Conflicting News: Recent Trends in Political Violence and Future Challenges

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UN: Gathering Storms and Silver Linings
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UN Sustainable Development Goals: Selected Targets

- Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere (16.1)

- By 2030, empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status (10.2)

- Strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters in all countries (13.1)

- Facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies (10.7)
Is there still a decline of conflict?

Armed conflicts, 1946 - 2017

Data source: Uppsala Conflict Data Program
Conflict intensity in world regions

Battle-related deaths, 1989 - 2017

Data source: Uppsala Conflict Data Program
Other types of intra-state violence

One-Sided Violence and Non-State Conflict, 1989 - 2017

Data source: Uppsala Conflict Data Program
Mostly bad news

- Civil conflict has been increasing in recent years
- Non-state conflict also increasing
- General indices confirm that various conflict measures have increased in recent years
.. but also some silver linings

- Yet, macro-historically there is progress: Pinker 2011
- Beyond Middle East things look better
- Ethnic civil conflict declining
- Interstate conflict also declining
Gurr: Decline of ethnic war

- From mid-1990s, decline of ethnic war
- Regime of accommodation:
  - Minority rights
  - Autonomy and power sharing
  - Negotiation and compromise
  - International norms and organizations
Global trend in discrimination

Ethnic Power Relations Dataset 2018
Global trend in regional autonomy

![Graph showing the trend in regional autonomy population share from 1950 to 2010. The graph indicates a general increase in the proportion of the population with regional autonomy rights over time, with notable fluctuations.](image-url)

Ethnic Power Relations Dataset 2018
Global trend in political exclusion

Excluded population share

Year


Ethnic Power Relations Dataset 2018
Trend in democracy

Data source: Polity IV
Democracy defined here as Polity score above 5
Trend in peacekeeping

Total UN peacekeepers deployed
November 1990 - October 2018

Number of personnel

Year


Observers Police Troops

Data source: International Peace Institute
Probability of conflict, 2004-2013

-1.0 -0.5 0.0 0.5 1.0

End of Discrimination
Regional Autonomy
Inclusion
Democratization
Peacekeeping

- Non-Accomodated - Accommodated - Predicted Change
Probability of conflict ending, 2004-2005

End of Discrimination

Regional Autonomy

Inclusion

Democratization

Peacekeeping

Non-Accomodated, Accommodated, Predicted Change
Probability of interstate conflict per dyad

Source: Maoz et al. 2018
Gathering Storms? Three main threats to peace

1. Erosion of liberal world order?
2. Climate change?
3. Migration?
Threat 1. Erosion of liberal world order

- Domestic liberal order
  - Internal threats: rising inequality → populism
  - External threats: globalization, refugee flows, terrorism

- Liberal community of states
  - Hegemon unwilling: America First!
  - Weakening of NATO, EU
  - Diffusion of illiberalism: Populist victories in Eastern Europe, India, Brazil

- Global liberal norms
  - Weakening of multilateral institutions
  - Undermining human rights and international law
  - Western support for illiberal leaders
The future of war in an illiberal world

- Increase in civil war
  - More discrimination and exclusion
  - More state-led repression
  - Less multilateral conflict resolution
- Increase in interstate conflict
  - Fewer democracy-democracy relations
  - Ethnic nationalism and Irredentism
  - Power politics rather than norms
- Nuclear crisis instability
Threats 2 and 3. Tempting narratives

“[O]ne of the major reasons for this horror in Syria was a drought that lasted for five or six years, which meant that huge numbers of people in the end had to leave the land.”

Prince Charles (2015)

See also Gleick (2014) & Kelley et al. (2015) vs. Selby et al. (2017)
Global climate trend. The heat is on

Temperature Anomaly from 1961-1990 Average, Global
Global average land-sea temperature anomaly relative to the 1961-1990 average temperature in degrees celsius (°C). Shaded area represents 95% CI.

Data source: Hadley Centre (HadCRUT4) via ourworldindata.org
Trends in flight and displacement


Data source: UNHCR
Research on climate and conflict

- Rapidly developing, interdisciplinary field. No consensus yet.
- Climate anomalies as threat multiplier (*Hsiang et al. 2013. Science*)
- Recent trends & future directions:
  - Subnational data and analyses (*O’Loughlin et al. 2014. PNAS*)
  - Causal mechanisms: food prices, migration, political competition, inequality… (*e.g. Raleigh et al. 2015. Glob. Env. Change*)
  - Scope conditions: ongoing conflict, agricultural dependence, pre-existing inequalities, institutions, type of conflict… (*e.g. von Uexkull et al. 2016. PNAS*)
  - Actors & Agency (*e.g. farmers, herders, rebel groups, militias, political elites*)
  - Conflict $\leftrightarrow$ Adaptation, Mitigation & Disaster Relief Policies (*e.g. Walch. 2018. J. Peace Res.*)
Research on climate, migration and conflict

- Conflict as main driver of migration and displacement
- Refugees and IDPs often victims rather than perpetrators of violence (*e.g.* Linke et al. 2018. Env. Res. Let.)

Recent findings & future directions
- Migration and displacement, in some contexts, associated with conflict incidence and diffusion (*e.g.* Bhavnani & Lacina. 2014. World Politics)
- Political context and power relations matter (*e.g.* JPR special issue)
- Some evidence that climate stress may induce out-migration; but no consensus (*e.g.* Carleton & Hsiang. 2016. Science.)
- Migration as adaptation: No natural link to conflict (*e.g.* Brzoska & Fröhlich. 2016. Mig. and Dev.)

→ Focus on causal mechanisms, scope conditions, actors & agency
Prediction has to be used with caution

Big data are helpful but more data not enough

Crucial to consider limitations:
1. Complexity
2. Data
3. Theoretical relevance
4. Policy relevance

Forecasting inaccuracy over time (Brier score)

Forecasting 5 years into the future, training model on previous 15 years

Base model: Cederman, Gleditsch and Buhaug (2013)
Conclusions for research

- Invest in data collection and careful research designs
- Study causes and consequences of conflict as genuinely political phenomena
- Engage across disciplinary boundaries
- Engage with policy-makers and journalists
- Avoid sensationalist claims, highlight limitations and complexity
Conclusions for policy

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- Facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies (10.7)
References, Data Sources & Further Reading


Selby, Jan, Omar S Dahi, Christiane Froehlich and Mike Hulme. 2017. “Climate change and the Syrian civil war revisited.” *Political Geography* 60:232–244.


