

# **Peace and Conflict in the New Millennium**

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Progress and resistance have always been part and parcel of world politics. Whether the past decade's global trends toward greater peace and democracy continue or are reversed depends on how the international community responds to new and continuing challenges. There are good reasons for optimism—none for complacency.

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Al Qaeda-related terrorism and the bloody ongoing confrontation between Israel and Palestine grabbed most of the headlines during the first three years of the new millennium; the virtual cascade of peace talks and settlements that took place in the same period garnered virtually none. They should have.

An extraordinary, but little known, decline in the number and cost of armed conflicts that began in the early 1990s, has continued into 2003. While some new armed conflicts broke out during this period, their impact was more than offset by the numbers of existing wars that ended. International crises also become less common and were more likely to be terminated by diplomacy than resort to force.

Patient and determined political and diplomatic efforts to induce regimes of all stripes to reach accommodation with rebels have settled—or managed—armed conflicts in Central America, Africa, the Middle East and Asia that were once considered intractable. Military means were sometimes used to help achieve and protect peace settlements, but were rarely sufficient in and of themselves.

Ethnonationalist wars for independence that were the main threat to civil peace and regional security in the first post-Cold War decade, have declined to their lowest level since 1960. More violent separatist conflicts were contained in 2001-02 than at any time in the previous post-World War II time period.

Recent challenges to global security—the conflict in Iraq, international terrorism, new upsurges of armed conflict in sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere—may, however, threaten these positive trends.

There are a number of reasons for concern:

- The survival of many of the “third wave democracies” established during the last few decades depends on international support as well as domestic reform. Without that support some will likely regress into partial or complete autocracy.
- This matters because autocracies and unstable, non-inclusive, quasi-autocracies are more prone to armed conflict and state failure than stable, inclusive democracies.
- Democratic governance does not, however, guarantee full respect for civil and political rights, nor does it preclude regimes from using violent coercion to repress dissent, or to “influence” the electoral process. Many new democracies have a poor human rights record.
- Though many civil wars have recently been settled or contained, enduring peace depends on implementation of agreements and, often, on international support and security guarantees as well. Without such support, peace agreements may founder and wars resume.
- The large number of armed conflicts that have ended since the Cold War have unleashed floods of surplus war materiel onto global regional markets and rendered tens of thousands of demobilized soldiers jobless—threatening to fuel, not just other wars, but also organized crime, including trafficking and narco-terrorism.

A further challenge to global security is the perception, particularly influential in the US, that some security threats are impervious to peaceful

or multilateral solutions. When threats are framed in this way, policy makers are more likely to rely on the unilateral use of force and devote less attention and fewer resources to constructive long-term efforts at conflict management and resolution. Such a shift in policy threatens one of the great accomplishments of the first post-Cold War decade: namely the peaceful containment and resolution of civil wars promoted by the UN and regional organizations and reinforced by the constructive engagement of the US and other powers.

### The African Crisis Zone

Today it is Sub-Saharan Africa that hosts most of the world's armed conflicts and continues to face the greatest challenges to peace and stability. Almost every country across the broad middle belt of the continent—from Somalia in the east to Sierra Leone in the west, and from Sudan in the north to Angola in the south—is mired in a volatile mix of poverty, sickness, unstable and inequitable political institutions, limited resources, and the “bad neighborhoods” of other crisis-ridden states.

A combination of pervasive poverty, poor infrastructure, low technology, lack of industrialization, and weak administration makes armed conflicts in these countries both difficult to avoid and even more difficult to end.

South Africa is better positioned to avoid serious conflicts and political instability—although deteriorating conditions in neighbouring Lesotho, Malawi, Swaziland, and, especially, Zimbabwe are a source of real concern.

Conditions in most African states to the west of Nigeria remain volatile and recent peace agreements in the region are likely to remain highly dependent on international support if they are to hold.

In Nigeria itself, the outcome of the shaky and frequently violent transition to democracy is crucial for the entire sub-Saharan region, as is the outcome of the international effort to overcome the brutal anarchy that has engulfed the

Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). A major new upsurge of fighting in the DRC would seriously challenge the prospects for economic recovery and continued peace in Angola and the countries of the Rift Valley in eastern Africa.

### The Asian Crisis Zone

Though not quite as poor or vulnerable as the countries of sub-Saharan Africa, the Asian crisis zone is characterized by three distinct security complexes: a south-central complex centred on Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan; the Middle Eastern complex that includes Israel/Palestine and Iraq, but also Armenia and Azerbaijan; and a southeastern complex. The latter includes relatively stable Thailand which has experienced recent upsurges of inter-communal violence in its southern borderlands. It also includes the Philippines and Indonesia where sporadic political violence has frequently flared in Aceh, Kalimantan, the Moluccas, and West Papua.

Two further threats to both Asian and global security are nuclear proliferation and the spread of terrorism.

### Secessionist Conflicts

Few countries are ethnically homogenous and the spectre of violent secessionist struggles haunts many state governments. In the 1990s many worried that the break-up of the Soviet Union and the Yugoslav Federation presaged a new era of violent instability. In fact, over the past forty years only five internationally recognized states have been established as a result armed separatist conflicts— Bangladesh (1971), Slovenia (1991), Croatia (1991), Eritrea (1993), and East Timor (2002).

While self-determination is by no means the only motive for violent struggle, many of the most protracted conflicts since World War II have seen

ethnic groups, sometimes entire societies, locked in bitter struggles for independence.

Although Africa has the highest number of armed conflicts of all types, Asia has the lion's share—nearly 60%—of separatist conflicts.

Between 1970 and the early 1980s, the number of conflicts fought over independence doubled, peaking at 48 in 1991. Then came a precipitous decline—fully seventy per cent of the separatist wars that came to an end during the last half-century were terminated between 1990 and the end of 2002. Nine were contained in 2001-2002 alone.

In 2002, there were just 22 secessionist conflicts—the smallest number for a quarter of a century. Moreover, the intensity of violence remains relatively low and is declining.

There are other encouraging signs. Recent research has shown that some ten years of non-violent protest generally precede outbreaks of ethnic rebellion. In the late 1980s the number of new ethnically-based protest campaigns was running at ten a year. After 1995, the rate dropped to about four a year, suggesting that the potential for future rebellions is shrinking.

The goal of self-determination wasn't abandoned in the 1990s, rather it was pursued by different means. Conventional politics and protest campaigns punctuated by only occasional outbursts of violence have increasingly replaced organized armed struggle. By 1998–2000 only a quarter of the 161 groups seeking self-determination were pursuing their goal by military means.

How do we explain the decline in separatist conflicts? The evidence suggests that international engagement—sometimes including forceful intervention—is an important factor in convincing parties to negotiate. Over the last decade, it also appears that governments have become increasingly willing to grant autonomy to independence-seeking minority groups, while would-be separatists have become increasingly willing to accept it. Nationalist rebels who

remain committed to waging violent struggle for total independence are still fighting—but they are increasingly rare.

Over the past 20 years, a dramatic increase in democratization has also helped enhance global security. This is in part because inclusive democratic governments provide the institutional means for minorities to secure and protect their rights. It is no accident that such governments have much lower rates of repression and political violence than autocracies and semi-autocracies.

What this suggests is a growing trend by governments to recognize and protect the civil liberties of minority peoples—with the corollary that national groups have the right to a degree of autonomy within existing state structures.

### Looking Ahead

Although remarkable, the past decade's downward trend in armed conflict is unlikely to continue indefinitely—force has been an instrument of politics for millennia and it would be naïve to believe that it will be abandoned at any time soon.

Then there is the spectre of terrorism. For the past thirty years the average death toll from international terrorism has been well under a thousand people per year—a tiny percentage of total worldwide deaths from other forms of political violence. But the real threat that terrorists pose to global security may lie in the future.

Terrorism requires little investment, modest expertise and no mass organization. It is a weapon of the weak, but one that could have catastrophic long-term consequences. In the US-led war against Al Qaeda-inspired Islamic terrorism, individual terrorists are frequently captured or killed, but new converts are often recruited as a consequence. Both terror and counter-terror campaigns have the potential to increase alienation and polarization on a global scale. A

transformation of the 'war on terrorism' into a violent 'clash of civilizations' would almost certainly reverse the ten-year decline in armed conflict.

But while these and other risks should not be discounted, there are also good reasons for optimism. Wars continue to decline in number and cost, respect for human rights has become a standard obligation of states, and there exist more inclusive democracies today than in any previous epoch. And while new conflicts will continue to erupt, we now know more about how they can be managed and resolved than at any time in human history. Governing elites—and their enemies—are increasingly susceptible to international influence, while proactive engagement helps strengthen the policy agendas of moderates struggling to prevail in deeply divided societies.

Most importantly the international community has demonstrated that preventive diplomacy and peace-building policies—despite all the mistakes—can help create a more secure world and in so doing save hundreds of thousands of lives.