



Conflict Trends in Asia, 1989–2022

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Over the past two years, government takeovers and coup d'états have been defining features of the conflict landscape in Asia. Until recently, one of the most violent conflicts in the world was located in Afghanistan, but since the takeover the number of battle-related deaths has significantly declined. However, this decrease in conflict intensity has not resulted in an increase in the quality of life under Taliban rule. In 2022, Myanmar surpassed Afghanistan as the country with the most battle-related deaths in the region after the Tatmadaw – Myanmar's military – took power in 2021. In this policy brief, I examine the conflict trends in Asia over the past thirty years.

Brief Points

- State-based battle-related deaths declined dramatically between 2021 and 2022, mostly due to the decline in conflicts in Afghanistan.
- There were 19 state-based conflicts in Asia in 2022, resulting in nearly 4,300 battle-related deaths.
- 2022 was the most violent year for state-based conflict in Myanmar since the UCDP began recording battle-related deaths in 1989.
- Since 2019, eight different communal groups in Papua New Guinea have been engaged in non-state conflict.

Conflict Trends in Asia

The coup d'état in Myanmar and the government takeover by the Taliban in Afghanistan were defining points for the conflict landscape in Asia over the past two years. In this policy brief, I break down trends in state-based, non-state, and one-sided violence in Asia between 1989 and 2022.¹

Figure 1 depicts conflict types and associated battle-related deaths in Asia since 1989. The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) distinguish between three types of conflict: state-based and non-state conflicts, as well as one-sided violence. The three lines in Figure 1 illustrate the trends in battle-related deaths for each conflict type; battle-related deaths are an important measure as they serve as an indicator of conflict severity. Battle-related deaths are fatalities caused by the warring parties that can be directly related to combat, including civilian losses. To be included as a conflict in the UCDP datasets,² a conflict must reach the threshold of 25 battle-related deaths within a calendar year. The number of battle-related deaths should be interpreted as baseline figures as obtaining exact data on conflict-related events is extremely difficult. The data described in this policy brief represent the best available estimates.

State-Based Conflict

State-based conflicts are defined as conflicts in which at least one actor is a government. In Asia, state-based conflicts are both the most common type of conflict and the deadliest type of conflict, as shown in Figure 1. This type of conflict includes conflicts between countries, such as that between the Governments of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and between a government and a non-state group, for example, between the Government of Thailand and Patani insurgents.

The number of state-based conflicts in Asia, as shown in light blue in Figure 1, has remained relatively stable over the last 33 years. However, there was a slight decline in 2020, when many COVID-19-related ceasefires caused some conflicts to fall below the 25 battle-related death threshold. In fact, there were fewer state-based conflicts in Asia in 2020 (fourteen) than in any year since 1989, which was the first year of the UCDP/PRIO dataset. In comparison, in 2022 there were nineteen state-based conflicts in Asia.

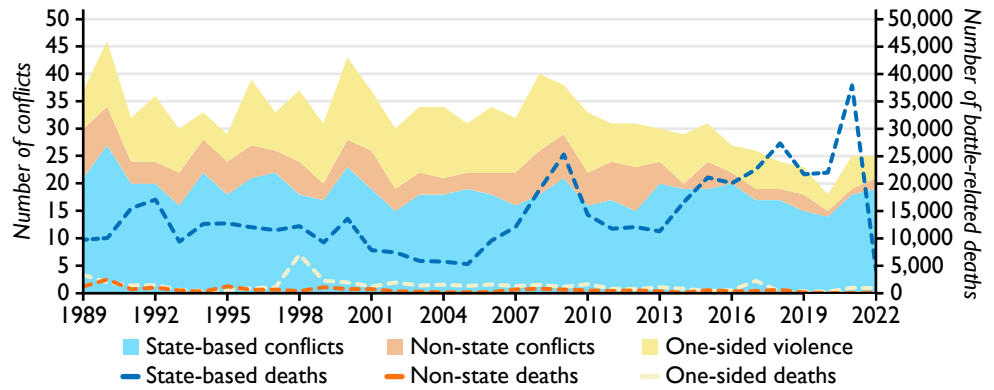


Figure 1: Number of conflicts and battle-related deaths in Asia, 1989–2022. Source: UCDP/PRIO dataset

One country can be affected by several state-based conflicts in a single year. For example, in 2022, the Government of the Philippines was engaged in two state-based conflicts: with the Islamic State (IS) and the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). In 2022, there were nineteen conflicts in eleven conflict-affected countries in Asia, indicating that several countries were home to more than one state-based conflict.

In contrast to the relatively stable number of conflicts in the region, the number of battle-related deaths fluctuates on a year-to-year basis. Following numerous years of consecutive increases in the number of battle-related deaths, 2022 marked a turning point in the region. As shown in Figure 2, the number of battle-related deaths resulting from the conflict in Afghanistan between the government and the Taliban declined significantly. This decline is attributed to the Taliban's seizure of the government in August 2021, resulting in an overall reduction in the intensity of conflict across the country. Consequently, for the first time since 2004, the conflict did not amount to a war. However, multiple opposition groups formed following the Taliban takeover. Leading up to the fall of the government, political and military leaders loosely formed an anti-Taliban force. After the takeover, the group announced the formation of the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan (NRF) based on the values of decentralization, multiculturalism, and social justice. Another anti-Taliban group, the Afghanistan Freedom Front (AFF), was formed after the takeover and was first recorded by the UCDP in 2022. The AFF seeks to free the country from the 'oppressive, illegitimate and tyrannical rule of the Taliban'. However, it is crucial to note that while conflict intensity has decreased in the country, this has not led to an improved quality of life

for Afghan citizens. In particular, women, as well as ethnic and linguistic minorities, who face intense hardships, discrimination, and violence under the harsh Taliban rule.

While in 2022 the level of conflict intensity in Afghanistan declined, the conflicts in Myanmar escalated. Myanmar also saw a government takeover in 2021, with the Tatmadaw – Myanmar's military – taking control in February 2021. Furthermore, 2022 was the most violent year for state-based conflict in Myanmar since the UCDP first began recording battle-related deaths in 1989. The military government of Myanmar (State Administration Council (SAC)) faced opposition from the existing Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) as well as opposition by the Anti-SAC Coalition, which is led by democratically elected officials and made up of civil defence forces. Following the coup d'état in 2021, several previously dormant conflicts re-emerged, signalling instability within the country.

In recent years, interstate conflicts have become increasingly rare but signs of a resurgence in conflict between states are emerging. One example of this trend is the escalating conflict between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, where, in 2022, battle-related deaths nearly tripled compared to the previous year. The hostilities there stem from the ongoing dispute over the shared, un-demarcated border. Initially, clashes were limited to the border region, but by September 2022 the fighting had extended into the Kyrgyz territory leading to the displacement of at least 100,000 Kyrgyzstani civilians.

Ceasefire negotiations between Tajik and Kyrgyz governments broke down several times in 2022. The 2021 presidential elections may have exacerbated the situation, as now President Japarov campaigned on territorial sovereignty

and border security. While Kyrgyzstan reached an agreement with another neighbouring country, Uzbekistan, over their shared border, the conflict of the Tajik-Kyrgyz border remains unresolved. Further adding to the complexity of the situation, both sides have been accused of committing war crimes during the conflict.

Non-State Conflict

Not all conflicts involve a state actor as a significant amount of contemporary violence takes place between groups which are not linked to the government. The UCDP defines a non-state con-

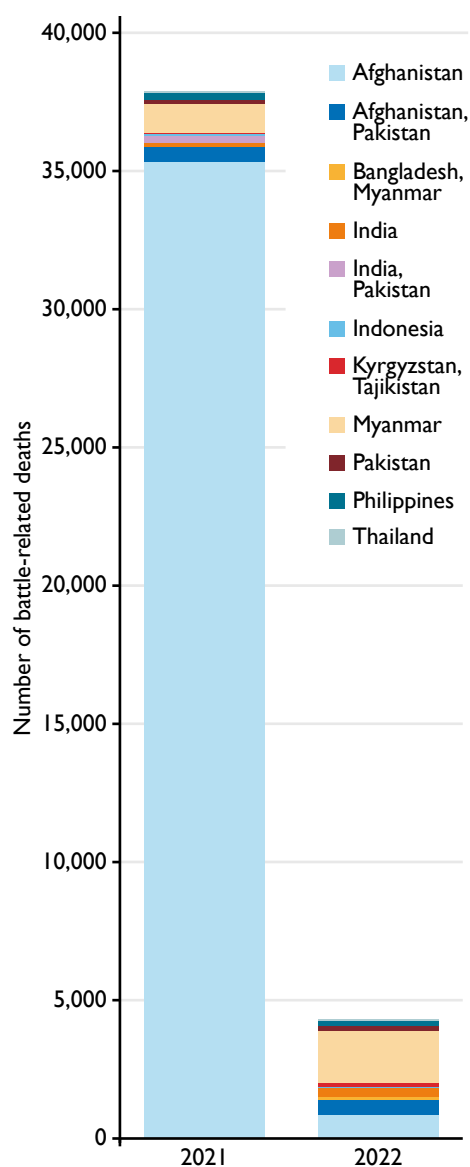


Figure 2: Battle-related deaths, 2021 and 2022

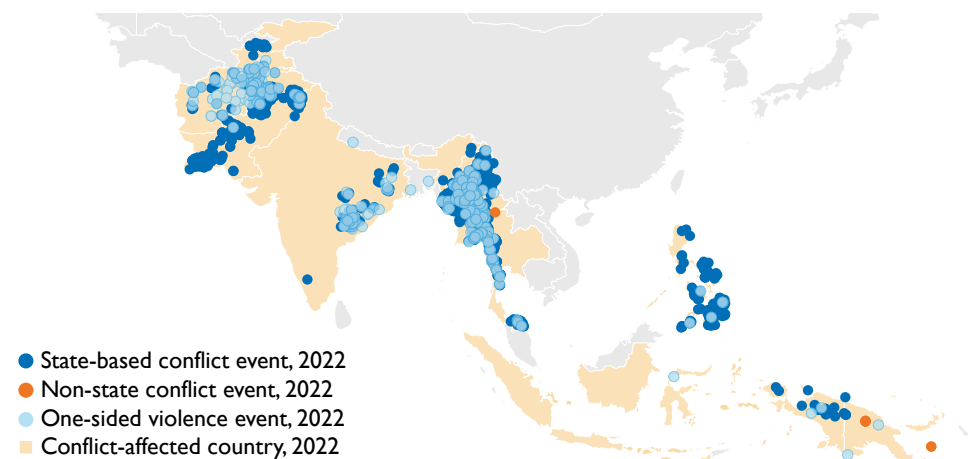


Figure 3: State-based, non-state, and one-sided violence events in Asia, 2022. Source: UCDP GED

flict as a conflict fought between two organized groups, neither of which is related to the state. Organized groups come in multiple forms: (i) formally organized groups, (ii) informally organized groups, and (iii) communal groups, which are defined as groups that have a common identity along religious, ethnic, national, tribal, or clan lines.

The number of non-state conflicts in Asia is depicted in Figure 1 (light orange). Most non-state conflicts in Asia take place between formally organized groups, followed by communal conflicts and informally organized groups. In 2022, there were two non-state conflicts in Asia, which is relatively few compared to other regions. However, this is still an increase from 2020 and 2021 when there was only one non-state conflict each year. If we compare the number of non-state conflicts in Asia to other regions, there has been a shift in where Asia ranks. During the 1990s, Asia was one of the two regions (second to Africa) with the most non-state conflicts. Today, it is second to last, with only Europe having fewer non-state conflicts. However, this is not because of a significant decrease in the number of non-state conflicts in Asia but rather an increase in the number of non-state conflicts in the Middle East and the Americas.

In 2022, both non-state conflicts took place in Papua New Guinea where non-state communal violence is becoming increasingly common. Since 2019, 8 different communal groups have been engaged in violence that surpassed the 25 battle-related death threshold. In 2022, conflicts occurred between the Aiyala and Nomali, as well as the Kuboma and Kulumata. Communal violence, or tribal conflict, is an accepted way of settling disputes in Papua New Guinea, and small-scale family conflicts can escalate into conflicts

between communities. Furthermore, in 2022, conflict and election-related violence resulted in the displacement of several communities and the closure of several health centres due to the attacks on, or lack of, staff.³ As the agrarian communities of Papua New Guinea face increasing hardships due to rapid population growth and the climate crisis, we may see an increase in the number of communal conflicts in the coming years.

One-Sided Violence

One-sided violence is defined as violence against civilians by a formally organized group, which can be either the state or a non-state group. While the number of deaths from one-sided violence in Asia has remained stable since 2021, the number of groups responsible for the violence decreased from seven to five. In 2022, the de facto Government of Myanmar (SAC) and the anti-SAC National Unity Government both perpetrated one-sided violence against civilians as violence against civilians has been part of the strategy of both groups. In a report on civilian casualties since the military coup, Min Zaw Oo and Stein Tønnesson state that an average of 150 to 200 civilians have been killed per month in 2022 in politically motivated murders by either SAC/government-affiliated forces or anti-military resistance groups.⁴

In Afghanistan, both the Taliban regime and IS were responsible for violence against civilians. Meanwhile, IS also maintained an active presence in the Philippines throughout the year, perpetrating violence against civilians. Elsewhere in the region, in India, where a state-based conflict between the Government and the Communist Party of India-Maoist (CPI-M)

was ongoing, the non-state CPI-M group also perpetrated one-sided violence against civilians. The UCDP has consistently recorded CPI-M-perpetrated violence against civilians in India since 2005. The CPI-M group aims to establish a ‘people’s government’ and perpetrates violence against individuals that they perceive as opposing their movement or collaborating with the state, including both civilians and security forces.⁵ Their tactics are wide-ranging, including raids, kidnappings, executions, assassinations, the use of landmines, and massacres.

Where are Conflicts Located?

Most conflicts are geographically concentrated, with only a small part of a country directly affected. Figure 3 depicts the conflict-affected areas in Asia, with the pale blue shading indicating countries with at least one conflict type in 2022 and the dots depicting where the conflict events took place. Conflict events include state-based and non-state conflicts, as well as one-sided violence.

While conflict events were spread out across most areas of Myanmar and the Philippines, other countries in the region experienced conflict hotspots within their territories. In particular, in Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, and Thailand conflict was contained to specific geographic locations.

In Pakistan, while the government engaged with the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) in peace talks and a ceasefire during the first half of 2022, fighting restarted after the TTP accused the government of not making sufficient efforts in moving the negotiations forward. The intensity of the fighting increased in the second half of the year and was concentrated in the Balochistan region and Federally Administered Tribal Areas, which both border Afghanistan.

Battle-related deaths were recorded on several islands in the Philippines in 2022, highlighting

the spread of conflict throughout the country. The Government of the Philippines was engaged in two state-based conflicts during 2022 – against IS and the CPP. The conflict with the CPP has been recorded by the UCDP nearly every year since the first year of the dataset in 1989, but the conflict extends well before 1989. The Government of the Philippines and the CPP have been engaged in several rounds of peace talks with an aim to end the 53-year-long “people’s war,” in particular those led by former president Rodrigo Duterte. However, the peace talks stalled and a return to violence occurred. The future of peace talks and an end to the conflict remain uncertain, as the controversial Anti-Terrorism Council, established in 2020, designated the CPP as a terrorist organization in 2021. Moreover, as the country moved towards elections in early 2022, violence spiked as the military sought to quell opposition forces prior to the end of Duterte’s period in office. In addition to the state-based conflict, one-sided violence was also recorded in the Philippines, as shown in Figure 3, but it did not surpass the 25 battle-related deaths threshold.

In Thailand, Patani insurgents initiated a call for increased territorial autonomy or independence of the Patani region in 2003. The population is primarily Malay-speaking and Muslim, and the region borders Malaysia. In 2022, conflict events occurred in Narathiwat, Pattani, Songkhla, and Yala provinces and mostly involved low-level clashes between insurgents and government forces.

Conclusion

In this policy brief, I examined conflict trends in Asia between 1989 and 2022. 2021 was pivotal for conflict in Asia with the ascension of two armed actors to power in different countries – the Taliban in Afghanistan and Myanmar’s military (Tatmadaw) in Myanmar. While we observed an overall decrease in the number of

battle-related deaths stemming from state-based conflicts, it must be noted that an improvement in the conflict severity does not necessarily translate into an improvement in the quality of life for the affected populations. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that the upheaval resulting from a coup d’état or a government takeover has far-reaching ramifications, especially in terms of other conflicts within a country, as exemplified by the situation in Myanmar. This underscores how fragile conflict-affected contexts are and how changes in the political or military landscapes can be far reaching. ■

Notes

1. This policy brief is part of a broader series on conflict trends: see Anna Marie Obermeier & Siri Aas Rustad (2023) *Conflict Trends: A Global Overview, 1946–2022*, PRIO Paper. Oslo: PRIO. Available at: www.prio.org/publications/13513.
2. All data in this policy brief comes from the UCDP. For more information, see: Lacina, Bethany Ann & Nils Petter Gleditsch (2006) *Monitoring Trends in Global Combat: A New Dataset of Battle Deaths*. In: Brunborg, Helge, Ewa Tabeau, & Henrik Urdal (eds) *The Demography of Armed Conflict*. Berlin: Springer, 145–165; and Davies, Shawn; Therese Pettersson & Magnus Öberg (2023) *Organized violence 1989–2022, and the return of conflict between states*, *Journal of Peace Research* 60(4): 691–708.
3. For more information on the implications of non-state conflict in Papua New Guinea, see: news.un.org/en/story/2022/09/1126051.
4. Min Zaw Oo & Stein Tønnesson (2023) *Counting Myanmar’s Dead: Reported Civilian Casualties since the 2021 Military Coup*. PRIO Paper. Oslo: PRIO.
5. For more information, see the UCDP Encyclopedia on conflicts in India: ucdp.uu.se/country/750.

THE AUTHOR

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THE PROJECT

The *Conflict Trends* project aims to answer questions relating to the causes, consequences, and trends in conflict. The project contributes to new conflict analyses within areas of public interest, and works to produce thorough and high-quality analysis for the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

PRIO

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.