alam, A., "'Shown their place": Muslim livelihoods under attack in India', *Al Jazeera*, 27 Sep. 2021.

⁷⁰ Bozhinova, K., Satre, J. and Rajagopal, S., 'An unlikely success: Demonstrations against farm laws in India', *ACLED*, 17 Dec. 2021; and Aswani, T., 'India's farmers signal lack of trust in Modi government', *The Diplomat*, 22 Nov. 2021.

Table 4.4. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Pakistan, 2016–2021

Event type	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Battles	1 173	891	479	630	522	784
Explosions/remote violence	815	668	410	185	151	262
Protests, riots and strategic developments	40	16	44	14	50	83
Violence against civilians	188	150	293	328	102	249
Total	2 216	1 725	1 226	1 157	825	1 378

Note: For definitions of event types, see Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 'ACLED definitions of political violence and protest', 11 Apr. 2019.

Source: ACLED, 'Data export tool', accessed 24 Jan. 2022.

related deaths were estimated to have averaged 4800) but witnessed an uptick in 2021 (see table 4.4).⁷¹

The current phase of the Baloch insurgency started in 2003, but has been at a relatively low level since 2012. Baloch separatist groups have increasingly targeted the China–Pakistan economic corridor, prompting Prime Minister Imran Khan to pledge to start talks with the groups.⁷² By the end of the year, however, there was little sign of such talks having commenced.⁷³

There were concerns that the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan would embolden Islamic militant groups in Pakistan, such as the TTP, which had already stepped up attacks against the Pakistani security forces, as well as other targets.⁷⁴ An attack on a bus in July that killed 10 Chinese workers and 3 Pakistanis was attributed to the TTP.⁷⁵ However, the Pakistan government also sought to use the influence of the Afghan Taliban over the TTP to start a reconciliation process, and in November 2021 a one-month ceasefire was agreed.⁷⁶ However, the ceasefire ended on 8 December, with domestic opposition to the reconciliation process meaning its future remained uncertain as of the end of 2021.⁷⁷

⁷¹ See also Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), 'Pakistan security report 2021', *Conflict & Peace Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1 (Jan.–June 2022).

⁷² Sheikh, S. R., 'Pakistan seeks peace with anti-China Baloch rebels', *Asia Times*, 17 July 2021; and Haq, R., 'Baloch leaders sceptical of govt's plan for dialogue with insurgents', *Dawn*, 9 July 2021.

⁷³ PIPS (note 71), pp. 35–36.

⁷⁴ Ellis-Petersen, H. and Baloch, S. M., 'Pakistan divided over success of Taliban in Afghanistan', *The Guardian*, 17 Aug. 2021; Giustozzi, A., 'The resurgence of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan', *RUSI Commentary*, 12 Aug. 2021; and Ni, V., 'China condemns bombing of hotel hosting ambassador', *The Guardian*, 22 Apr. 2021.

⁷⁵ Masood, S. and Myers, S. L., 'Blast that killed Chinese workers in Pakistan was a terrorist attack, officials say', *New York Times*, 16 July 2021.

⁷⁶ Jamal, U., 'Imran Khan seals deal with the Tehreek-i-Taliban in Pakistan', *The Diplomat*, 16 Nov. 2021; and Shehzad, R., 'Govt, TTP agree to cease fire', *Express Tribune*, 8 Nov. 2021.

⁷⁷ Khan, I., 'TTP declares end to ceasefire', *Dawn*, 10 Dec. 2021; and PIPS (note 71), pp. 34–35.