Conflicting News: Recent Trends in Political Violence and Future Challenges

Lars-Erik Cederman and Yannick Pengl
International Conflict Research | ETH Zurich | www.icr.ethz.ch

UN: Gathering Storms and Silver Linings
New York, February 20-21, 2019
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

Number of conflicts

Year

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

Battle-related deaths, 1989 - 2017

Battle-related deaths

Year

Region: Europe, Middle East, Asia, Africa, Americas

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
Trends in battle deaths since WWII

Battle-related deaths, 1946-2017
From inter- and intrastate war

Data source: UCDP & PRIO via ourworldindata.org
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
Trends in ethnic civil conflict
Global trend in ethnic discrimination

Discriminated population share from 1940 to 2020, showing a decreasing trend over time.

Ethnic Power Relations Dataset 2018
Global trend in ethno-regional autonomy

Regional autonomy population share

Year
Global trend in ethno-political exclusion

Excluded population share

Year

Ethnic Power Relations Dataset 2018
Trend in democracy

Democratic states, 1945-2017

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

-1.0  -0.5  0.0  0.5  1.0

End of Discrimination

Regional Autonomy

Inclusion

Democratization

Peacekeeping

- Non-Accomodated
- Accommodated
- Predicted Change
Where Accommodation (plausibly) worked

Table III. Examples of conflict-preventing and termination-promoting accommodation since the mid-1990s

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group rights</th>
<th>Autonomy</th>
<th>Inclusion</th>
<th>Democratization</th>
<th>Peacekeeping</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Onset</td>
<td>Liberia, Nigeria</td>
<td>Kurds in Iraq</td>
<td>South Africa, Angola</td>
<td>Guatemala, Ghana (●)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Termination</td>
<td>Tuaregs in Mali and Niger</td>
<td>Northern Ireland, Aceh</td>
<td>Bosnia</td>
<td>Burundi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 (*e.g. UCDP-GED & ACLED data sets*)
  - 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 ↔ 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
No Crystal Balls: Conflict Prediction

- 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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Appendix
Types of Conflict according to UCDP

Arrows indicate direction of armed force | Based on: www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/definitions/

- Interstate Conflict
- Intrastate Conflict
- Non-State Conflict
- One-Sided Violence
Internationalization of Intrastate Conflict

Increasing Internationalization of Intrastate Conflict
Foreign government(s) actively support(s) one or both conflict parties

Data source: Uppsala Conflict Data Program
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.


