

I. Key general developments in the region

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Seven countries in Asia and Oceania experienced active armed conflicts 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 (high-intensity as result of combined interstate border and subnational armed conflicts), as discussed in section II; and four in South East Asia: Indonesia (low-intensity subnational armed conflict), Myanmar (high-intensity subnational armed conflict), the Philippines (high-intensity as a result of combined subnational armed conflict and high levels of violence against civilians in a ‘war on drugs’) and Thailand (low-intensity subnational armed conflict), as discussed in section III.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 China–United States rivalry), and important subregional differences.

While Asia, especially East Asia, has experienced a dramatic reduction in armed conflict and mass-atrocity crimes in the last 40 years, a reversal of this positive trend appears to be under way.² Two emerging trends remained cause for concern in 2019: (a) the growing violence related to identity politics, based on ethnic and/or religious polarization (some of which has long-term roots) and (b) the increase in transnational violent jihadist groups—including the presence of actors linked to the Islamic State in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, China, 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.

Only a few of the armed conflicts discussed in this chapter were being addressed in 2019 by ongoing or new peace processes. One significant peace development in 2018—the peace process on the Korean peninsula—deteriorated in 2019 (see below), while the Taliban–USA peace talks collapsed in September 2019. This was followed by an increase in violence in the long-running war in Afghanistan, despite a resumption of the peace talks in November 2019 (see section II). There is no noticeable peace process

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: 2017).

³ Marshall, W., ‘Islamic State’s South Asia pivot: Rhetoric or reality?’, *Geopolitical Monitor*, 18 June 2019.

between India and Pakistan with regard to their ongoing interstate armed conflict over Kashmir. This conflict also witnessed a significant uptick in violence in 2019 and growing tensions between the two nuclear-armed states (see section II).

Developments to end the long-running Moro insurgency in the southern Philippines (see section III) and in Papua New Guinea, where the Autonomous Region of Bougainville voted in December 2019 for independence from Papua New Guinea, were more promising. The vote, which had been delayed twice in 2019, was part of the 2001 Bougainville Peace Agreement, which ended 10 years of armed conflict over revenues from mining and its environmental impact. However, as the referendum result was non-binding further negotiations will be required before the group of islands becomes the world's newest nation.⁴

There were five multilateral peace operations active in Asia and Oceania in 2019. This was 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. The other multilateral peace operations in the region were the International Monitoring Team on the Philippine island of Mindanao, the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission on the Korean peninsula, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan and the UN Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan.

Geopolitical developments involving China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, North Korea) continued to take a prominent place in regional and global affairs in 2019, as discussed briefly below.

China

China marked the 70th anniversary of its official formation on 1 October 2019.⁵ The country's rapid development—including its most high-profile political and development project, the Belt and Road Initiative—and especially its development of a modern military force, has been accompanied by internal and external challenges and controversies.⁶ These include growing domestic political repression, increased economic, military and political competition with the USA (and some neighbouring states, especially Taiwan), and tensions in Hong Kong and the South China Sea.

⁴ Lyons, K., 'Bougainville referendum: Region votes overwhelmingly for independence from Papua New Guinea', *The Guardian*, 11 Dec. 2019; and Powles, A., 'Bougainville has voted to become a new country, but the journey to independence is not yet over', *The Conversation*, 12 Dec. 2019.

⁵ BBC, 'China anniversary: Beijing celebrations mark 70 years of Communist rule', 1 Oct. 2019.

⁶ BBC, 'Belt and Road: China showcases initiative to world leaders', 25 Apr. 2019; and Perlez, J., 'China retools vast global building push criticized as bloated and predatory', *New York Times*, 25 Apr. 2019. On China's growth in military expenditure, see chapter 8, section I, in this volume.

Repression of ethnic minorities in Xinjiang

International censure of a large-scale programme for the mass surveillance, incarceration and forced re-education of many hundreds of thousands of Uighurs (Turkic Muslims), Kazakhs and other ethnic minorities in the autonomous region of Xinjiang continued in 2019.⁷ In June the vice-governor of Xinjiang defended the state-run detention camps, arguing that they were vocational training centres which helped protect people from extremist influences.⁸ In July an international diplomatic divide emerged over the issue at the UN Human Rights Council. Twenty-two Western states signed a letter criticizing China's actions, while 50 states, including many Muslim-majority states, such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, endorsed an alternative letter backing China.⁹ Neither Turkey, which shares a related language with the Uighurs and earlier in the year had stepped up criticism of China's policy towards them, or the USA signed either letter.¹⁰ Nonetheless, the USA announced new visa restrictions on certain Chinese officials allegedly involved in human rights abuses against the Uighurs and other minority groups in October.¹¹ However, the overall international response has been largely muted.¹²

⁷ Smith Finley, J., 'Securitization, insecurity and conflict in contemporary Xinjiang: Has PRC counter-terrorism evolved into state terror?', *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 38, no. 1 (2019), pp. 1–26; Hasmath, R., 'What explains the rise of majority–minority tensions and conflict in Xinjiang?', *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 38, no. 1 (2019), pp. 46–60; *The Economist*, 'To suppress news of Xinjiang's gulag, China threatens Uighurs abroad', 24 Oct. 2019; and Ramzy, A. and Buckley, C., 'The Xinjiang papers, "Absolutely no mercy": Leaked files expose how China organized mass detentions of Muslims', *New York Times*, 16 Nov. 2019.

⁸ Nebehay, S., 'Xinjiang vice-governor defends centers for Uighurs at UN rights forum', Reuters, 25 June 2019.

⁹ UN General Assembly, Human Rights Council Forty-first session, Letter dated 8 July 2019 from the Permanent Representatives of Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Japan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the United Nations Office at Geneva addressed to the President of the Human Rights Council, A/HRC/41/G/11, 23 July 2019; and UN General Assembly, Human Rights Council Forty-first session, Letter dated 12 July 2019 from the representatives of Algeria, Angola, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Belarus, the Plurinational State of Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cambodia, Cameroon, Comoros, the Congo, Cuba, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Gabon, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria, Oman, Pakistan, the Philippines, the Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, Serbia, Somalia, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tajikistan, Togo, Turkmenistan, Uganda, the United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Yemen, Zambia, Zimbabwe and the State of Palestine to the United Nations Office at Geneva addressed to the President of the Human Rights Council, A/HRC/41/G/17, 9 Aug. 2019. Also see Putz, C., 'Which countries are for or against China's Xinjiang policies?', *The Diplomat*, 15 July 2019.

¹⁰ Pitel, L., 'Turkey steps up criticism of China over crackdown on Uighurs', *Financial Times*, 25 Feb. 2019.

¹¹ Hansler, J., 'US announces visa restrictions on China for Xinjiang abuses', CNN, 9 Oct. 2019.

¹² Storey, H., 'Why nobody is taking action on Xinjiang and why it matters', Australian Institute of International Affairs, 30 Dec. 2019; and Blanchard B. and Emmott, R., 'EU's proposed ambassadorial visit to Xinjiang seen unlikely to happen', Reuters, 14 Nov. 2019.

China–United States tensions

Tensions between China and the USA continued during 2019, with serious disagreements across economic, political, security and human rights dimensions.¹³ A truce in the 2018 China–USA trade war was agreed in December 2018, and the two governments undertook not to impose further tariffs for 90 days while working out a broad trade agreement.¹⁴ Although trade talks stalled in May 2019, a temporary halt in the trade war was agreed after talks at the Group of Twenty (G20) summit at the end of June.¹⁵ In October Chinese–US trade negotiators reached a preliminary agreement to ease tensions, and in December they reportedly reached a ‘deal in principle’. However, it remained unclear whether this represented a comprehensive settlement of the dispute.¹⁶

A significant area of disagreement remains over the development of next-generation 5G communication networks, with the USA urging allies not to use China’s Huawei Technologies Co. Ltd because of the risk that the company’s equipment could be used by China for spying, which the company has repeatedly denied.¹⁷

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.¹⁸ Tensions in the South China Sea between China and its Association of Southeast Asian Nations neighbours generally eased during 2019 as the parties sought to resolve issues peacefully. An exception was a fishing dispute between China and Indonesia.¹⁹ However, various challenges and uncertainties remained, largely due to Chinese–US military competition. The USA increased the frequency of its freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs)—transits of US naval vessels to challenge what the USA considers excessive territorial claims on the world’s oceans—in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait during 2019, while an expanding navy and improving

¹³ See e.g. World Politics Review, ‘US–China rivalry in the Trump era’, 19 Aug. 2019.

¹⁴ See Smith, D., ‘Introduction: International stability and human security in 2018’, *SIPRI Yearbook 2019*, pp. 19–20; and BBC, ‘A quick guide to the US–China trade war’, 16 Jan. 2020.

¹⁵ Bradsher, K. and Swanson, A., ‘Trump’s trade war threat poses problems for China and investors’, *New York Times*, 6 May 2019; and Davis, B. et al., ‘Trump allows US sales to Huawei as trade talks resume’, *Wall Street Journal*, 29 June 2019.

¹⁶ Kuo, L., ‘Beijing silent on US reports of China trade deal’, *The Guardian*, 13 Dec. 2019.

¹⁷ Halpern, S., ‘The terrifying potential of the 5G network’, *New Yorker*, 26 Apr. 2019.

¹⁸ On China’s strategy towards the South China Sea, see Rosyidin, M., ‘The *Dao* of foreign policy: Understanding China’s dual strategy in the South China Sea’, *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 40, no. 2 (2019), pp. 214–38.

¹⁹ Ng, J., ‘The Natuna Sea incident: How Indonesia is managing its bilateral relationship with China’, *The Diplomat*, 15 Jan. 2020; and Shicun, W., ‘What’s next for the South China Sea?’, *The Diplomat*, 1 Aug. 2019.

Chinese missile technology provided a perceived threat to US naval supremacy in the region.²⁰

China–Taiwan relations continued to deteriorate in 2019, and proposed US arms sales, including 66 F-16V combat aircraft, Abrams tanks and Stinger missiles, to Taiwan worth over \$10 billion further exacerbated tensions.²¹

Protests in Hong Kong

The former British colony of Hong Kong is a special administrative region of China that, unlike the Chinese mainland's provinces, has certain political and economic freedoms. However, in recent years there have been growing fears that Hong Kong's significant autonomy could erode. China increased its efforts to restrict political dissent following the Umbrella Movement protests in 2014 and the electoral victories of pro-democracy factions in 2016.²² Tensions resurfaced in June 2019, when hundreds of thousands of people protested against a proposed new extradition law.²³

In July the protesters temporarily occupied the Legislative Council building, while the Chinese Government called the protests an 'undisguised challenge' to Hong Kong's system of governance, and damaging to the rule of law and social order.²⁴ In August, the Chinese Government deployed the People's Armed Police, a paramilitary force, to Shenzhen, across the border from Hong Kong, in an apparent warning that China could use force in response to the protests.²⁵ By the end of September it was reported that China had more than doubled the number of troops stationed in Hong Kong

²⁰ Kelly, T., 'US, UK conduct first joint drills in contested South China Sea', Reuters, 16 Jan. 2019; Browne, R., 'US Navy sails warships through Taiwan Strait', 24 Jan. 2019; Ali, I., 'Two US Navy warships sail through strategic Taiwan Strait', Reuters, 29 Apr. 2019; Lague, D. and Kang Lim, B., 'New missile gap leaves US scrambling to counter China', Reuters, 25 Apr. 2019; and Lague, D. and Kang Lim, B., 'China's vast fleet is tipping the balance in the Pacific', Reuters, 30 Apr. 2019. The US Department of Defense publishes annual reports on FONOPs, see Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, DOD Annual Freedom of Navigation (FON) Reports, [n.d.].

²¹ Reuters, 'China to impose sanctions on US firms that sell arms to Taiwan', 12 July 2019; and Chan, M., 'Taiwan's plan to buy 66 F-16 Viper fighter jets from US still on track, defence ministry says', *South China Morning Post*, 6 Apr. 2019. On the risk of a conflict over Taiwan, see Taylor, B., *Dangerous Decade: Taiwan's Security And Crisis Management* (Routledge: 2019); *The Economist*, 'China's might is forcing Taiwan to rethink its military strategy', 26 Jan. 2019; and 'Tensions in the Taiwan Strait', *Strategic Comments*, vol. 25, no. 3 (2019), pp. vi–viii. On US arms sales to Taiwan, see chapter 9, section III, in this volume.

²² Buckley, C. et al., 'Violence erupts in Hong Kong as protesters are assaulted', *New York Times*, 3 Oct. 2014.

²³ Bodeen, C. and Wang, Y., 'Extradition bill pushes Hong Kong to a political crisis', Associated Press, 10 June 2019; Victor, D., 'Hong Kong protests resume as police headquarters is surrounded', *New York Times*, 20 June 2019; and *The Economist*, 'Hong Kong remains crucially important to mainland China', 8 Aug. 2019.

²⁴ Westcott, B. and Fang, N., 'Beijing says "radical" Hong Kong protests are an "undisguised challenge"', CNN, 2 July 2019; and Associated Press, 'Hong Kong leader condemns protest in legislature', 2 July 2019.

²⁵ Myers, S. L. and Hernández, J. C., 'With troop buildup, China sends a stark warning to Hong Kong', *New York Times*, 19 Aug. 2019.

since the protests began (up from 3000–5000 to 10 000–12 000 military personnel).²⁶

In mid-November the protesters occupied several university campuses amid growing violence.²⁷ In local elections, pro-democracy candidates won 347 of the 452 district council seats, with a high turnout of over 71 per cent.²⁸ Clashes between police and protesters continued to the end of the year, and the future outlook remained uncertain.²⁹

Democratic People's Republic of Korea

There were further developments in two parallel and closely related diplomatic processes initiated in 2018: one between North Korea and the Republic of Korea (South Korea) that aimed to promote peace and reconciliation between the two states, and the other between North Korea and the USA that sought to achieve denuclearization of the Korean peninsula and a peace agreement to formally end the Korean War (1950–53) as part of normalizing their relations.³⁰ These developments affect the future of all Korean citizens, regional and global peace and security, the international nuclear non-proliferation regime, China–USA relations and the balance of power in East Asia.

Despite a second North Korea–USA nuclear summit in Hanoi, Viet Nam, in February 2019, and meetings between President Donald J. Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un at the demilitarized zone at the end of June, and between officials from both sides in Stockholm in October, it proved impossible to break the deadlocked negotiations over the North Korean nuclear programme.³¹ At the end of the year, the prospects that North Korea and the USA could make progress towards resolving the impasse on a denuclearization agreement remained uncertain.

Humanitarian needs and the human rights situation in North Korea remained acute in 2019. In February the country issued an international appeal for food aid to help combat the worsening impact of international

²⁶ Torode, G. et al., 'China quietly doubles troop levels in Hong Kong, envoy says', Reuters, 30 Sep. 2019; and Walden, M. and Li, M., 'Why does Beijing have a military garrison in Hong Kong and what could that mean for protesters?', ABC News, 30 Aug. 2019.

²⁷ Ives, M. and Li, K., 'Hong Kong students ready bows and arrows for battles with police', *New York Times*, 14 Nov. 2019; and *The Economist*, 'Hong Kong stares into the abyss amid growing violence', 21 Nov. 2019.

²⁸ BBC, 'Hong Kong elections: Carrie Lam promises "open mind" after election rout', 25 Nov. 2019.

²⁹ Jim, C. and Jiang, X., 'Hong Kong to end year with multiple protests, kick off 2020 with big march', Reuters, 30 Dec. 2019.

³⁰ For developments in 2018, see Smith (note 14), pp. 9–10; and Davis, I., 'Armed conflict and peace processes in Asia and Oceania', *SIPRI Yearbook 2019*, pp. 53.

³¹ On negotiations on North Korea's nuclear programme, see chapter 1, section II, and chapter 11, section II, in this volume.

sanctions and a poor harvest.³² According to a UN report released in May 2019, 4 in 10 North Koreans were chronically short of food, and further cuts to already minimal rations were expected after the worst harvest in a decade.³³

Japan–Russia territorial dispute

Relations between Japan and Russia improved in 2018 following several meetings between the two leaders to discuss a possible peace accord for the 70-year dispute over the South Kuril Islands (also known in Japan as the Northern Territories). However, three further summit meetings in 2019 between Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Russian President Vladimir Putin (in January, June and September) failed to produce any significant progress.³⁴

³² *The Guardian*, 'North Korea appeals for food aid as regime cuts rations due to drought and sanctions', 22 Feb. 2019.

³³ World Food Programme, 'After worst harvest in ten years, 10 million people in DPRK face imminent food shortages', 3 May 2019.

³⁴ 'Why Japan's prime minister pines for four desolate islands', *The Economist*, 7 Feb. 2019; Tsuruoka, M., 'Making sense of Japan's approach to Russia', *The Diplomat*, 5 Sep. 2019; and 'Vladimir Putin rebuffs Shinzo Abe's call to sign peace treaty over Tokyo's ties with US military, unresolved territorial issues', *South China Morning Post*, 5 Sep. 2019.