

4. Armed conflict and peace processes in Asia and Oceania

Overview

Seven countries in Asia and Oceania experienced active armed conflicts in 2019—three in South Asia: Afghanistan (major internationalized civil war), India (high-intensity interstate border and subnational armed conflicts) and Pakistan (high-intensity interstate border and subnational armed conflicts); and four in South East Asia: Indonesia (low-intensity subnational armed conflict), Myanmar (high-intensity subnational armed conflict), the Philippines (high-intensity subnational armed conflict) and Thailand (low-intensity subnational armed conflict). Two emerging trends remained cause for concern in 2019: (a) the growing violence related to identity politics, based on ethnic and/or religious polarization, and (b) the increase in transnational violent jihadist groups.

Two peace processes deteriorated in 2019: discussions between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the United States stalled; and the Taliban–USA peace talks collapsed in September 2019—leading to renewed pessimism about the prospects of ending the long-running war in Afghanistan (despite the resumption of talks in November 2019). The war in Afghanistan was the deadliest armed conflict in the world, with nearly 42 000 fatalities in 2019. The increased use of suicide and improvised explosive device attacks by anti-government groups, in particular the Taliban, and an expansion in US air strikes, contributed to increased civilian casualties.

There were five multilateral peace operations active in Asia and Oceania in 2019, the same number as in 2018. The number of personnel serving in peace operations in the region decreased only slightly during 2019, from 17 296 in 2018 to 17 086 in 2019. Most of these were part of the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, led by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Tensions between China and the USA continued during 2019, with serious disagreements across economic, political, security and human rights dimensions. In addition to their roller-coaster trade war, strategic competition between the two countries continued in the South China Sea and across the Taiwan Strait. Tensions in Hong Kong resurfaced in June 2019, when hundreds of thousands of people protested against a proposed new extradition law, and clashes between police and protesters continued to the end of the year.

A February suicide attack by a Pakistan-based militant group in Indian-administered Kashmir—the worst in Kashmir for over three decades—sparked a sharp but short escalation in the conflict between the nuclear-armed neigh-

bours of India and Pakistan. Although the immediate crisis thawed, tensions continued throughout the year as India indicated that the episode had brought to an end its unstated policy of strategic restraint, and that retaliation for any attack perceived to be linked to Pakistan was now the 'new normal'.

Some of the most organized Islamist extremist groups are 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 rising violence, especially in Rakhine state. The voluntary return of almost a million Rohingya people forcibly displaced in 2017 seemed even less likely, despite worsening humanitarian conditions in refugee camps in Bangladesh. Accountability and justice for alleged atrocities committed against the Rohingya people and other ethnic minorities in Myanmar remained elusive, despite legal efforts pending at the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice. Developments to end the long-running Moro insurgency in the southern Philippines were more promising.

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