

**A Short Investigation of Interstate Conflict since  
World War II: Has the Frequency or Severity  
Declined?**

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November 17, 2003

**Commissioned by the  
Human Security Centre**

The issue of whether there are recent trends in the level of conflict globally can be investigated by looking at conflict between states as well as within states. To look at the frequency and severity of international conflict, we make use of the Correlates of War data set on interstate wars and the Militarized Interstate Dispute (MID) Dataset. The first data set contains all instances of war between members of the interstate system, while the MID data set records lower levels of violence, specifically, all the instances where one nation-state threatened, displayed, or used force against another nation-state. Each data set extends from January 1, 1816 through December 31, 2001.<sup>1</sup> This extensive time-period is of use for many, but our present purposes are better served by restricting our presentation to the post-World War II years, emphasizing the period since 1992.

One of the primary benefits of using this data – besides its lengthy time-frame – is that it records cases where high levels of military fatalities occur as well as instances where only lower-levels of militarized hostility are present, such as a threat by one state against another or a brief border skirmish. These lower-levels of militarized action are important to pay attention to because many of them had and have the potential to escalate to more serious international confrontations involving large number of casualties; focusing only on those cases that escalated to serious levels of hostility ignores the potential that these lower-level hostilities have for becoming more serious conflicts. The existence of these lower-level disputes can be taken as an indication of the potential of escalation to more serious and lethal levels.

The portions of the MID data we are about to present records all instances of militarized interstate conflict. Those conflicts – which we will call “disputes” – are aggregations of smaller, more specific individual actions that are related to each other; we refer to these smaller actions that take place within the disputes as “incidents.” We have complete data for disputes since 1816 (though, again,

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<sup>1</sup> The war data set is currently undergoing revision, and we present war data for the last twelve years that are drawn from the MID data set. We fully expect these most recent wars as identified by the MID data to be incorporated into the war data set.

we will focus only on the period since 1946) and can analyze the more detailed incidents since 1992.

To determine trends in interstate conflict over the past decade, we will be looking at four measures, proceeding from larger aggregations of violence to the smaller and more specific. First, we will look at the frequency of the most violent and noticeable form of interstate conflict, war. Next we will investigate the frequency of international disputes since World War II and since 1992 in particular. Third, we will disaggregate those disputes into four categories, which depend upon the level of hostility used in the conflicts. Last, we will undertake a brief analysis of the frequency and nature of specific conflictual acts – the “incidents” – in the last decade. Our conclusion from these analyses is that the frequency of international conflict does not appear to be diminishing over the past decade, but there is some limited evidence to suggest that the severity and lethality of that violence is lessening.

### **Frequency of Interstate Wars**

A straight-forward method of measuring the level of international violence and to determine if that level is decreasing is to count the number of interstate wars that have begun in decades past. The Correlates of War Project defines interstate wars as occurring when two nation-states engaged in military action against one another that results in at least 1,000 battle fatalities. Excluded from this are civil wars, because they are not between two states. Civilian fatalities are also not included in determining whether the battle-fatality threshold has been past. Nonetheless, the COW war dataset is widely used among scholars and practitioners and does allow us to compare this form of international violence across decades.

Table 1 shows the number of interstate wars for each decade from 1942 through 2001. As can be seen, the past two decades have seen a decline in the number of interstate wars from the previous two decades. The period 1982-1991 had four wars (the Falklands War, Israel-Syria, Sino-Vietnamese in 1987, and the

Gulf War I), while the decade since the end of the Cold War had five. Those five wars are: Armenia-Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, 1992-1995; war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, 1998-2000; the Congo War of 1998-2000; the 1999 Kargil War between India and Pakistan; and the war in Afghanistan in 2001.<sup>2</sup> While drawing lessons from such an aggregated indicator as the number of interstate wars, it appears that this particular form of violence has become slightly less frequent in the past twenty years.

### **General Trends in Militarized Interstate Disputes**

We move now to an investigation of lower levels of international violence, militarized interstate disputes. Has the frequency on international disputes demonstrated a pattern since the end of World War II? To determine this, we look at the number of international disputes begun each year since 1946, as is shown in Figure 1. As one can see, the frequency of the disputes has varied over time. The first decade after World War II saw relatively few disputes, though there was an average of more than sixteen new disputes each year through 1957 – more than one per month. The level of interstate conflict rose after 1957 and remained relatively stable for the next thirty years, through 1988, with two notable exceptional periods. The first period was 1970-1974; only seven of the 31 years we looked at had 25 or fewer disputes, and five of those seven years were in this first period. These years of relative international quiet, of course, coincided with the height of the US-Soviet *détente*, though one would hesitate to ascribe that as the primary cause for this temporary decline in

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<sup>2</sup> Two other serious disputes in the 1990s that do not qualify as wars deserve mention. The first is the fighting in Bosnia from 1992-1995. Yugoslav regular troops appear to have been completely withdrawn from Bosnia perhaps as early as May, 1992. The subsequent fighting between Bosnian regulars and the Bosnian-Serbs, which continued through December, 1995, is thus not combat between nation-states. The “NATO” bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 over Kosovo probably resulted from 501 to 999 battle fatalities, insufficient to qualifying it as an interstate war. While large numbers of Yugoslav regular troops were killed in the bombing campaign, we found no satisfactory information that the 1000-battle death threshold was reached.

international conflict.<sup>3</sup> The second period, 1984-1987, saw four of the five years where more than 35 disputes began (and the fifth was 1982). Many of those disputes were centered in the Middle East, with Iran alone being involved in almost 29% of the total number of disputes in those four years.

[Figure 1 here]

The years 1989-1991 witnessed a dramatic decline in the number of disputes, though there is no clear connection between that decline and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Since 1991, however, the number of militarized disputes has average almost 31.5 per year, slightly higher than the average of thirty disputes per year for the entire post-World War II period. Using the frequency of militarized disputes as a gross indicator of global strife, we do not see a decline in the level of international conflict in the past decade. Indeed, the level of conflict in 1992-2001 as measured by the militarized interstate disputes is remarkably similar to the entire post-war period.

### **Types of Interstate Disputes**

We can use a third, more refined measure of interstate conflict to investigate whether conflict has declined in the past decade. Militarized Interstate Disputes can be categorized by the most severe action taken within the dispute. Specifically, all recorded actions within disputes fall into one of four levels of severity: threats to use force; displays of force (such as troop mobilizations or border fortifications); uses of force (such as seizures of ships, or exchanges of gunfire) and war (occurring when there are 1,000 or more battlefield fatalities). We categorize disputes according to the level of severity of the most hostile action taken within the dispute. Figure 2 shows the distribution of disputes

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<sup>3</sup> From 1946-1991, the USA and USSR were on opposite sides of 53 disputes, slightly more than 1 per year on average. During 1970-1974, the relatively peaceful four-year period globally, the two countries had four disputes. The years 1974-1976, however, when global the level of interstate conflict again rose, there were no Soviet-American disputes. In other words, while relations between those two countries doubtless affected the entire world political system, the level of international conflict was not directly affected.

according to these levels of hostility. (Wars have been omitted as we discussed them previously.)

[Figure 2 about here]

As the figure shows, disputes involving the use of force are generally the most common form of interstate conflict, with disputes involving only a display of force second, and relatively few disputes that consist only of threats to use force. One will notice that the general pattern of disputes found in Figure 1 is replicated in this figure. Focusing only on the last decade, 1992-2001, Figure 2 shows that the relative frequency of disputes involving displays of force has increased, while disputes involving uses of force have declined. To be specific, in the period since 1957 (when the number of interstate disputes became relatively stable), there has been an average of about 7 disputes with displays of force and twenty-one with uses of force each year. In the last ten years, however, the annual occurrence of displays of force has increased to slightly more than twelve, while uses of force have declined to an annual average of less than eighteen; indeed, the last four years for which we have data all saw fewer uses of force than was the average for the entire period since 1957. In other words, while the frequency of disputes generally appears not to have declined since the end of the Cold War, disputes do appear to have become less hostile in the last ten years, with fewer uses of force.

### **Frequency of Incidents**

The last type of international violence we will look at is the militarized incident. These are the specific and individual actions that make up “militarized interstate disputes.” These specific actions are, of course, more frequent and more precise than either wars or disputes. These incidents are the rawest acts of violence between nation-states, the building blocks of disputes.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> We must be careful and note here that incidents are not recorded once wars have begun. That is, once the 1,000-battle fatality threshold is reached, the COW project no longer collects data on incidents.

Figure 3 shows the frequency of three types of militarized incidents since 1992, the earliest year for which we have data on this type of activity,<sup>5</sup> divided into the three categories that we used to analyze militarized disputes – threats, displays, and uses of force. One will observe from the figure that, generally, displays of force are the most common type of incident, with threats the least frequent. Indeed, international threats to use force are relatively rare events, occurring about twice a month over the last decade. Uses of force – the most severe form of militarized incident – are usually, though not always, less frequent than uses of force.

[Figure 3 about here]

What of the trends in the frequency of the types of incidents? There is little fluctuation in the frequency of international threats. Displays of force, on the other hand, vary greatly in frequency.<sup>6</sup> Displays of force were most frequent in 1996-1998 (averaging 165 for those three years), declining every year since 1997. In the last three years, displays of force average about 100 a year, which is a little less than the average for the entire decade.

The most serious type of incident is in the use of force category. The two most common types of activity in this category are attacks and clashes. (“Clashes” occur when fire is exchanged and the side that initiated the activity is difficult to distinguish, while “attacks” are those incidents where we are confident as to who initiated the activity and where the use of force is not reciprocated.) There were, on average, about forty attacks and thirty-one clashes per year from 1992-2001, and the average for all uses of force was about eighty-four per year.

What of the pattern of uses of force over the last decade? As one can see from Figure 3, uses of force were remarkably constant from 1993 through 1997. There was a slight drop (from 97 to 72) in 1998, with a rebound (to 114) in 1999. The numbers for the uses of force for 2000 and 2001 are 67 and 73, respectively,

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<sup>5</sup> While we have complete incident-level data for 1993-2001, we have only some incidents in 1992 recorded. The data for 1992 presented in Figure 3 is estimated.

<sup>6</sup> The four most common types of displays of force are “shows of force” (such as the deployment of naval groups or air squadron over flights), border violations, border fortifications and alerts.

the lowest figures since 1992 (which is estimated) and down slightly from the decade average of 84 per year. We can only conclude, then, that there was a slight decrease in the frequency of this most severe category of interstate conflict in the last two years, but that the decade 1992-2001 as a whole shows no obvious decline.

## **Conclusion**

Let us first summarize the four main findings we have presented:

- The *number of interstate wars has declined* slightly in the past two decades.
- The *frequency of militarized disputes has not changed* significantly (with the exception of a few years) since the late 1950s.
- The *severity of militarized disputes appears to have decreased* slightly in the past decade.
- The *severity of militarized incidents has not changed* noticeably in the past decade, though there is a decline in 2000-2001.

We can draw these disparate and seemingly contradictory conclusions together by saying that the frequency and severity of relatively minor militarized international activity has not changed significantly in the past decades; the frequency of the more severe forms interstate conflict has declined slightly. One might infer from this that the sources and expressions of international conflict remain unaltered in the current system. The escalation of those conflicts to more severe levels, however, appears to occur somewhat less often. This may be an indication that conflict management – practiced either by the participants themselves or by third parties – appears to be working more than in the past. In any event, the indications of significant and large shifts in the frequency and severity of international violence are lacking. Attempts to regulate or to resolve international conflict are still needed.