1. Introduction: International stability and human security in 2020

DAN SMITH

The histories that have yet to be written of 2020 seem likely to be dominated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the United States presidential election.[1] Neither is a security event or issue as traditionally understood but both have important implications for international stability and human security.

This is the 52nd edition of the SIPRI Yearbook. Recent editions have registered the deteriorating international security environment. Over the last half decade, there have been more armed conflicts, higher military spending, an expanding volume of international arms transfers and a crisis in nuclear arms control. Over the same period, the impact of climate change and other kinds of environmental degradation on human society has intensified, and climate change has combined with armed conflict to drive a rise in world hunger.[2] There have been regional flashpoints and confrontation in almost every region except the Americas and an increasingly sour tone in global geopolitics. This is the international background against which the Covid-19 pandemic took hold and the US presidential election happened.

One reading of the overall situation in international security is to be found in the 'Doomsday Clock' of the journal *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*.[3] Metaphorically fixing the hour of the apocalypse at midnight, the clock is 'set' each January. Like any broad assessment of security, this one contains elements of subjective judgement, but it is evidence-based, clearly argued and consistent in its approach. In December 1991 at the end of the cold war, the clock showed 17 minutes to midnight; in 2010, it stood at 10 minutes to midnight; and in 2015 at 3 minutes to. Step by step it has moved closer to midnight until in January 2020 it was set at 100 seconds

---

[1] See e.g. 'A review of 2020 through *Nature*'s editorials', *Nature*, 22 Dec. 2020; Blake, P. and Wadhwa, D., '2020 year in review: The impact of Covid-19 in 12 charts', World Bank Blog, 14 Dec. 2020; and Page, S. and Bravo, V., 'The year that was: A global pandemic, racial protests, a president-elect. Oh, and impeachment', *USA Today*, 29 Dec. 2020.

[2] Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) et al., *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World: Transforming Food Systems for Affordable Healthy Diets* (FAO, International Fund for Agriculture Development, UNICEF, World Food Programme, World Health Organization: Rome, 2020).

[3] 'The Doomsday Clock: A timeline of conflict, culture, and change', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, [n.d.].

before the apocalypse, the closest it has ever been.[4] Awareness of the steadily intensifying twin risks of climate change and nuclear war were the primary foundations of this judgement. At the start of 2021, based on events in 2020, the clock remained at 100 seconds to midnight. The situation was not better than a year before but, on balance, at least it was no worse.

That may sound like optimistically grasping at straws but the deterioration in global stability and security during the last decade has been extraordinarily sharp. That has hindered cooperation to bring armed conflicts to an end, leaving the global system of conflict management weaker than at any time since 1990.[5] An interruption of that deterioration is both significant and welcome. The deficiencies in international cooperation that have emerged in the last decade apply not only to conflict management but also to other aspects of global risk.

This introductory chapter explores the intersections of the security, environmental, health and political challenges of 2020. It offers a global overview with the core message that the balance sheet of insecurity and security largely remained unchanged in 2020, neither worsening nor improving. The first section looks in turn at trends in military spending, the arms trade and conflicts; arms control; regional hotspots and potential flashpoints; and the relationship between climate change and insecurity. The second section explores the ramifications of the Covid-19 crisis and the third section considers the meaning of the 2020 US presidential election. The chapter finishes with a scan of some aspects of international cooperation. Further detail on many of the issues covered in the chapter is to be found in other chapters of this edition of the SIPRI Yearbook.

I. Security issues in 2020: A global overview

Broad trends

SIPRI's data on arms transfers comparing the five years 2016–20 with the preceding five-year period, 2011–15, indicates that the volume of international transfers of major weapons was approximately stable.[6] Whether that marks a turn towards a downward trend, or is merely a pause in growth, cannot be determined yet. Global military spending, in contrast, increased in 2020, as it had in previous years, imposing a heavier burden on national economies that in most cases shrank during the year under the impact of

---

[4] 'Closer than ever: It is 100 seconds to midnight', 2020 Doomsday Clock Statement, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 23 Jan. 2020.

[5] Smith, D., 'Introduction: International stability and human security in 2019', *SIPRI Yearbook 2020*, pp. 5–10.

[6] See chapter 9 in this volume. SIPRI uses a 5-year average as the basis for comparison because annual figures often show fluctuations that are irrelevant and misleading as to the medium- to long-term trends. The 0.5% decline from 2011–15 to 2016–20 is statistically insignificant.

the Covid-19 pandemic.[7] It is possible that, in the wake of the pandemic and its economic effects, coming years will see lower military spending, as happened after the global financial and economic crisis of 2008–2009. This is not inevitable, however; many major military spenders perceive reasons, including anxiety about the security context, to devote more resources to military preparations.

The number of armed conflicts increased again in 2020 but the global total of fatalities in war has fallen well below the level experienced when the Syrian war was at its height some five to six years ago.[8] The overall statistics mask some significant variations. War deaths in sub-Saharan Africa increased by about 40 per cent in 2020 compared to 2019.[9] The war in Yemen remained the source of a major humanitarian disaster throughout 2020 and showed no signs of finding a conclusion either through negotiation or on the battlefield itself.[10] There were hints of frustration and fatigue on the part of one of the governments intervening in the conflict, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), but Saudi Arabia, the main external power in the war, retained US support throughout 2020 and seemed to see little incentive to seek an urgent exit. There was an explosion of combat in the long-simmering conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, an ethnic Armenian enclave within Azerbaijan. The latter took a decisive advantage on the battlefield and took back control of territory lying between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia itself that Armenia had occupied since the first major war between the two countries ended in 1994.[11] In late 2020, a major new war began in Ethiopia in Tigray province. The large numbers of people fleeing and reports of atrocities by both Ethiopian forces and troops from neighbouring Eritrea became the focus of international concern.[12]

SIPRI's review of armed conflicts in 2020 found limited signs that the Covid-19 pandemic materially affected armed conflicts during the year. Some conflicts eased somewhat but others became more intense.[13] In an attempt to turn a health crisis into a peace opportunity, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres issued a global ceasefire call on 23 March, calling

---

[7] See chapter 8 in this volume.

[8] Uppsala Conflict Data Program, University of Uppsala, [n.d.]; see also chapter 2, section I, in this volume.

[9] See chapter 7, section I, in this volume.

[10] See chapter 6, section V, in this volume.

[11] See chapter 5, section II, in this volume.

[12] Getachew, S., 'Ethiopia's Tigray conflict sees hundreds dead, thousands flee to Sudan', *New Humanitarian*, 10 Nov. 2020; Akinwotu, E., '"I saw people dying on the road": Tigray's traumatised war refugees', *The Guardian*, 2 Dec. 2020; 'Tigray: Hundreds of civilians reported killed in artillery strikes, warns UN rights chief', *UN News*, 22 Dec. 2020; and AP News, 'I would never go back': Accounts of atrocities grow in Ethiopia's Tigray conflict', *Los Angeles Times*, 28 Dec. 2020. For detail see chapter 7, section IV, in this volume.

[13] See chapter 2, section I, in this volume; and Ide, T., 'Covid-19 and armed conflict', *World Development*, vol. 140 (Apr. 2021).

on all parties to stop fighting and take on the superordinate challenge of the pandemic.[14] There was a supportive response from many quarters, including from some parties actively engaged in armed conflict.[15] In the end, however, the impact was limited. Conflict participants—both governments and non-state armed groups—initiated some 17 ceasefires in response to the call but only 6 clearly lasted beyond a month.[16] The situation was not made more conducive to serious implementation of the ceasefire when the UN Security Council, instead of immediately and loudly supporting the secretary-general's call, became embroiled in an argument between China and the USA about whether an endorsement of his appeal should include reference to the World Health Organization (WHO).[17] The UN Security Council resolution supporting the call for a ceasefire was finally passed on 1 July 2020.[18]

That a straightforward appeal to support a humanitarian goal amid a global health emergency should get caught up in bickering between two great powers was an unfortunate indication of the limits of international cooperation at the time. In 2021, a new, similar effort resulted rather more quickly in a UN Security Council resolution calling for a humanitarian pause so vaccinations against the coronavirus causing Covid-19 could proceed worldwide. It passed unanimously in late February 2021 with none of the previous attempt's bad feeling.[19] This was, perhaps, a welcome sign that the global environment was starting to improve—or, at least, in the vocabulary used above, was no longer deteriorating.

Arms control

Nuclear arms control continued to stagnate in 2020, continuing a process that started almost a decade before. It was in 2013 that the USA, then under the Obama administration, accused Russia of non-compliance with the 1987 Treaty on the Elimination of Intermediate-Range and Shorter-Range Missiles (INF Treaty).[20] The Trump administration's decision to withdraw the USA from the INF Treaty, announced in 2018, was a landmark moment in the crumbling of the treaty-based architecture of US–Russian nuclear arms control. It also appeared to be representative of a profound distaste for arms

---

[14] United Nations, Global Ceasefire, 'Now is the time for a collective new push for peace and reconciliation', [n.d.].

[15] UN Secretary-General, 'Update on the secretary-general's appeal for a global ceasefire', 2 Apr. 2020.

[16] See chapter 2, section I, table 2.3, in this volume.

[17] Gowan, R., 'What's happened to the UN secretary-general's Covid-19 ceasefire call?', Speech, International Crisis Group, 16 June 2020.

[18] UN Security Council Resolution 2532, 1 July 2020.

[19] UN Security Council Resolution 2565, 26 Feb. 2021.

[20] Arms Control Association, 'The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty at a glance', Fact sheet, Aug. 2019. For a summary of the INF Treaty see annex A, section III, in this volume.

control on the part of the Trump administration. The only exception was the rather short-lived nuclear diplomacy with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, North Korea) from May 2018 until October 2019.[21] As well as withdrawing from the INF Treaty, the Trump administration ended US adherence to the Iran nuclear deal (formally, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA) in 2018 and, in 2020, it withdrew from the Open Skies Treaty of 2002.[22] The latter is not directly an arms control agreement but offers an important measure of transparency as a means of building confidence between states. The Trump administration also appeared indifferent to the potential demise in February 2021 of the 2010 New START treaty with Russia on strategic nuclear weapons.[23] The treaty has a clause permitting its extension for five years by mutual agreement; until a late change of approach, the Trump administration opposed extending the treaty and insisted China came into trilateral negotiations on a new treaty.[24] China refused, arguing that it has far fewer nuclear warheads than either the USA or Russia.[25] It offered to join trilateral talks when their numbers come down.[26] More than anything, the US position looked like an excuse for not agreeing to extend. That impression was only strengthened when, in a strange stunt, US negotiators about to meet with Russian representatives to discuss possible extension of the treaty, arranged—and tweeted photos of—empty chairs and a Chinese flag at the negotiating table.[27]

Of particular concern was that neglecting to extend New START could have a negative effect on the deferred five-year review conference (RevCon) of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).[28] The RevCon was scheduled for 2020 but was postponed because of the Covid-19 pandemic to January 2021, before being put off again until August 2021.[29] The NPT is designed both to limit the spread of nuclear weapons to non-nuclear weapons states (NNWS) and to lead to their elimination by the nuclear weapons states (NWS).

---

[21] On US diplomacy with North Korea including the Singapore summit in June 2018, the Hanoi summit in Feb. 2019, the brief summit in the Korean Demilitarized Zone in June 2019, and the unsuccessful working level meeting in Stockholm in Oct. 2019, see Kile, S. N., 'North Korean–United States nuclear diplomacy', *SIPRI Yearbook 2019*, pp. 361–68, and *SIPRI Yearbook 2020*, pp. 410–17.

[22] On the Open Skies Treaty see chapter 13, section V, and annex A, section II, in this volume. See also Arms Control Association, 'The Open Skies Treaty at a glance', Fact sheet, Nov. 2020.

[23] Arms Control Association, 'New START at a glance', Fact sheet, Feb. 2021. See also chapter 11, section I, in this volume.

[24] Gordon, M. R., 'Trump administration shifts course on Russian Arms talks, easing insistence China join now', *Wall Street Journal*, 18 Aug. 2020.

[25] Quinn, L., 'China's stance on nuclear arms control and New START', Arms Control Now blog, Arms Control Association, 23 Aug. 2019.

[26] AFP–JIJI, 'China says would join nuclear talks if US reduces arsenal', *Japan Times*, 8 July 2020.

[27] Meyer, H. and Wadhams, N., 'Russia, China lash out at US over flag stunt at nuclear talks', Bloomberg, 22 June 2020.

[28] Arms Control Association, 'The Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) at a glance', Fact sheet, Mar. 2020.

[29] United Nations, Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), [n.d.].

It is thus a treaty of both arms control and disarmament. When the NPT came into force in 1970, there were five known NWS—the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. Israel already had nuclear weapons but secretly. SIPRI's 1972 Yearbook identified a further 15 states with 'near nuclear' status.[30] This was the proliferation risk as seen at the time. Since then, India, Pakistan and North Korea have developed nuclear weapons. On the other side of the balance sheet, South Africa gave up its nuclear weapon programme when apartheid was overthrown, while Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine all gave up nuclear weapons they could have kept as successor states to the Soviet Union (USSR). Seen in this light, the non-proliferation regime—the NPT plus the International Atomic Energy Agency's system of safeguards and monitoring—has been an imperfect but important measure of arms control.

However, the disarmament aspect of the NPT—the commitment in Article VI to 'pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament'—generates less satisfaction and more controversy. Russia and the USA can point to a significant reduction in their total stockpiles of nuclear warheads from some 70 000 in the mid 1980s to some 11 800 at the start of 2021.[31] For many NNWS, this reduction is not enough: the estimated global total of approximately 13 000 nuclear warheads is more than sufficient for global destruction.[32] Further, the nuclear doctrines and strategic planning of both Russia and the USA appear to many commentators to reveal increasing focus on the use of nuclear weapons in wartime, rather than a sole focus on strategic deterrence. This is because of their investment in low-yield nuclear weapons that in some eyes are 'usable'. The other three NWS are also upgrading their nuclear arsenals.

Impatience with what was seen as slow progress on Article VI brought the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) into being in 2017.[33] The number of states parties to the TPNW reached 50 in October 2020, which meant it would enter into force in January 2021.[34]

All these factors taken together could mean that a very difficult NPT RevCon was in store, especially if New START were no longer to be in force at the time. The five-yearly RevCons have often seen clashes between NWS and NNWS over Article VI and other issues. A scan of SIPRI's successive

[30] SIPRI, *World Armaments and Disarmament: SIPRI Yearbook 1972* (Almqvist & Wiksell: Stockholm, 1972), chapter 9.

[31] See chapter 10 in this volume for details on nuclear stockpiles.

[32] See e.g. International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, 'Catastrophic harm', [n.d.]. See also Ellsberg, D., *The Doomsday Machine* (Bloomsbury Press: London, 2017).

[33] United Nations, Office for Disarmament Affairs, 'Treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons', [n.d.]. For analysis of the origins and impact of the TPNW see Kile, S. N., 'Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons', *SIPRI Yearbook 2018*, pp. 307–18. See also chapter 11, section III, in this volume.

[34] United Nations (note 33).

assessments is instructive in this regard. In 1990, the RevCon 'failed to issue a Final Document', while in 2005, there was no final report with any substantive decisions, and in 2015, 'After 20 working days, which witnessed heated discussions . . . , the conference ended without any agreement on a concluding document or recommendations'.[35] Against a background of collapsing bilateral US–Russian arms control and enhanced NWS nuclear arsenals, a large number of RevCon participants would likely be highly critical of the NWS stance. It is not impossible that one or more states parties to the NPT would announce they were thinking about withdrawing from it. The result would be a much weaker and less credible architecture of non-proliferation. How these issues and disputes are handled in 2021 and thereafter will be a major test of international leadership.

Further items on the arms control agenda also pose problems. The continuing forward march of technology offers opportunities for military exploitation and sets multiple challenges for security policy and international law. These include the possibility of conflict in both cyber space and outer space; increased feasibility of autonomy in weapon systems; and disruptive effects on the strategic balance with hypersonic weapons, machine learning and advances in ballistic missile defence.[36] One response to technological innovation in the security realm is countervailing innovation, leading perhaps to a form of arms race; the other obvious option is to manage the risks through diplomacy, by regulating innovation in the form of agreements on arms control, if not the more ambitious and definitive form of disarmament measures. One problem here is that the political and diplomatic agenda is already full with the tasks of ensuring a reasonably successful NPT RevCon and, for Russia and the USA, re-energizing their bilateral arms control diplomacy. Though there are some indications of growing interest in possible regulation of military use of the newer technologies, it is unclear how much bandwidth will be left for that demanding task.[37] Here lies a significant challenge for international leadership in 2021 and beyond.

---

[35] Fischer, D. and Müller, H., 'The fourth review of the Non-Proliferation Treaty', *SIPRI Yearbook 1991*, p. 555; Kile, S. N., 'Nuclear arms control and non-proliferation', *SIPRI Yearbook 2006*, p. 607; and Rauf, T., 'Nuclear arms control and non-proliferation', *SIPRI Yearbook 2016*, p. 689.

[36] Mazarr, M. J. et al., *The Emerging Risk of Virtual Societal Warfare: Social Manipulation in a Changing Information Environment* (RAND Corporation: Santa Monica, CA, 2019); Boulanin, V. et al., *Limits on Autonomy in Weapon Systems: Identifying Practical Elements of Human Control* (SIPRI and the International Committee of the Red Cross: Stockholm and Geneva, 2020); Sayler, K. M. and Woolf, A. F., 'Defense primer: Hypersonic boost-glide weapons', In Focus no. IF11459, US Congress, Congressional Research Service (CRS), 1 Dec. 2020; and Boulanin, V. et al., *Artificial Intelligence, Strategic Stability and Nuclear Risk* (SIPRI: Stockholm, 2020).

[37] On efforts to regulate lethal autonomous weapons see chapter 13, section II, in this volume.

Continuing confrontation and incidents

Events in 2020 marked out two geopolitical dyads, India–Pakistan and Iran–Saudi Arabia, as major causes for concern, as they had been in 2019, adding to them a potential third in China–India. In some respects, relations did not deteriorate as significantly as had been expected, though they did not show notable improvement either. For example, at the end of 2019, some readings of the tense relationship, confrontation and clashes between India and Pakistan over Jammu and Kashmir foresaw escalating violence and danger in 2020.[38] There were frequent clashes, with both military and civilian deaths on both sides, but these did not escalate into combat outside of the immediate region of confrontation, even though trade was disrupted, transport links severed and diplomatic representation in the respective capitals reduced.[39]

In neighbouring Ladakh, at the Line of Actual Control with Aksai Chin, India's long-lasting border dispute with China turned violent during 2020 for the first time in several decades. Large-scale brawls took place between Chinese and Indian troops, reportedly resulting in four fatalities in February 2020 and more than twenty in June.[40] What sparked the clashes remains unclear. There was a degree of disengagement mid-year when both sides withdrew troops from frontline border positions.[41] Talks between military officials on how to handle the border issues were under way at the turn of the year but tensions remained high.[42]

Rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, each with their regional and global allies, has been intense in recent years. The roots of their antagonism are often traced to the 1978–79 revolution that changed Iran from a monarchy into the Islamic Republic. But even during the 1970s before the revolution, there was rivalry between them with accompanying tensions, if no clashes or dangerous incidents.[43] Though religious difference between Shia Iran and Wahhabi Sunni Saudi Arabia is part of their antagonism, the rivalry

---

[38] See e.g. Kugelman, M., 'India and Pakistan are edging closer to war in 2020', *Foreign Policy*, 31 Dec. 2019. On events in Jammu and Kashmir in 2020 see chapter 4, section II, in this volume.

[39] Press Trust of India, 'India–Pakistan relations plumb new depths in 2020', *Economic Times*, 23 Dec. 2020.

[40] The Feb. 2020 fatalities were only revealed by China in Feb. 2021 in an announcement posthumously honouring four soldiers. See 'Ladakh: China reveals soldier deaths in India border clash', BBC News, 19 Feb. 2021. On the June violence see e.g. 'India–China clash: 20 Indian troops killed in Ladakh fighting', BBC News, 16 June 2020. For more detail see chapter 4, section II, in this volume.

[41] Sharma, A., 'Indian, Chinese soldiers disengaging after deadly clash in Ladakh', The Diplomat, 17 July 2020.

[42] Parohit, K. and Zheng, S., 'China–India border dispute: Troops saw "minor" clash amid ninth round of talks to resolve row', *South China Morning Post*, 25 Jan. 2021; and Madhavendra, R., 'Indian Army apprehends Chinese soldier near disputed Himalayan border', CNN, 10 Jan. 2021.

[43] Chubin, S. and Tripp, C., *Iran–Saudi Arabia Relations and Regional Order*, Adelphi Papers, vol. 36, no. 304 (International Institute of Strategic Studies: London, 1996), pp. 9, 71.

also derives from the competing national interests of two regional powers. In some ways, the national interest basis of the two states' rivalry comes into clearer focus when looking at the diplomatic normalization between Israel and two of Saudi Arabia's close allies—Bahrain and the UAE—in the US-brokered agreements known as the Abraham Accords.[44] There are contending views as to whether the accords usher in a more peaceful era in the Middle East.[45] There is little doubt, however, that they bring a group of states that share antipathy to Iran and its regional ambitions into a closer relationship with each other.

In 2019, the Gulf region witnessed missile strikes, proxy attacks and challenges to freedom of navigation, as well as regional involvement in wars in Iraq, Syria and Yemen.[46] At the start of 2020, a US missile strike killed Iranian general Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force, a division of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps.[47] He was a key strategic leader of Iranian policy in Iraq and beyond. Iran retaliated with a missile attack on two Iraqi military bases that hosted US forces. This was interpreted by some analysts, reportedly including US officials, as a moderate response that indicated Iran did not seek escalation.[48] This relative restraint in the dynamics of confrontation persisted throughout the year.

There were renewed fears of escalation in March when a pro-Iran militia killed US and British soldiers in Iraq and, reportedly, the US Department of Defense ordered plans to be drawn up for a major campaign to destroy the group. These plans were controversial within the US military and were not implemented.[49]

The assassination of Iran's most senior nuclear scientist, Dr Mohsen Fakrizadeh, in November 2020 presented another moment for potential escalation. It came near the end of a year that had been punctuated by a series of explosions and fires at various places in Iran. Locations of incidents included the Natanz nuclear site where uranium enrichment is carried out, a missile production facility in the western outskirts of Tehran, and other sites including a factory, a petrochemical plant, a military base and power

[44] The Abraham Accords comprise the general declaration (Abraham Accords Declaration), the Bahrain–Israel agreement, the Israel–Morocco agreement and the Israel–UAE agreement. See US Department of State, 'The Abraham Accords Declaration', [n.d.]; see also chapter 6, section III, in this volume.

[45] Goldberg, J., 'Iran and the Palestinians lose out in the Abraham Accords', *The Atlantic*, 16 Sep. 2020; and Egel, D., Efron, S. and Robinson, L., 'Abraham Accords offer historic opportunity to spur Mideast growth', RAND Blog, 25 Mar. 2021.

[46] For an overview of events in 2019 see Smith (note 5), pp. 5–8.

[47] Crowley, M., Hassan, F. and Schmitt, E., 'US strike in Iraq kills Qassim Suleimani, commander of Iranian forces', *New York Times*, 2 Jan. 2020; and Black, I., 'General Qassem Suleimani obituary', *The Guardian*, 5 Jan. 2020.

[48] Leary, A., Youssef, N. A. and Rasmussen, S. E., 'US and Iran back away from open conflict', *Wall Street Journal*, 9 Jan. 2020. For more detail see chapter 6, section I, in this volume.

[49] Mazetti, M. and Schmitt, E., 'Pentagon order to plan for escalation in Iraq meets warning from top commander', *New York Times*, 27 Mar. 2020.

plants.[50] It is not clear whether these were accidents or acts of sabotage. Iran, however, was quick to accuse Israel of responsibility for the murder of Dr Fakrizadeh, just as it had accused Israel of involvement in killing four Iranian nuclear scientists from 2010 to 2012.[51] Dr Fakrizadeh's importance in Iran's nuclear research was well known, having been highlighted by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in a high-profile and contentious presentation about Iran's nuclear programme in April 2018.[52]

Despite this range of incidents throughout 2020, there was no broader escalation of the conflict in any part of the region where Iranian forces or influence were active. It was of particular concern that the USA was so closely involved, and likewise Israel, at least in being named as complicit. However, it was noteworthy in 2020 that Saudi Arabia was not such an active protagonist in the regional political reverberations around these various incidents. This relative disengagement of Saudi Arabia possibly implied there was not much appetite there for taking confrontation further than the tense status quo made up of proxy wars, the competition for regional influence and the always heated war of words.[53]

This ambiguous balance between potential escalation and restraint was also seen in North East Asia. Almost seven decades of post-truce military confrontation on the Korean peninsula since 1953 have produced intermittent violent incidents. Against that backdrop the nuclear weapons programme of North Korea has caused major international concern, as recorded and analysed in successive editions of this Yearbook. In 2018, after a year of particularly heated rhetoric between North Korea and the USA with mutual insults traded between the respective leaders, a dual process of inter-Korean détente and North Korean–US diplomacy got under way. As part of this process, a Joint Liaison Office (JLO) was opened in Kaesong, not far north of the demilitarized zone between the two Koreas, housed in a refurbished four-storey building first constructed in 2005 as part of an earlier enhancement of inter-Korean communication and cooperation.[54] The JLO was a way of facilitating discussions and speeding up decisions

---

[50] Fazeli, Y., 'Timeline: A look back at recent explosions and fires across Iran', Alarabiya News, 8 July 2020; Hamill-Stewart, C., 'Explosions in Iran: Isolated incidents or acts of sabotage?', *Arab News*, 10 July 2020; and 'Iran explosions: Officials deny reports of fresh blast', BBC News, 10 July 2020.

[51] 'Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, Iran's top nuclear scientist, assassinated near Tehran', BBC News, 27 Nov. 2020.

[52] 'Full text of Netanyahu on Iran deal: "100,000 files right here prove they lied"', *Times of Israel*, 30 Apr. 2018.

[53] For a similar line of analysis see Alaaldin, R., 'Iran will lose the battle, but win the war', Brookings Blog, 1 Dec. 2020; and Wintour, P., 'Nervous Saudis try to ease Middle East tensions', *The Guardian*, 9 Jan. 2020.

[54] Lee, J., 'Hopes rise as two Koreas open liaison office on North's side of border', Reuters, 14 Sep. 2018.

and handling of contentious issues. It replaced the previous practice of communicating by fax and special telephone lines.

One problem with the fax and telephone communication the JLO replaced was that lines were often cut when relations soured. In June 2020, the equivalent of cutting the lines happened when North Korea blew up the building housing the JLO.[55] The office had not been staffed for several months because of the Covid-19 pandemic. External commentators offered little by way of clear interpretation of North Korea's motives, except for noting its irritation at leaflets and chocolate biscuits being sent on balloons floating northwards across the border from the Republic of Korea (South Korea), allegedly by defectors from North Korea.[56] The JLO's destruction had little prospect of putting pressure either on South Korean President Moon Jae-in or US President Trump to provide economic aid or concessions in negotiations that had long since stalled, if it were indeed intended for that purpose. It did seem, however, a clear rejection of dialogue. There were some concerns that this was a step toward manufacturing a crisis that would lead to further deterioration of the inter-Korean and the North Korean–US relationships with possible risks of violent clashes. Yet in September when North Korean troops shot and killed a South Korean official who had crossed into North Korean waters, Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un issued a formal apology to the South Korean Government.[57] Though the hopes generated by the initial 2018 improvement in North Korea's relations with both South Korea and the USA have not been realized, the situation in 2020 reflected a return to no worse than the previous status quo—an assessment that is broadly in line with the overview of other geopolitical hotspots in the year.

Climate change

In the background, as in previous years, are the looming and growing risks associated with the impact of climate change. While in some quarters it remains controversial whether climate change has an impact on security issues, awareness of the linkages is steadily increasing. UN peace operations in both Mali and Somalia, for example, are mandated to address the

[55] Sinh, H. and Smith, J., 'North Korea destroys inter-Korean liaison office in "terrific explosion"', Reuters, 16 June 2020.

[56] Berlinger, J., Kwon, J. and Seo, Y., 'North Korea blows up liaison office in Kaesong used for talks with South', CNN, 16 June 2020; Davies, G. T. and Tong, Z., 'Expert commentary on current tensions following the destruction of the Inter-Korean Liaison Office', One Earth Future, [June 2020]; and Snyder, S. A., 'North Korea's loyalty test and the demolition of inter-Korean relations', Council on Foreign Relations Blog, 18 June 2020.

[57] Bae, G. and Kwon, J., 'South Korea official shot dead by North Korean troops after crossing border: Seoul', CNN, 24 Sep. 2020; and Kwon, J., 'Kim Jong Un apologizes in letter to Seoul for shooting of South Korean official', CNN, 25 Sep. 2020.

linkages.[58] The UN Peacebuilding Commission and Peacebuilding Fund have likewise begun to address the linkages in recent years.[59] The African Union and the European Union (EU) are also both actively engaged in addressing the linkages.[60] There remain discussions about which exactly are the best policy forums in which to address the linkages—whether, for example, the UN Security Council is appropriate to the task. But recent research on both contemporaneous and historical cases is making clear that the environment and natural resources have never been divorced from violent conflict or from politics, both local and global.[61] It is inevitable that problems generated by the knock-on consequences of climate change for instability and insecurity will eventually end up on the Security Council's agenda. Better to be prepared and able to analyse the risks than not. Disputing the reality of the nexus on the basis that climate change alone does not cause violent conflict carries little weight, not least because violent conflict is generally not a subject of mono-causality but rather the result of several factors interacting. The argument about climate change and insecurity is not that it is the only issue at stake, nor that it is relevant in every case of instability and violence, but rather that there are many cases in which it is a background factor. There is abundant evidence that the impact of climate change figures in a variety of pathways towards violent conflict.[62] It is not the whole explanation but leaving it out would mean the explanation is often incomplete.

According to a combination of datasets put together by the World Meteorological Organization, 2020 was the equal warmest year for which

[58] Eklöw, K. and Krampe, F., *Climate-related Security Risks and Peacebuilding in Somalia*, SIPRI Policy Paper no. 53 (SIPRI: Stockholm, Oct. 2019); and Hegazi, F., Krampe, F. and Smith, E. S., *Climate-related Security Risks and Peacebuilding in Mali*, SIPRI Policy Paper no. 60 (SIPRI: Stockholm, Apr. 2021).

[59] Krampe, F. and Sherman, J., 'The Peacebuilding Commission and climate-related security risks: A more favourable political environment?', SIPRI–IPI Insights on Peace and Security no. 2020/9, Sep. 2020.

[60] Aminga, V., 'Policy responses to climate-related security risks: The African Union', SIPRI Background Paper, May 2020; Aminga, V. and Krampe, F., 'Climate-related security risks and the African Union', SIPRI Policy Brief, May 2020; Bremberg, N., 'EU foreign and security policy on climate-related security risks', SIPRI Policy Brief, Nov. 2019; and Remling, E. and Barnhoorn, A., 'A reassessment of the European Union's response to climate- related security risks', SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security no. 2021/2, 19 Mar. 2021.

[61] Krampe, F., Hegazi, F., and VanDeveer, S. D., 'Sustaining peace through better governance: Three potential mechanisms for environmental peacebuilding', *World Development*, vol. 144 (Aug. 2021).

[62] Van Balen, S. and Mobjörk, M., 'Climate change and violent conflict in East Africa: Integrating qualitative and quantitative research to probe the mechanisms', *International Studies Review*, vol. 20, no. 4 (Dec. 2018); and Mobjörk, M., Krampe, F. and Tarif, K., 'Pathways of climate insecurity: Guidance for policymakers', SIPRI Policy Brief, Nov. 2020.

temperatures have been recorded going as far back as 1850, tying with 2016.[63] The seven warmest years on record are those from 2014 through 2020. A study published in February 2020, based on climate data through 2018, forecasts a greater than 99 per cent probability that most of the years from 2019 through 2028 will rank among what will, by the end of 2028, be the 10 warmest years on record.[64] In short, climate change, driven by the warming of the atmosphere, driven in turn by the release of greenhouse gases—especially carbon dioxide and methane—is continuing apace. The consequences have been felt in a series of extreme weather events throughout 2020, including particularly violent wildfires in Australia, and also in California and Siberia, and unprecedentedly warm temperatures in both the Arctic and the Antarctic.[65] Without remedial action addressing the drivers of climate change in the long term and its impact in the shorter term, further consequences will be felt in the realm of security. It remains the case that, without action and a change of course, the security agenda of the late 2020s and the 2030s risks being essentially unmanageable in some countries and regions.

II. The Covid-19 pandemic

This challenging global security environment is part of the international political background against which to consider the Covid-19 pandemic. By the end of 2020, some 82 million people were recorded as having contracted the disease, and recorded deaths numbered approximately 1.8 million.[66] There were grounds for regarding these figures as major underestimates, including both the many imperfections of testing schemes and data systems in different countries, as well as the diverse ways in which deaths are recorded. One estimate suggested that, compared to recorded data, an additional 500 million people may have been infected and additional deaths may number in multiple hundreds of thousands.[67]

[63] World Meteorological Organization (WMO), '2020 was one of three warmest years on record', Press release, 15 Jan. 2021; note that some of the data identifies 2020 as marginally cooler than 2016. See also the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), '2020 tied for warmest year on record, NASA analysis shows', Press release no. 21-005, 14 Jan. 2021. Note that while the WMO takes 1850 as the base year for temperature data, NASA takes 1880: see 'Why does the temperature record shown on your "Vital Signs" page begin at 1880?', NASA Global Climate Change: Vital Signs of the Planet, [n.d.].

[64] National Centers for Environmental Information, 'More near-record warm years are likely on horizon', News, 14 Feb. 2020 (updated 29 Jan. 2021).

[65] Watts, J., 'Floods, storms and searing heat: 2020 in extreme weather', *The Guardian*, 30 Dec. 2020.

[66] World Health Organization (WHO), 'Covid-19 weekly epidemiological update—29 Dec. 2020', Emergency Situational Update, 29 Dec. 2020; and WHO, 'WHO coronavirus disease (Covid-19) dashboard', [n.d.]. For details of the unfolding Covid-19 pandemic and key milestones in 2020 see chapter 12, section I, and annex C in this volume.

[67] 'The year when everything changed', *The Economist*, 19 Dec. 2020.

The pandemic is an experience that has been shared in one form or another all around the globe. The speed with which the infection spread was a shock for most people and many governments. At the G20 virtual summit in March 2020, UN Secretary-General Guterres noted that it took three months to reach 100 000 confirmed cases of infection, but the next 100 000 cases were registered in the next 12 days, a further 100 000 in the following 4 days, and the fourth 100 000 in just 36 hours.[68] Understanding the exponential increase in infections perhaps makes it possible to appreciate the pressure decision makers were under and to acknowledge the likelihood of errors of judgement. However, not all countries experienced exponential growth in infections.[69]

Other serious consequences of the pandemic included increases in psychological stress and domestic violence. The pandemic disrupted the delivery of mental health services in 93 per cent of all countries, while the demand for those services increased.[70] Research on the impact of Covid-19 in low- and middle-income countries reported that it caused high rates of psychological distress and signs of an increase in mental health disorders.[71] A US study found that just over 40 per cent of adults in the USA reported symptoms of anxiety or depression during the pandemic, almost four times as many as in the first half of 2019, attributing the increase to the effect of the pandemic and the resulting economic recession.[72] The stress of the pandemic on daily life has also been reflected in reports of increased domestic and gender-based violence in countries as different as Argentina, Canada, Cyprus, Colombia, France, Germany, Kenya, Singapore, South Africa, the United Kingdom, the USA and Zimbabwe.[73] The range of increase varied from 25 per cent in Argentina to over 200 per cent in Bogotá, Colombia, and parts of Kenya. It is unlikely these are the only countries with that experience.

As noted above, SIPRI's overview reveals limited direct impact of Covid-19 on the conduct of conflicts in 2020. The pandemic nonetheless held important

---

[68] UN Secretary-General, 'Remarks at G20 virtual summit on the Covid-19 pandemic', Speech, 26 Mar. 2020.

[69] Komarova, N. L., Schang, L. M. and Wodarz, D., 'Patterns of the Covid-19 pandemic spread around the world: Exponential versus power laws', *Journal of the Royal Society Interface*, vol. 17, no. 170 (30 Sep. 2020).

[70] World Health Organization (WHO), 'Covid-19 disrupting mental health services in most countries, WHO survey', WHO News, 5 Oct. 2020.

[71] Kola, L. et al., 'Covid-19 mental health impact and responses in low-income and middle-income countries: Re-imagining global mental health', *Lancet Psychiatry*, 24 Feb. 2021.

[72] Panchal, N. et al., 'The implications of Covid-19 for mental health and substance use', Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) Issue Brief, 10 Feb. 2021.

[73] UN Women, 'Covid-19 and ending violence against women and girls', EVAW Covid-19 Brief, 2020; Taub, A., 'A new Covid-19 crisis: Domestic abuse rises worldwide', *New York Times*, 6 Apr. 2020; Janetsky, M., 'Violence against women up amid Latin America Covid-19 lockdowns', *Al Jazeera*, 20 Apr. 2020; and Mlambo, N., 'Africa: Triple threat—conflict, gender-based violence and Covid-19', allAfrica, 26 Apr. 2020.

implications for conflict, peace and security. The most obvious link lies in the heavier impact of Covid-19 in countries already burdened by violent conflict. In Yemen, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) reported how Covid-19 exacerbated what was already a severe humanitarian crisis.[74] Libya, likewise, is reported to face exacerbated Covid-19 effects because violent conflict has degraded the country's once impressive health system.[75] The same can be expected in Syria for the same reason.[76] Comparative research leaves little doubt about the obvious point that violent conflict reduces the effectiveness and comprehensiveness of health services for the general population.[77] In short, violent conflict can be expected to worsen the impact of Covid-19.

The pandemic has also had a major economic effect, which in turn will have a social and human effect and possible security consequences. In 2020, the global economy shrank; economic output declined in all except 20 countries, including all major national economies except China.[78] Employment, consumption, and both collective and individual behaviour changed as lockdowns and lesser restrictions shaped daily life, reduced travel even locally, partially or wholly closed schools and universities, and shut down theatres, sports stadiums and other focal points of cultural life. The pandemic depressed wages, either slowing their increase or forcing them down, in two thirds of countries for which official data is available.[79] It is estimated to have driven approximately 120 million people into extreme poverty in the course of 2020, reversing three decades of progress in poverty reduction.[80] Initial estimates for 2021 suggested a continued, albeit significantly smaller, spread of extreme poverty in the pandemic's second year.[81]

There will, however, also be winners. The pandemic has accelerated corporate absorption of digitalization. One analysis identified several years' worth of change unfolding in a matter of months.[82] For nimble companies,

---

[74] 'A tipping point for Yemen's health system: The impact of Covid-19 in a fragile state', ReliefWeb, 23 July 2020.

[75] 'ONE UN supporting Libya to tackle Covid-19', ReliefWeb, 2 Dec. 2020.

[76] Li, G., 'Hospital bombings destroy Syria's health system', Health and Human Rights Journal Blog, 11 May 2017.

[77] Chöl, C., Cumming, R. G. and Negin, J., 'The impact of war on health systems and maternal mortality in sub-Saharan Africa: A quantitative analysis of 49 countries', Unpublished paper, ResearchGate, July 2019.

[78] Jones, L., Palumbo, D. and Brown, D., 'Coronavirus: How the pandemic has changed the world economy', BBC News, 24 Jan. 2020.

[79] International Labour Organization (ILO), *Global Wage Report 2020–21: Wages and Minimum Wages in the Time of Covid-19*, ILO Flagship Report (ILO: Geneva, Feb. 2020), chapter 3.

[80] Lakner, C. et al., 'Updated estimates of the impact of Covid-19 on global poverty: Looking back at 2020 and the outlook for 2021', Data Blog, World Bank, 11 Jan. 2021; and Beaumont, P., 'Decades of progress on extreme poverty now in reverse due to COVID', *The Guardian*, 3 Feb. 2021.

[81] Lakner et al. (note 80).

[82] McKinsey & Company, 'How Covid-19 has pushed companies over the technology tipping point and transformed business forever', Survey, 5 Oct. 2020.

able to recruit technology-literate talent and adjust their management models and interactions with clients and customers, this offers large opportunities for commercial exploitation and shareholders' profit. The prospects were not so bright for everybody, however. Covid-19 could be slow to dissipate and the fear of another pandemic will linger; one analysis pointed out that companies would adjust around that risk, so some activities, goods and services would be costlier and regarded as riskier, accelerating the existing trend of automating low-skilled work and person-to-person services.[83] These labour market effects would feed already rising economic and social inequalities in many countries.

There has been considerable back and forth among academic researchers for at least the last two decades about whether and how inequality contributes to armed conflict and which of vertical (social class) and horizontal (social group, such as ethnic) inequalities contribute more.[84] Part of the problem here is that there is neither a neat nor a comprehensive explanation of the role of any such factor—inequality, poverty, access to land, climate change, governance—in conflict causality.[85] The real issue is whether and how each individual factor interacts with others to create a background conducive to armed conflict, within which groups and their leaders opt to pursue political ends with violent means. How this happens differs from case to case.[86] Seen in this light, the trend of increasing inequality generates persistent conflict risk. This risk has been intensified by the economic knock-on effects of the pandemic, whose pressures are in turn exacerbated by the impact of climate change.

There has been a similar debate in research on the relationship between democracy and armed conflict. It remains a well-established finding that consolidated democracies are internally more peaceful than autocracies, semi-democracies and transitional states alike.[87] Recognizing that the condition of democracy is a significant factor in conflict causation, though not the sole determinant, the reported deterioration in the quality of democracy

---

[83] Stiglitz, J., 'Conquering the great divide', *Finance and Development*, Sep. 2020.

[84] See e.g. Baghat, K. et al., *Inequality and Armed Conflict: Evidence and Data*, Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) Background Report (PRIO: Oslo, 12 Apr. 2017).

[85] For a useful survey of contending causal concepts, among others in the research literature, that emphasizes the importance of a multicausal approach, see Herbert, S., *Conflict Analysis*, GSDRC Topic Guide (GSDRC, University of Birmingham: Birmingham, May 2017).

[86] See e.g. Bartusevicius, H., 'The inequality–conflict nexus re-examined: Income, education and popular rebellions', *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 51, no. 1 (2014).

[87] For a review of the literature nearly 2 decades ago that supports this conclusion see e.g. Söderberg, M. and Ohlson, T., *Democratisation and Armed Conflicts* (Sida: Stockholm, Apr. 2003); for a more recent review with effectively the same conclusion, see Hegre, H., 'Democracy and armed conflict', *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 51, no. 2 (2014).

in 2020, all too often justified as part of the response to the pandemic, is of concern.[88]

Through reasonably well-established and well-understood channels of conflict causality—rising inequality and declining democratic quality—the pandemic forces itself into the field of vision for analysing peace, conflict and security. The number of armed conflicts tends to increase some two to three years after a major economic disruption. Examples include the oil price shock of the early to mid 1970s, the Asian financial crisis of 1997, and the global economic crisis of 2008–2009.[89] The increase in armed conflicts in the early 1990s is in part traceable to similar disruption—the fall of the Soviet Union—but the picture is complicated by other influences including broader aspects of the end of the cold war and the acceleration of attempted democratization in many parts of the world. There are, accordingly, firm grounds for concluding that the erosion of human well-being driven not just by the pandemic, but also by deficient governmental and international responses to it, is a challenge to security broadly defined.

Such deficiencies were visible in denialism, as represented vividly at different times by Presidents Bolsonaro and Magufuli of Brazil and Tanzania respectively, and the systematic downplaying of risk and promotion of non-remedies by US President Trump.[90] They were also visible in a lack of preparedness. Comparing the initial responses of South Korea and the USA is instructive, as both countries recorded their first cases of Covid-19 on 20 January 2020.[91] Within a week, the South Korean authorities engaged 20 commercial companies in fast-track development of a test for the virus, backed up by systematic tracing of infections and quarantining of individuals. By contrast, the US Government took a further six weeks to begin developing a test; by then, the infection had taken hold.

There was considerable criticism in the USA that the Global Health Security and Biodefense unit in the National Security Council (NSC) had been closed down. Established by the Obama administration as a result of its assessment of the implications of the Ebola epidemic, the unit was closed and much of its staff merged into a larger unit in 2018. Partisan disputes broke out over whether the change left the USA less prepared for

---

[88] 'Global democracy has a very bad year: The pandemic caused an unprecedented rollback of democratic freedoms in 2020', *The Economist*, 2 Feb. 2021; and V-Dem Institute, *Autocratization Turns Viral: Democracy Report 2021* (V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg: Gothenburg, 2021).

[89] See the conflict trends recorded by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (note 8).

[90] Watson, K., 'Coronavirus: Brazil's Bolsonaro in denial and out on a limb', BBC News, 29 Mar. 2020; Duncan, E. S., 'Tanzania's layered COVID denialism', *Reinventing Peace*, 11 Sep. 2020; and Hamblin, J., 'Trump's pathology is now clear', *The Atlantic*, 31 Oct. 2020.

[91] Pilkington, E. and McCarthy, T., 'The missing six weeks: How Trump failed the biggest test of his life', *The Guardian*, 28 Mar. 2020.

a pandemic.[92] The evidence on whether the reorganization had a negative effect on readiness is not clear but the US administration's performance in 2020 would seem to confirm the conclusion of a November 2019 report that the USA was 'woefully ill-prepared' for a pandemic.[93] The US Government was by no means alone in giving the impression of wilfully avoiding planning for a pandemic. In the UK, for example, a 2016 exercise involving all national government departments, the National Health Service and local authorities revealed large gaps in the UK's planning for resilience but nothing was done to address them.[94]

There will doubtless be more controversies about responses to the pandemic and preparations against the next one. The record in 2020 makes clear that resilience in the face of a pandemic is a matter of human security.[95] Pandemic risk and response must be addressed through that policy lens as well as through medical, vaccination and public health policy. Among the early decisions of the incoming Biden administration in January 2021 was acknowledgement of that reality, with a national security memorandum on the topic and the appointment of the previous leader of the biodefence unit in the NSC to lead a reformed unit.[96]

III. The US election

The 2020 US presidential election result brought to an end a US administration that had systematically challenged multiple features of the international system which previous administrations of both parties had helped build, and which have benefited the USA and its successive governments for several decades. Among other actions, the Trump administration withdrew from bilateral and multilateral treaties, suspended funding to the WHO, abandoned Pacific trade negotiations, and weakened the World Trade

[92] Dozier, K. and Bergengruen, V., 'Under fire for coronavirus response, Trump officials defend disbanding pandemic team', *TIME*, 19 Mar. 2020; 'Partly false claim: Trump fired entire pandemic response team in 2018', Reuters, 25 Mar. 2020; and Heinrichs, R. L., 'The truth about the National Security Council's pandemic team', Hudson Institute, 1 Apr. 2020.

[93] Morrison, J. S., Ayotte, K. and Gerberding, J., *Ending the Cycle of Crisis and Complacency in US Global Health Security*, Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS) Commission Report (CSIS: Washington, DC, 20 Nov. 2019).

[94] Sinclair, I. and Read, R., '"A national scandal": A timeline of the UK Government's woeful response to the coronavirus crisis', *Byline Times*, 11 Apr. 2020.

[95] United Nations, Trust Fund for Human Security, 'What is human security?', [n.d.].

[96] White House, 'United States global leadership to strengthen the international Covid-19 response and to advance global health security and biological preparedness', National Security Memorandum no. 1, 21 Jan. 2021; and Hunnicutt, T., 'Biden names pandemic official to new national security team', Reuters, 8 Jan. 2021.

Organization (WTO) by withholding approvals of key positions.[97] It has been a particularity of the international system in recent years that none of the three great powers—China, Russia and the USA—was committed to the international status quo.[98] Each has taken an opportunistic and pragmatic approach to norms, commitments and participation in international institutions. This has been associated with rising insecurity and risk amid increasingly toxic geopolitical relations. The international significance of the election result and change of administration, accordingly, is greater than the norm.

Assessing the likely significance of the replacement of the Trump administration by the internationalist Biden administration, however, needs careful nuance for several reasons. The primary reason concerns the scale of the tasks involved. The Biden administration will have to devote considerable time, energy, resources and political capital to a complex and troubling domestic agenda. It includes post-pandemic economics, education and health provision, the USA's deep social fractures, and policies on immigration. In addition, the new administration must address international issues including preparation against the next pandemic, climate change, international development, trade and the refurbishment of the architecture of arms control. With a narrow majority in the House of Representatives and a split Senate, this is a heavy agenda for the administration to enact, even before unexpected events and crises emerge to distract its attention and blur its focus. The implication must surely be that other governments must step up their active engagement in international institutions. These have continued to operate with perhaps surprising degrees of efficacy but repair is necessary in several places. The USA cannot successfully undertake this by itself, nor, in any case, would it be healthy for the international system if it does so. Leadership of the effort must be shared or success will be limited.

The USA is not today the sole superpower that it was in the 1990s. China's economic growth over the four decades since 1980 makes it the number one trading partner of more countries than the USA.[99] China's economic weight is accompanied by increasingly strong armed forces along with growing political and diplomatic weight. Its diplomacy with African states, for example, is increasingly effective. China has not only invested in Africa but provided development assistance on a scale that makes it Africa's third

[97] Amirfar, C. and Singh, A., 'The Trump administration and the "unmaking" of international agreements', *Harvard International Law Journal*, vol. 59, no. 2 (summer 2018); Council on Foreign Relations, 'Trump's foreign policy moments, 2017–2020', [n.d.]; and Swanson, A., 'Trump cripples WTO as trade war rages', *New York Times*, 8 Dec. 2019.

[98] Smith, D., 'Introduction: International security and human stability in 2018', *SIPRI Yearbook 2019*, pp. 17–20; and Smith (note 5), pp. 19–23.

[99] 'How to deal with China', *The Economist*, 7 Jan. 2021.

largest donor after the USA and the EU.[100] In 2020, it successfully convened a summit meeting with 13 African leaders on the pandemic, while the EU was having difficulties preparing its own summit with African leaders.[101] The return to the international stage of an internationalist USA will not restore the status quo as it was before Trump because the world has changed—and will continue to change—in other ways. Neither the Biden administration, nor the USA's allies, nor its critics can behave any more as if the USA is the hegemon it was in the 1990s.

There is little reason to think global politics will swiftly become less confrontational.[102] In the USA, distrust of China's ambitions became a bipartisan view during the Trump years. In relation to Russia, a Democrat administration is likely to be more critical and abrasive than the Trump administration was, because of the evidence of Russian influence in the 2016 US presidential election.[103] Moreover, the Biden administration's approach includes strengthening US alliances and undoing divisions sown by the Trump administration's policies and rhetoric. China and Russia will likely contest that approach in both direct and indirect ways. For straightforward reasons of policy, both prefer to face fragmentation in the Western alliance system. Thus, while the Biden administration can be expected to seek cooperative solutions to major international problems to a far greater extent than the Trump administration did, it will continue to face (and generate) attitudes in the other two great powers and their allies that are not conducive to working together.

Perhaps the most important reason for noting that there are limits to the significance of the 2020 US presidential election result is that the departure of the Trump administration is not a death knell for its policies and attitudes. What to observers outside (and many inside) the USA has appeared paradoxical—spurning an international system that favoured the USA—is to many American voters simply the assertion of legitimate US interests. Distrust of alliances has a long history in the USA. Warnings against 'permanent alliance with any portion of the foreign world' by President George Washington and against 'entangling alliances' by President Thomas Jefferson were respected for 165 years after the War of Independence.[104] During that time, apart from its treaty with France during the revolutionary

[100] Calabrese, L. et al., 'FOCAC 2018: Top takeaways from the China–Africa summit', ODI, 6 Sep. 2018.

[101] Bilal, S. and Tadesse, L., 'The China–Africa summit on Covid-19: Geopolitical and economic considerations', ECDPM Blog, 22 June 2020.

[102] Wright, R., 'Biden faces more aggressive rivals and a fraying world order', *New Yorker*, 18 Jan. 2021.

[103] Mueller, R. S., *Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election* (US Department of Justice: Washington, DC, Mar. 2019).

[104] Fromkin, D., 'Entangling alliances', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 48, no. 4 (July 1970).

war, the USA formed no international alliances.[105] By the time of the Trump administration, the USA had alliances with 54 other states.[106] Nostalgia for non-entanglement is never far from the surface of US politics and one analyst has identified a shift in 'the center of political gravity' away from the post-1945 norm of engaged internationalism 'toward something closer to isolationism'.[107]

While the election result was clear, its meaning is not. The facts, though strongly contested within the USA, are not in doubt. What happened once the voting was over has absorbed so much attention that some of the implications of the result have passed many commentators by. That is hardly surprising in view of the unedifying theatre of the then-incumbent pre-emptively complaining about electoral fraud, crowds gathering at vote-counting stations to influence the result, a series of baseless legal challenges, all cheered on by many senior legislators, culminating in the events of 6 January 2021 when a semi-organized mob, audibly urged on by the soon-to-depart president, stormed the US Capitol Building to disrupt the Senate's ratification of the result.

Both candidates in the 2020 presidential election won more votes than any previous presidential candidates. Joe Biden won with a 7 million vote majority; he received 51.3 per cent of the vote compared to Trump's 46.9 per cent—a clear margin but not overwhelming.[108] In the Electoral College, Biden's majority was 306 to 232, only marginally different from the 304 to 227 majority Trump gained in 2016.[109] Just as in Trump's win in 2016, Biden's success in 2020 came down to a handful of narrow victories in 'battleground states', some of them much against expectations on both sides.[110] Biden's win, in short, was far from comfortable. The electoral system will not change, Trump's broad politics and approach still have currency, and a candidate representing them could win a future presidential election.

The Trump presidency will cast a long shadow over a new administration with, on the international stage, antithetical approaches on many issues. Among the USA's international interlocutors, among allies as well as those less friendly to the USA, questions persist about the stability of US policy and the reliability of its word and its commitments. Much changed when Joe Biden was confirmed as president but the tasks are great, the capacity is

[105] Beckley, M., 'The myth of entangling alliances', War on the Rocks, 9 June 2015.

[106] US Department of State, 'US collective defense arrangements', [n.d.].

[107] Kirshner, J., 'Gone but not forgotten: Trump's long shadow and the end of American credibility', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 100, no. 2 (Mar./Apr. 2021).

[108] Lindsay, J. M., 'The 2020 election by the numbers', Council for Foreign Relations Blog, 15 Dec. 2020.

[109] National Archives, '2020 Electoral College results' (updated 16 Apr. 2021); and National Archives, '2016 Electoral College Results' (updated 11 Jan. 2021).

[110] Allen, J. and Parnes, A., *Lucky: How Joe Biden Barely Won the Presidency* (Random House: New York, 2021), chapter 20.

constrained and the politics are volatile. These uncertainties only serve to emphasize the importance of stepping up international cooperation.

IV. International cooperation

On 21 September 2020, the UN General Assembly marked the UN's 75th anniversary with a declaration that, while acknowledging 'moments of disappointment', amounted to an endorsement of and re-commitment to the UN's fundamental goals and norms.[111] Despite vicissitudes during the past half-decade, many institutions of international cooperation remained vibrant, offering a framework for international relations to stay as peaceful and as conducive to human well-being as possible. That framework has not been used to the full for several years but has not suffered irretrievable damage. In September 2015, the UN adopted Agenda 2030 with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).[112] Agenda 2030 remains an important expression of ambition for human progress and, with 169 specific targets, it offers criteria by which to assess economic and social development, including in the sphere of security and peace. There was limited progress on most of the goals up to 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic hit and made the task much more difficult.[113] But with Agenda 2030 and the SDGs, a global conversation on what path to take as countries come out of the Covid-19 pandemic at least has a shared starting point.

The Paris Agreement, reached in December 2015 at the climate change summit—formally the 21st Conference of the Parties (COP) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)—is at least equally important.[114] It established a framework for action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to the inevitable impacts of climate change resulting from past emissions. Progress towards these targets, even though they are set by individual national decision, as nationally determined contributions (NDCs), has been limited. Under the Paris Agreement, the targets in the NDCs are to be periodically enhanced—that is, made more demanding. The Climate Ambition Summit, held in December 2020 as something of a substitute for COP26 which was postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, convened 75 heads of government. It was the occasion for announcing enhanced targets in a number of NDCs. At or just before the meeting, some 27 governments announced enhanced NDC targets, while the EU announced a collective NDC with enhanced targets for its member states. The UNFCCC secretariat calculated that these commitments, together with

---

[111] UN General Assembly Resolution 75/1, 21 Sep. 2020.

[112] United Nations, Sustainable Development Goals, 'The sustainable development agenda', [n.d.].

[113] United Nations, Sustainable Development Goals, 'Sustainable Development Goals report', [n.d.].

[114] United Nations, Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), 'COP 21', [n.d.].

others expected in early 2021, meant countries representing around 65 per cent of global carbon emissions, and 70 per cent of the world's economy, were committed to achieving net zero carbon emissions at a future date.[115] According to an independent analysis, targets and pledges announced so far will not suffice to meet the aim of restricting global warming to 2°C, while current policies are still less adequate for that goal.[116]

A year that began with international attention seized by widespread wildfires in Australia finished with continuing difficulties in achieving a sustainable and actionable international awareness of the urgency of the climate crisis. But the institutional framework for governments to work towards appropriately ambitious goals still stood.

Similarly in arms control and in handling the most combustible of the world's potential flashpoints, the institutional framework of the UN, the Security Council, its key offices and agencies remained active and available for use. The tasks, it is true, have become steadily more complex, in arms control because of the forward momentum of technological development as well as the pressures of rivalry and manoeuvring for advantage, and in crisis management and conflict mediation because it is inevitably harder to address antagonisms that have been left to fester.

Perhaps what is most important at the start of 2021 is to strengthen and re-energize routines of international cooperation in and with key international organizations such as the WHO and the WTO. The ways in which governments relate to each other and how inter-governmental organizations work during normal times do much to determine whether and how they can work together in crisis. The political disputes that festered throughout 2020 about responsibility for the origin of the novel coronavirus that spread the Covid-19 disease were symptoms of an ailing international body politic that requires care and attention. Whatever issue of international concern is in focus, a healthier body politic with strong norms of cooperation is a prerequisite for effective action.

---

[115] UNFCCC, 'Climate Ambition Summit builds momentum for COP26', Press release, 12 Dec. 2020.
[116] Climate Action Tracker, 'New momentum reduces emissions gap, but huge gap remains—analysis', Press release, 23 Apr. 2021.