

4. Armed conflict and peace processes in Asia and Oceania

Overview

Nine countries in Asia and Oceania experienced active armed conflicts in 2021 (two more than in 2020). These consisted of three in South Asia (section III), namely Afghanistan (major internationalized civil war), India (low-intensity combined interstate border and subnational armed conflicts) and Pakistan (high-intensity combined interstate border and subnational armed conflicts); four in South East Asia (section IV), namely a major armed conflict in Myanmar and low-intensity subnational armed conflicts in Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand; and a new low-intensity interstate conflict in Central Asia between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, where an outbreak of border clashes resulted in more than 25 battle-related deaths, taking it above the armed conflict threshold. Total conflict-related fatalities in Asia and Oceania increased by 59 per cent in 2021 (having fallen by nearly 50 per cent in 2020), mostly due to conflict-related fatalities increasing in Afghanistan, Myanmar and Pakistan.

Three trends remained a cause for concern in 2021: (a) the growing Chinese–United States rivalry, combined with an increasingly assertive Chinese foreign policy (see section II); (b) a range of complex threats and conflicts falling within the broad terrorism/counterterrorism rubric, involving both states and non-state actors; and (c) the growing impact of weather and climate hazards—especially floods, storms and droughts—in many of the region’s countries. The Covid-19 pandemic appeared to have minimal impact on the region’s armed conflicts in 2021, despite profound impacts on human security more generally.

Only a few of the armed conflicts were being addressed by ongoing or new peace processes in 2021. South and North Korea, China and the US agreed ‘in principle’ to declare a formal end to the Korean War (see section II). In Afghanistan the war effectively came to an end after the Taliban took control of the country following the final withdrawal of US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization forces. There was a new ceasefire between India and Pakistan regarding their ongoing interstate armed conflict over Kashmir, as well as a slight thawing in China–India relations. There were five multilateral peace operations active in Asia and Oceania in 2021—the same number as in 2020.

The war in Afghanistan was set to end in time for the 20th anniversary of the terrorist attacks on the United States of 11 September 2001 with the agreed withdrawal of US troops. However, the withdrawal precipitated the rapid collapse of the Afghan government and the Taliban’s triumphant return to power in Kabul. This left several lingering questions concerning the group’s

ability to govern and unify the country, the future of human rights and the role of women, and the likely response by regional powers and the rest of the international community. In particular, the Taliban faced a growing economic and humanitarian crisis driven by displacement, drought, the Covid-19 pandemic and an extreme dependency on external funds, much of which was suspended following their takeover.

The territorial conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir has generally involved relatively low levels of armed violence, largely consisting of regular artillery fire exchanges and other clashes between Indian and Pakistani forces along the Line of Control (LOC), and militant attacks and Indian counter-insurgency operations inside Jammu and Kashmir. However, following a United Arab Emirates-brokered ceasefire in February (the first such agreement since 2003), there was a significant drop in the number of ceasefire violations along the LOC. The ceasefire also enabled further bilateral dialogue between the parties, although this appears unlikely to overcome their divisions on Kashmir and other issues. After the deadly Chinese–Indian clashes in the Galwan Valley in 2020, there was a return to relative stability in territorial disputes along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in 2021, although both countries increased troop deployments and improved infrastructure on their respective sides of the LAC.

In Pakistan increased violence involving Taliban-affiliated groups in the north-western province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baloch separatist fighters in the south-western province of Balochistan led to an uptick in conflict-related deaths in 2021.

In Myanmar a military coup at the beginning of February 2021 ended the recent short period of civilian rule and led to escalating protests and violence throughout the country. The armed conflict was transformed from a low-intensity to a major armed conflict, with over 11 000 conflict-related deaths in 2021. At the end of the year government forces and resistance forces—a loose coalition of ethnic armed groups and civilian militias—were locked in a violent stalemate, which Association of Southeast Asian Nations-led diplomacy seemed unlikely to break. In addition to armed violence and regime oppression, Myanmar faced a growing humanitarian crisis characterized by deepening economic recession, internal displacement, collapsing healthcare, and surging poverty and food insecurity.

Two long-running insurgencies in the Philippines continued in 2021 at relatively low levels of violence: one in the Muslim-majority areas of the southern Philippines' Mindanao region and another involving the New People's Army of the Communist Party of the Philippines. However, as in recent years, it was the 'war on drugs' that appeared to produce the most fatalities in the Philippines during 2021.