II. Armed conflict and peace processes in South Asia

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

This section focuses on the major internationalized civil war in Afghanistan, and the interstate border and subnational armed conflicts in India and Pakistan. The long-running and devastating war in Afghanistan, and the territorial dispute between India and Pakistan over the Kashmir region are crucial barometers for peace and stability in South Asia. In the former, there was renewed optimism following a peace agreement between the Taliban and the United States in February 2020, although subsequent peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan Government took time to get started and had agreed only procedural rules for further talks by the end of the year. In the latter, after a short but sharp escalation in the conflict in 2019 the situation returned to an uneasy stalemate in 2020. However, there was heightened tension and a short escalation in hostilities on the border between China and India, as discussed below. This China–India border conflict is likely to be an equally important barometer for regional stability in the coming years.

South Asia remains one of the regions most affected by armed conflicts involving non-state groups and state security forces. For example, the *Global Terrorism Index 2020* noted the region recorded more deaths from terrorism in 2019 than any other region (as was also the case in 2018). Afghanistan, India and Pakistan were among the top 10 countries most affected by terrorism worldwide (and have all appeared in the top 10 for over a decade).[2]

Armed conflict in Afghanistan

The war in Afghanistan (2001–present) continued into its 19th year in 2020, although the wider historical conflict in Afghanistan began with the 1979–89 Soviet–Afghan War. It was the deadliest armed conflict in the

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

[2] IEP, *Global Terrorism Index 2020: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism* (IEP: Sydney, Nov. 2020), pp. 18, 43.

Table 4.2. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Afghanistan, 2017–20

Event type	2017	2018	2019	2020
Battles	26 326	31 728	26 510	15 120
Explosions/remote violence	9 587	10 894	14 584	5 187
Protests, riots and strategic developments	259	287	198	167
Violence against civilians	434	369	388	464
Total	**36 606**	**43 278**	**41 680**	**20 938**

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

Source: ACLED, 'Data export tool', accessed 23 Jan. 2021.

world in 2020 (in terms of conflict-related fatalities), but there was progress in the Afghan peace process. As discussed below, a conditional peace agreement between the Taliban and the USA was signed in February 2020 and intra-Afghan peace talks have been ongoing since September 2020, with a preliminary procedural agreement reached between the Afghan Government and the Taliban in December 2020.

Nonetheless, the humanitarian consequences of the conflict continued to be stark. There were nearly 21 000 estimated fatalities due to the conflict over the course of the year, a 50 per cent reduction from 2019 (see table 4.2).[3] Most of these were combat related and involved Afghan Government forces and the Taliban. Meanwhile, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) continued to document high levels of violence against civilians. It recorded 8820 civilian casualties (3035 fatalities and 5785 injuries) in 2020. While this represents a 15 per cent reduction from 2019 and the lowest number since 2013, total civilian casualties in the past decade (1 January 2011 to 31 December 2020) totalled nearly 100 000 (with more than 33 000 killed and over 64 000 injured).[4]

Food security in Afghanistan has steadily deteriorated over the past five years, with the percentage of food-insecure people doubling (from 37 per cent in September 2015 to 76 per cent in November 2020). The number of people in crisis or emergency levels of food insecurity has increased to 16.9 million people, more than a fivefold increase (from 8 per cent to 42 per cent of the population) over the same period. The spread of Covid-19 throughout Afghanistan—resulting in more than 48 000 confirmed cases and at least

[3] Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 'Data export tool', accessed 23 Jan. 2021.

[4] UNAMA, *Afghanistan: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, Annual Report 2020* (UNAMA and UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner: Kabul, Feb. 2021).

1900 deaths as of 7 December 2020 (although numbers are likely to be higher due to underreporting)—has exacerbated rising food insecurity.[5]

There have been numerous controversial practices and events associated with the Afghan conflict; at least three more occurred or came to light in 2020. First, in early March 2020 the International Criminal Court (ICC) ruled it could open an investigation into alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity in Afghanistan committed by the Afghan authorities, the Taliban and the US military. This decision was the first from the ICC involving US forces (the USA is not a member state, but Afghanistan is), and led to the US administration applying sanctions against ICC officials in June and September.[6] Second, there were allegations that in 2019 a Russian military intelligence unit secretly offered payments to Taliban-linked militants to kill US and coalition forces. These US allegations were subsequently widened to include Iran. Iran and Russia both denied the allegations.[7] Third, elite Australian soldiers (part of the International Security Assistance Force, led by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)) allegedly committed over 36 war crimes, including murder and cruel treatment of non-combatants, in Afghanistan between 2009 and 2013, according to an official report by the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force. The report refers to one heavily redacted incident as 'possibly the most disgraceful episode in Australia's military history'.[8]

The Taliban–US peace agreement

During 2019 the Taliban and the USA reached a framework agreement in which the USA would withdraw military forces in exchange for credible assurances from the Taliban that it would prohibit terrorist groups from operating inside the country. The withdrawal of US troops was conditional on the Taliban also agreeing to a ceasefire and holding direct talks with the Afghan Government.[9] Despite these Taliban–US talks being the most

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[5] UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), *Humanitarian Needs Overview: Afghanistan* (UN OCHA: Dec. 2020), p. 6; and Watkins, A., 'Covid-19 in Afghanistan: Compounding crises', International Crisis Group Commentary, 6 May 2020.

[6] ICC, 'Judgment on the appeal against the decision on the authorisation of an investigation into the situation in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan', 5 Mar. 2020; Deutsch, A. and van den Berg, S., 'International Criminal Court members defend it in face of US sanctions', Reuters, 23 June 2020; and 'International Criminal Court officials sanctioned by US', BBC News, 2 Sep. 2020.

[7] Savage, C., Schmitt, E. and Schwirtz, M., 'Russia secretly offered Afghan militants bounties to kill US troops, intelligence says', *New York Times*, 26 June 2020; 'Afghanistan war: Russia denies paying militants to kill US troops', BBC News, 28 June 2020; and Borger, J., 'Iran reportedly paid bounties to Afghan group for attacks on Americans', *The Guardian*, 17 Aug. 2020.

[8] Commonwealth of Australia, *Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force Afghanistan Inquiry Report* (Commonwealth of Australia: 2020). For an overview of the inquiry see Elphick, K., 'The Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force Afghanistan Inquiry (Brereton Inquiry): A quick guide', Australian Parliamentary Library, Research paper series, 3 Sep. 2020.

[9] Mashal, M., 'US and Taliban agree in principle to peace framework, envoy says', *New York Times*, 28 Jan. 2019.

promising of the various strands of a multilevel and multiactor Afghan peace process, they collapsed in September 2019.[10]

However, in December 2019 official Taliban–US talks resumed in Doha, Qatar. These led to a seven-day partial ceasefire that began on 22 February 2020.[11] At the end of the ceasefire period, on 29 February 2020, Zalmay Khalilzad, the US special representative for Afghanistan reconciliation, and Abdul Ghani Baradar, a representative of the Taliban, signed the 2020 Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan, in Doha.[12] The provisions of the deal reflected the earlier framework agreement. The USA agreed to an initial reduction of its force level from 13 000 to 8600 by July 2020, followed by a full withdrawal within 14 months, conditional on the Taliban meeting its commitments. The agreement received unanimous backing from the UN Security Council and was welcomed by NATO, which was expected to make parallel reductions in its Resolute Support Mission (RSM).[13] At the beginning of 2020 NATO's RSM consisted of about 16 500 troops, including about 8000 from the USA. A further 5000 US troops were deployed in Afghanistan as part of the US counterterrorism operation Freedom's Sentinel.[14]

The resulting intra-Afghan negotiations that were scheduled to begin on 10 March 2020 were delayed due to the disputed outcome of the 2019 Afghan presidential elections (which among other things prevented the formation of the Afghan Government negotiating team) and a stalled prisoner exchange.[15] The February agreement required the release of 5000 Taliban prisoners in exchange for 1000 government soldiers held by the Taliban. The Afghan Government initially rejected the prisoner exchange, but by the end of

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[10] For more information on the various international peace processes in Afghanistan see Davis, I., 'Armed conflict and peace processes in Asia and Oceania', *SIPRI Yearbook 2019*, pp. 62–65. For the main developments in 2019 see Davis, I. and Smit, T., 'Armed conflict and peace processes in South Asia', *SIPRI Yearbook 2020*, pp. 92–94.

[11] 'First round of resurrected US-Taliban peace talks open in Qatar', Al Jazeera, 7 Dec. 2019; and Qazi, S., 'US–Taliban truce begins, raising hopes of peace deal', Al Jazeera, 22 Feb. 2020.

[12] 'Agreement for bringing peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America', 29 Feb. 2020; and United Nations, 'Security Council welcomes significant steps towards ending war in Afghanistan, unanimously adopting Resolution 2513 (2020)', 10 Mar. 2020.

[13] 'Security Council resolution endorses moves towards long-sought Afghanistan peace', UN News, 10 Mar. 2020; and NATO, 'Statement by the North Atlantic Council on Afghanistan', Press release, 29 Feb. 2020.

[14] SIPRI Multilateral Peace Operations Database, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/pko>, accessed 1 Apr. 2021; NATO, 'Resolute Support Mission: Key facts and figures', Feb. 2020; and US Department of Defense, *Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, Report to Congress (US Department of Defense: Washington, DC, Dec. 2019).

[15] Qazi, S., 'Will the Ghani-Abdullah rivalry undermine Afghan peace process?', Al Jazeera, 9 Mar. 2020.

March it was indicating some prisoners might be released.[16] In the meantime the Taliban resumed military operations against Afghan Government forces, while the USA sought to apply pressure on the Afghan Government to compromise by threatening (but not implementing) a $1 billion cut in US security assistance to the country.[17]

A surge in violence

Although the Taliban stopped conducting attacks against the US-led coalition forces in Afghanistan, attacks against Afghan security forces increased significantly. In the 45 days after the agreement (between 1 March and 15 April 2020) the Taliban conducted more than 4500 attacks, and more than 900 Afghan security forces were killed.[18] US air strikes continued, including against the Taliban, but at a much-reduced tempo.

On 31 March 2020 the first direct talks took place between the Afghan Government and the Taliban on exchanging prisoners, but they quickly collapsed.[19] The cycle of violence continued in May with several insurgent attacks, including on a hospital in Kabul and a suicide bombing in Nangarhar, resulting in more than 100 civilian casualties. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani blamed the Taliban and announced Afghan security forces would drop their defensive posture and resume offensive operations against the group. The Taliban denied responsibility and no other group claimed the attacks, although the USA blamed the Islamic State in the Khorasan Province (IS-KP) for both of them.[20] Afghan security forces arrested two IS-KP leaders in the first half of the year, while the UN estimated that the group had 2200 members in 2020.[21]

On 17 May 2020 President Ghani and his rival Abdullah Abdullah signed a power-sharing deal ending the long-running dispute about the outcome

[16] Sanger, D. E., Schmitt, E. and Gibbons-Neff, T., 'A secret accord with the Taliban: When and how the US would leave Afghanistan', *New York Times*, 8 Mar. 2020; Sediqi, A. Q., 'Taliban rule out taking part in Afghan talks until prisoners freed', Reuters, 2 Mar. 2020; and Sediqi, A. Q. and Shalizi, H., 'Taliban say prisoner release by Afghan government to start by end of March', Reuters, 25 Mar. 2020.

[17] Borger, J., 'US to cut $1bn of Afghanistan aid over failure to agree unity government', *The Guardian*, 24 Mar. 2020; and Mohammed, A., Landay, J. and Ali, I., 'US has not cut Afghan security funds despite Pompeo vow of immediate slash—sources', Reuters, 20 May 2020.

[18] Shalizi, H., Sediqi, A. Q. and Jain, R., 'Taliban step up attacks on Afghan forces since signing US deal: Data', Reuters, 1 May 2020.

[19] 'Afghanistan and Taliban begin direct talks with aim of prisoner swap', BBC News, 1 Apr. 2020; and 'Afghanistan peace deal: Taliban walk out of "fruitless" talks', BBC News, 7 Apr. 2020.

[20] 'Afghanistan: Deadly suicide attack targets funeral in Nangarhar', Al Jazeera, 12 May 2020; and 'US says Islamic State conducted attack on Kabul hospital', Reuters, 15 May 2020.

[21] Mines, A. and Jadoon, A., 'Can the Islamic State's Afghan province survive its leadership losses?', Lawfare, 17 May 2020; and United Nations, Security Council, 'Eleventh report of the secretary-general on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of member states in countering the threat', S/2020/774, 4 Aug. 2020, pp. 6–7. On the rivalry between the IS-KP and the Taliban see Semple, M., 'How the Taliban's rivalry with ISIS is shaping the Afghan peace talks', World Politics Review, 22 Dec. 2020.

of the 2019 presidential elections. Abdullah was assigned responsibility for peace negotiations with the Taliban.[22] On 25 May 2020 the Taliban unilaterally declared a three-day ceasefire, and shortly afterwards the Afghan Government agreed to release up to 2000 Taliban prisoners.[23] However, these goodwill gestures did not last. The Taliban carried out a series of attacks on Afghan security forces in June, described by one Afghan official as the 'deadliest' week in Afghanistan's 19 years of conflict.[24]

Despite a continuation of high levels of violence against the Afghan civilian population, including roadside bombs and targeted killings, incremental progress continued to be made in prisoner exchanges.[25] At the beginning of September it was confirmed that all but 7 of the 5000 prisoners on the Taliban list had been released, thus paving the way for intra-Afghan peace talks.[26]

Intra-Afghan negotiations

Talks between representatives from the Afghan Government and the Taliban began in Doha on 12 September 2020. Many of the key negotiators were the children of officials and insurgents who played major roles in the Soviet conflict in Afghanistan in the 1980s.[27] The initial discussions focused on seeking agreement on an agenda and a road map for more detailed talks later. However, reports suggested that both sides were far apart on basic issues such as a ceasefire and women's rights.[28]

Fighting continued despite several rounds of negotiations in Doha. In October the USA carried out air strikes against Taliban fighters in Helmand province, after a major offensive saw insurgents take over government military bases in the region and close in on the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah. The USA renewed diplomatic efforts with the Taliban to try to de-escalate the fighting.[29]

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[22] 'Afghanistan: Rival leaders Ghani and Abdullah in power-sharing deal', BBC News, 17 May 2020.

[23] Dwyer, C., '3-day truce, prisoner release deal inspire hopes for reconciliation in Afghanistan', NPR, 25 May 2020; and Salizi, H., 'Afghanistan begins freeing 900 Taliban prisoners, urges truce extension', Reuters, 26 May 2020.

[24] 'Afghanistan reports "deadliest" week in its 19 years of conflict', France 24, 23 June 2020.

[25] For details on civilian casualties see UNAMA, 'Afghanistan: Protection of civilians in armed conflict, Midyear report: 1 January–30 June 2020', July 2020.

[26] 'Loya Jirga approves release of 400 Taliban prisoners', Tolo News, 9 Aug. 2020; and Shalizi, H. and Sediqi, A. Q., 'Afghan officials primed for talks with Taliban after deal on prisoners: Sources', Reuters, 3 Sep. 2020.

[27] Mashal, M., 'At Afghan peace talks, hoping to end their fathers' war', *New York Times*, 5 Oct. 2020. For an assessment of potential Taliban negotiating perspectives see International Crisis Group, *Taking Stock of the Taliban's Perspectives on Peace*, Asia Report no. 311 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 11 Aug. 2020).

[28] Sediqi, A. Q. and Shalizi, H., 'Afghan peace negotiators far apart on basic issues such as ceasefire, women's rights', Reuters, 21 Sep. 2020; and 'When will the real talks begin? As America draws down its troops, Afghans clear their throats', *The Economist*, 19 Sep. 2020.

[29] 'US air strikes target Taliban fighters advancing on key Afghan city', Reuters, 12 Oct. 2020.

With the peace negotiations stalled and the Taliban increasing attacks near important cities such as Kandahar, in mid November it was reported that the USA was preparing to withdraw troops from Afghanistan (as well as Iraq and Somalia). Under a draft order of the US Department of Defense, the USA would roughly halve the number of soldiers in Afghanistan—from 4500 to 2500—by January 2021.[30] While the Taliban welcomed the US announcement, some NATO allies were concerned that the reductions could undermine the Afghan Government and destabilize the peace talks.[31]

At an international donor conference in Geneva, Switzerland, on 23–24 November 2020 the international community agreed to support Afghanistan with a total of around $12 billion over the next four years. In a new framework agreement for the partnership, the Afghan Government committed to respect democracy, the rule of law, human rights and gender equality, and to take concrete steps against rampant corruption. The conference participants also adopted a communiqué calling for an immediate, permanent and comprehensive ceasefire.[32]

On 2 December 2020 the Afghan Government and the Taliban reached a preliminary agreement—their first written agreement during 19 years of war—to move forward with more detailed negotiations and peace talks, including discussions of a ceasefire.[33] However, by the end of the year the talks had faltered and violence was rising again, with the Taliban seemingly abandoning any initial restraint. An increasing number of casualties appeared to be the result of targeted assassinations.[34]

Conclusions

With neither the Afghan Government nor the Taliban showing much inclination for compromise, the important advances in peace talks made during 2020 remained fragile and could be reversed during 2021. With a conditional deadline for complete US and NATO military withdrawal by May 2021, uncertainty over the incoming Biden administration's approach and the Taliban apparently in the ascendancy, the future of the peace process remained uncertain.[35]

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[30] Gibbons-Neff, T., Rahim, N. and Faizi, F., 'US troops are packing up, ready or not', *New York Times*, 17 Nov. 2020.

[31] 'Taliban hails US troop drawdown from Afghanistan as "good step"', France 24, 18 Nov. 2020; and 'Guns and poses: As America pulls out of Afghanistan the Taliban fights on', *The Economist*, 18 Nov. 2020.

[32] 'Communiqué', 2020 Afghanistan Conference on Peace Prosperity and Self-Reliance, Geneva, 24 Nov. 2020; 'Afghanistan conference draws donor pledges and calls for lasting ceasefire', UN News, 24 Nov. 2020; and 'Strong support for Afghanistan at the 2020 Afghanistan conference', UNAMA, 24 Nov. 2020.

[33] 'Afghan gov't, Taliban announce breakthrough deal in peace talks', Al Jazeera, 2 Dec. 2020.

[34] Graham-Harrison, E., 'Gunmen shoot dead Afghan journalist and her driver', *The Guardian*, 10 Dec. 2020; and Glinski, S., 'Taliban denies targeting media as 50th journalist dies in Afghanistan', *The Guardian*, 3 Dec. 2020.

[35] International Crisis Group, 'What future for Afghan peace talks under a Biden administration?', Asia Briefing no. 165, 13 Jan. 2021.

Figure 4.1. The disputed territory in Kashmir

Notes: The boundaries, names and designations used here do not imply any endorsement or acceptance by SIPRI of claims or stances in disputes over specific territories. ***Aksai Chin:*** Both India and China claim the Aksai Chin plateau, which has been administered by China since the 1962 Indo-China War. India considers it part of Ladakh; China considers the plateau a part of its Xinjiang province and Tibet. ***Azad Kashmir and Jammu and Kashmir:*** These regions are considered to be part of Kashmir by all countries involved. ***Gilgit Baltistan:*** Pakistan does not consider this region to be part of Kashmir, but India does. ***Ladakh:*** India does not consider this to be part of Kashmir but Pakistan does. ***Shaksgam Valley:*** Originally administered by Pakistan, until Pakistan relinquished its claim over to China in 1963. ***Siachin Glacier:*** India controls two-thirds of this glacier, but both India and Pakistan maintain a military presence.

Source: Ethirajan, A. and Pandey, V., 'China–India border: Why tensions are rising between the neighbours', BBC News, 30 May 2020.

Territorial disputes in Kashmir between China, India and Pakistan

The Kashmir region of some 18 million people has been the subject of a dispute since the independence of British India and the creation of India and Pakistan in 1947 (see figure 4.1). Kashmir is mainly divided between India and Pakistan, but claimed by both in full. India administers the area south of the line of control (LOC), which includes Jammu, Ladakh and the Kashmir Valley. Pakistan administers north-western Kashmir (comprising Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Kashmir), while China controls a small part of the region (the Shaksgam Valley and Aksai Chin).

The principal conflict has been between India and Pakistan, which have fought three of their four wars over Kashmir (1947–48, 1965 and 1999)—and the other one over Bangladeshi independence (1971)—and have been involved in numerous armed clashes and military stand-offs. In addition to national and territorial contestations, the conflict involves various political demands by religious, linguistic, regional and ethnic groups in both parts of divided Kashmir. There have also been many talks and confidence-building measures over the years that sought to improve the relationship, but no current peace process.[36] There are no accurate cumulative casualty statistics for the conflict. In 2008 the Indian Government stated the death toll since the start of the current phase of the conflict in the late 1980s was over 47 000, while the South Asian Terrorism Portal estimates over 45 000 fatalities from 'terrorist violence' during 1988–2019.[37]

Tensions between India and Pakistan surged again in 2019, especially as a result of the military confrontation across the de facto border in Kashmir in February 2019. In August 2019 the Indian Government dissolved the state of Jammu and Kashmir and formed two union territories ruled by the Indian home ministry: Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh. China and Pakistan strongly criticized this move.[38] Early in 2020 (as part of the August 2019 reforms) the Indian Government passed a new residency law, allowing Indian citizens from outside the region who had worked, served or studied in Kashmir for 7–10 years to become permanent residents for the first time. This and other reforms, acts of political repression and harsh counter-insurgency measures appear likely to fuel further militancy.[39]

A further redrawing of the maps in Kashmir by Pakistan and China in the second half of 2020 indicated a new tense phase in the conflict.[40] On 4 August 2020 Pakistan published a new map showing all of Kashmir as part of Pakistan—restricting the disputed territory only to the areas that are 'illegally occupied' by India. In November 2020 Pakistan announced plans to formally integrate the Gilgit-Baltistan region into Pakistan.[41] During the

[36] On the history and characteristics of the conflict see e.g. Behera, N. C., 'The Kashmir conflict: Multiple fault lines', *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2016), pp. 41–63; and Zutshi, C. (ed.), *Kashmir: History, Politics, Representation* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2017).

[37] 'India revises Kashmir death toll to 47,000', *Hindustan Times*, 21 Nov. 2008; and 'Fatalities in terrorist violence 1988–2019', South Asia Terrorism Portal, [n.d.].

[38] For developments in 2019 see Smith, D., 'Flashpoints', *SIPRI Yearbook 2020*, pp. 8–10; and *SIPRI Yearbook 2020* (note 10), pp. 95–96.

[39] International Crisis Group, *Raising the Stakes in Jammu and Kashmir*, Asia Report no. 310 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 5 Aug. 2020); and Bhalla, A., 'Kashmir: Big spike in local terror recruitment amid lockdown even as forces killed top commanders', *India Today*, 8 June 2020. On the origins of the militancy in Kashmir see Mehdi, S. E., 'Serving the militant's cause: The role of Indo-Pak state policies in sustaining militancy in Kashmir', *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2020), pp. 244–55.

[40] Wagner, C. and Stanzel, A., 'Redrawing the maps in Kashmir', SWP Comment no. 52, Nov. 2020.

[41] 'Pakistan affirms claim to IHK with new map', *Dawn*, 5 Aug. 2020; and Farooq, U., 'Pakistani PM says he will upgrade status of part of Kashmir, angering India', Reuters, 1 Nov. 2020.

border conflict with India (see below) the Chinese Government changed the territorial status quo when it declared in September 2020 that it would revert again to the Line of Actual Control (LAC) of 1959.[42]

The Indian–Pakistani conflict

While the situation in 2020 largely reverted to the status quo of relatively low levels of armed violence between India and Pakistan—consisting of: (*a*) regular exchanges of artillery fire and other clashes between Indian and Pakistani forces along the LOC, (*b*) cross-border and cross-LOC infiltration and attacks by militants and (*c*) Indian counter-insurgency operations inside Jammu and Kashmir—the number of these incidents appeared to be rising.[43] There were 431 battle-related fatalities in Jammu and Kashmir in 2020 (compared to 280 in 2019).[44] A new armed group—The Resistance Front— claimed several high-profile attacks on security personnel in April–May 2020.[45] In May Indian Government forces killed one of the leading figures in the region's largest rebel group, Hizbul Mujahideen, which is based in Pakistan-controlled Azad Kashmir.[46] Tensions escalated again in November with several deadly clashes along the LOC.[47]

The Chinese–Indian conflict

In June 2020, for the first time in over five decades, the border tensions between China and India in the disputed eastern Ladakh region of Kashmir turned deadly.[48] Several rounds of talks in the last three decades have failed to resolve the boundary disputes. Both sides have been building infrastructure to support military deployments along the border for about two decades, with Chinese infrastructure projects generally the more advanced. Alleged incursions along this disputed and informal border known as the LAC are common during the summer months, when both sides intensify patrols, but disputes are usually resolved locally through long-standing joint border protocols.[49]

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[42] Wagner and Stanzel (note 40); and Patranobis, S., 'China makes it official, wants to revert to 1959 LAC India has rejected many times', *ThePrint*, 29 Sep. 2020.

[43] ACLED, *Ten Conflicts to Worry About in 2021* (ACLED: Feb. 2021), pp. 7–10; and Shakil, S., '28 encounter killings in security operations: April most successful month for forces in Kashmir', *Indian Express*, 7 May 2020.

[44] ACLED, 'Data export tool', accessed 24 Jan. 2021.

[45] 'The Resistance Front: New terrorist group in Jammu and Kashmir amplifies attacks on social media', Atlantic Council, 16 July 2020.

[46] AP News, 'Top rebel commander killed by Indian forces in Kashmir', *The Guardian*, 6 May 2020.

[47] International Crisis Group, Conflict tracker, Nov. 2020.

[48] On the China–India rivalry see Paul, V. (ed.), *The China-India Rivalry in the Globalization Era* (Georgetown University Press: Washington, DC, 2018).

[49] Singh, S., 'Line of actual control (LAC): Where it is located, and where India and China differ', *Indian Express*, 1 June 2020.

During May 2020 military stand-offs were being reported in at least three locations—the Galwan Valley, Hot Springs and Pangong Lake (see figure 4.1)—with military reinforcements made by both sides.[50] India accused China of preventing Indian patrols from accessing those contested areas where both sides had previously patrolled. According to some Indian analysts changes to the LAC resulted in Chinese territorial gains of more than 1000 square kilometres, although no additional territorial losses were officially acknowledged by the Indian Government.[51] While attempting to de-escalate the situation, a gunless but brutal confrontation—troops deployed in this sensitive border area follow long-standing protocols that prohibit the use of firearms—in the Galwan Valley on 15 June 2020 resulted in the deaths of at least 20 Indian soldiers and an unknown number of Chinese soldiers (although China later acknowledged that four of its soldiers died), with many others likely injured on both sides.[52]

Drivers for this escalation are contested but are mainly related to domestic and bilateral dynamics on both sides, including recent infrastructure projects.[53] Several rounds of high-level meetings between Chinese and Indian military commanders during June–August and a meeting of defence ministers on 4 September failed to resolve the situation. On 7 September gunshots were fired along the LAC for the first time in 45 years. Both sides blamed each other for the incident.[54] During talks between the countries' foreign ministers in Moscow on 10 September a joint statement called for dialogue and disengagement to ease tensions. 'The two sides also agreed to continue to have dialogue and communication through the Special Representative mechanism on the India-China boundary question', the

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[50] Boyd, H. and Nouwens, M., 'Understanding the military build-up on the China-India border', International Institute for Strategic Studies, 18 June 2020; and Topychkanov, P., 'New trends and developments in border tensions between China and India', SIPRI WritePeace Blog, 29 June 2020.

[51] Singh, S., 'What Rajnath left out: PLA blocks access to 900 sq km of Indian territory in Depsang', The Wire, 17 Sep. 2020; Menon, S., 'What China hopes to gain from the standoff with India', The Wire, 3 Dec. 2020; and ANI News, 'China disrupted traditional patrolling pattern of Indian troops in Galwan Valley causing face-off conditions', 15 Sep. 2020.

[52] Singh, S., 'Explained: If soldiers on LAC were carrying arms, why did they not open fire?', Indian Express, 20 June 2020; Griffiths, J. et al., 'Twenty Indian soldiers dead after clash with China along disputed border', CNN, 17 June 2020; Myers, S. L., 'China acknowledges 4 deaths in last year's border clash with India', New York Times, 19 Feb. 2021; and Safi, M., Ellis-Petersen, H. and Davidson, H., 'Soldiers fell to their deaths as India and China's troops fought with rocks', The Guardian, 17 June 2020. On media coverage of the clashes in China and India see Altieri, R., Kannan, V. and Maheshwari, L., 'The days after: A retrospective on Chinese and Indian media coverage of the June 16 border conflict', Lawfare, 8 July 2020. With confirmed fatalities less than 25 it is not treated as an armed conflict within this volume. See definitions in chapter 2, section I, of this volume.

[53] Ethirajan, A. and Pandey, V., 'China–India border: Why tensions are rising between the neighbours', BBC News, 30 May 2020; 'Galwan Valley: Satellite images "show China structures" on India border', BBC News, 25 June 2020; and Topychkanov (note 50).

[54] 'India and China exchange their first border gunfire in 45 years', The Economist, 8 Sep. 2020; and Kaushik, K., 'First time in 45 years, shots fired along LAC as troops foil China's bid to take a key height', Indian Express, 9 Sep. 2020.

statement said.[55] A joint working group to address this boundary question was established in 1989, and by 2019 the special representatives had met 22 times. By mid November 2020 the two sides were discussing a staggered military disengagement from some of the locations.[56]

However, with tensions persisting at the end of 2020, there were fears that the military stand-off on the border could become a permanent feature in the strategic competition between these two nuclear-armed states.[57] Chinese dam projects in Tibet added to these tensions and threatened India's water security.[58] There was also a geostrategic dimension with India's support for the USA being considered as part of wider Chinese–US tensions (see section I).[59]

Conclusions

In 2020 Pakistan and China redrew their maps on Kashmir in reaction to India's move in August 2019, thereby transforming Kashmir into a territorial conflict between three nuclear-armed states. While this configuration was partly there before 2020 it was relatively muted because of the recognized status quo on the western part of the LAC that had existed since the 1990s. With the breakdown of the fragile consensus between China and India the conflict dynamic in Kashmir became even more unpredictable.

India's internal armed conflicts and intercommunal tensions

In addition to the armed conflict zone in Kashmir, in 2020 there was an ongoing non-international armed conflict in India between the Indian Government and the Naxalites (Maoist rebels in rural areas of central and eastern India). The Maoist insurgency started in 1967 and entered its current phase in 2004.[60] On 5 April 2020 the Communist Party of India (Maoist) offered a ceasefire to enable community health workers to address the spread of Covid-19.[61] The Indian Government, which was given five days to respond

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[55] Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, 'Joint press statement—Meeting of external affairs minister and the foreign minister of China', 10 Sep. 2020.

[56] 'India, China close in on plan to end months of border standoff', Al Jazeera, 13 Nov. 2020; and Rajagopalan, R. P., 'India-China talks on the standoff: Cautious optimism?', The Diplomat, 12 Nov. 2020.

[57] Purohit, K., 'As India-China border stand-off endures, a fear: Ladakh is the new Kashmir', *South China Morning Post*, 12 Oct. 2020.

[58] Chen, F., 'China's dam plan in Tibet worries downstream India', Asia Times, 1 Dec. 2020.

[59] Myers, S. L., 'China's military provokes its neighbours but the message is for the United States', *New York Times*, 26 June 2020.

[60] On the history of the conflict see Sahoo, N., 'Half a century of India's Maoist insurgency: An appraisal of state response', Observer Research Foundation, Occasional Paper no. 198, June 2019.

[61] Chatterjee, M., 'Days after killing 17 troopers, Maoists offer Covid ceasefire', *Times of India*, 7 Apr. 2020.

to the offer, ignored it and thereafter the levels of activity by the Naxalites appeared to return to normal pre-ceasefire levels.[62]

There were various low-level insurgencies in the north-east of India in 2020, but attacks by insurgent groups were rare. Even the most violent insurgency in Nagaland appeared to be close to a resolution.[63] Peace talks were initiated in 1997 between the Indian Government and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM), the main separatist group in Nagaland, and the Naga National Political Groups (NNPGs). A framework agreement was reached in 2015. Talks continued in 2020 and by early October the Indian Government was reported to be close to signing a peace accord with the NNPGs and several civil society organizations, but not the NSCM-IM and several other stakeholders. Two symbolic issues continued to divide the NSCM-IM and the Indian Government: a separate flag and a separate constitution for the Nagas.[64] The situation remained deadlocked at the end of the year.[65]

Finally, intercommunal (mainly Hindu–Muslim) tensions remained a key security issue in India in 2020. Hindu–Muslim communal violence continued following the introduction of a controversial citizenship law in December 2019, which has been criticized for being discriminatory towards Muslims and undermining India's secularism.[66] In India's capital New Delhi in February 2020, for example, intercommunal violence left 53 people dead and hundreds injured.[67] Religious polarization was further heightened in April–May 2020 when Covid-19-related accusations (mainly directed at the Muslim community) fuelled intercommunal attacks, although these were partly tempered by a strict national lockdown to contain the spread of the disease.[68] Overall, conflict-related fatalities in India in 2020 were lower than in 2019 (see table 4.3).

[62] Bhatia, B., 'For red corridor to win Covid war, truce a must', *Deccan Chronicle*, 19 Apr. 2020; and Miller, A., 'Call unanswered: A review of responses to the UN appeal for a global ceasefire', ACLED, 13 May 2020.

[63] 'Insurgency on decline in north east, tri-junction between Assam, Arunachal and north Nagaland arc of violence: Eastern army commander', First Post, 14 Feb. 2020.

[64] Anand, M., 'Naga accord "draft" finalised, demand for separate flag rejected', *Deccan Chronicle*, 7 Oct. 2020; and Chakma, A., 'What is getting in the way of the 3rd round of Indo-Naga peace talks?', The Diplomat, 1 Oct. 2020.

[65] Nathanael, M. P., 'The Nagaland deadlock', *Indian Express*, 30 Dec. 2020.

[66] Ellis-Petersen, H., 'Violent clashes continue in India over new citizenship bill', *The Guardian*, 13 Dec. 2019; and Vaid, D., 'One year of India's Citizenship Amendment Act', Deutsche Welle, 11 Dec. 2020.

[67] Ellis-Petersen, H., 'Delhi protests: Death toll climbs amid worst religious violence for decades', *The Guardian*, 26 Feb. 2020; and 'Situation report—3: Delhi violence', Sphere India, 11 Mar. 2020.

[68] Ellis-Petersen, H. and Rahman, S. A., 'How lives were destroyed under cover of lockdown in a small Indian town', *The Guardian*, 8 June 2020; and Saha, T., 'Telinipara riots of West Bengal: A story of human suffering', Times Now News, 14 May 2020.

Table 4.3. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in India, 2016–20

Event type	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Battles	1 007	830	1 203	571	658
Explosions/remote violence	69	64	148	114	15
Protests, riots and strategic developments	282	209	224	308	322
Violence against civilians	301	317	525	533	293
Total	**1 659**	**1 420**	**2 100**	**1 526**	**1 288**

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

Source: ACLED, 'Data export tool', accessed 24 Jan. 2021.

Pakistan's internal armed conflicts and border conflict with Afghanistan

The Government of Pakistan is involved in low-level non-international armed conflicts with various armed groups acting throughout its territory, particularly Taliban-affiliated groups in the north-western Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and Baloch separatist fighters in the south-western province of Balochistan. Overall battle-related fatalities and deaths in Pakistan have declined considerably since the 2013–15 period (see table 4.4).[69] The UN estimates that more than 6000 Pakistani insurgents are based in Afghanistan, with most belonging to the Pakistan Taliban group, Tehreek-e-Taliban.[70]

The current phase of the Baloch insurgency started in 2003, but it has been at a relatively low level since 2012. The most prominent Baloch nationalist group—the Baloch Liberation Army—attempted an attack on the Pakistan stock exchange building in Karachi in June 2020.[71] There were also several attacks against Pakistani soldiers within Balochistan, where there are a number of high-profile China–Pakistan economic corridor projects.[72] Human rights violations by state security forces in Balochistan also continued to be documented.[73]

[69] Also see Pak Institute for Peace Studies, 'Pakistan security report 2020', *Conflict and Peace Studies*, vol. 13, no. 1 (Jan.–June 2021).

[70] United Nations, Security Council, 'Twenty-sixth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to Resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities', S/2020/717, 23 July 2020.

[71] Shah, S., 'Gunmen attack Pakistan stock exchange, citing its links to China', *Wall Street Journal*, 29 June 2020.

[72] 'Pakistan: 7 troops killed in Balochistan insurgent attack', Deutsche Welle, 27 Dec. 2020.

[73] Mir, N. A., 'Abysmal human rights situation in Balochistan', Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses Comment, 30 May 2020.

Table 4.4. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Pakistan, 2013–20

Event type	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Battles	1 532	1 860	1 976	1 173	891	479	630	519
Explosions/remote violence	2 203	2 826	1 956	815	668	410	185	161
Protests, riots and strategic developments	72	53	75	40	16	44	14	39
Violence against civilians	667	639	541	188	150	293	328	94
Total	**4 474**	**5 378**	**4 548**	**2 216**	**1 725**	**1 226**	**1 157**	**813**

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

Source: ACLED, 'Data export tool', accessed 24 Jan. 2021.

In July the most intense border clashes between Afghan and Pakistani forces in recent years killed at least 23 civilians on the Afghan side in two separate incidents. In a second incident on 30 July 2020 Pakistani forces reportedly fired heavy artillery into civilian areas after protests by communities on both sides, who were demanding the reopening of a border crossing that Pakistan had closed to try to limit the spread of Covid-19.[74]

[74] Shah, T. and Mashal, M., 'Border clashes with Pakistan leaves 15 Afghan civilians dead, officials say', *New York Times*, 31 July 2020. On the impact of Covid-19 in Pakistan see International Crisis Group, 'Pakistan Covid-19 crisis', Asia Briefing no. 162, 7 Aug. 2020.