



Martin Adler / Panos Pictures

## Fewer wars, fewer deaths

**During the 1990s, after four decades of steady increase, the number of wars being fought around the world suddenly declined. Wars have also become progressively less deadly since the 1950s.**

A number of scholars have claimed that the Cold War—the period from the late 1940s to the late 1980s—was one of unprecedented stability. Some even called it the ‘Long Peace’.<sup>8</sup>

By century’s end, the world was indeed experiencing the longest period of uninterrupted peace between the traditional ‘great powers’ in hundreds of years. But this welcome trend did not reflect reality in the developing world.

From the beginning of the Cold War to the early 1990s, the number of armed conflicts in developing countries rose inexorably.<sup>9</sup> Every decade witnessed more wars than its predecessor. For the global South, the Cold War was anything but a Long Peace.

In 1992, the number of conflicts worldwide rose to a post–World War II high, as a series of short-lived wars flared in the former Soviet Union. Then something remarkable happened. Just as the Western media started to

worry about a worldwide epidemic of ethnic violence, the number of armed conflicts began to drop rapidly.

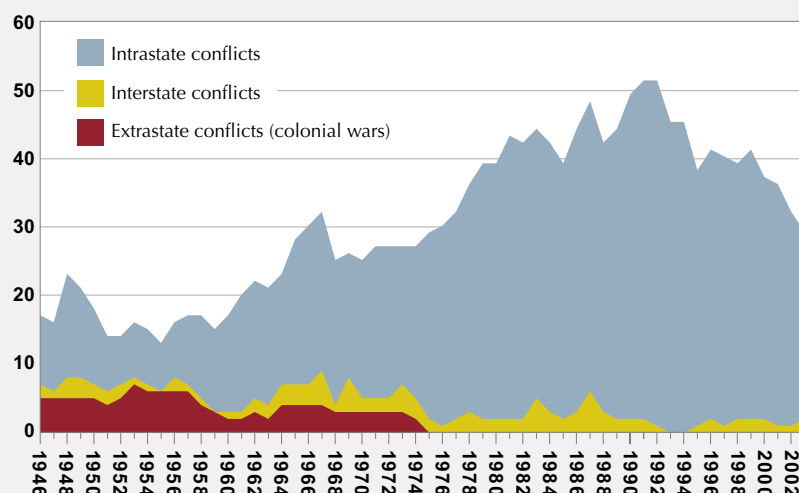
Today that decline continues. In 1992, more than 50 armed conflicts involving a government were being waged worldwide; by 2003 that number had dropped to 29. Battle-deaths have declined even more steeply, though the trend here is very uneven and has been going on for a much longer time.

In the developing world, the end of the Cold War played a critical role in the decline in armed conflict. It removed a major source of ideological polarisation. It also staunched the flow of resources to warring parties in the South. And it allowed the UN to begin to play the global security role that its founders had originally intended.

## Analysing the trends

Figure 1.1 shows the global trend in three types of armed conflict: interstate, intrastate (civil wars) and extrastate (overwhelmingly colonial wars).

In the developing world the end of the Cold War played a critical role in the decline in armed conflict.



**Figure 1.1 A less violent world:  
Numbers of conflicts, 1946–2003**

Since World War II, the number of interstate wars has remained relatively low. Colonial (extrastate) wars had disappeared by the mid-1970s, but civil (intrastate) conflicts rose steadily until 1992, after which they declined steeply.

Source: Uppsala and PRIO, 2004<sup>10</sup>

The conflicts shown in Figure 1.1 resulted in at least 25 battle-related deaths a year. They are of three types: interstate (fought between states), extrastate (colonial wars) and intrastate (civil wars). In all cases one of the warring parties was a state. The graph does not include ethnic or other conflicts where neither warring party was a state, nor does it include cases of 'one-sided' violence such as genocide.

Figure 1.1 is a 'stacked graph', meaning that the number of conflicts in each category is indicated by the depth of the band of colour. The top line indicates the total of number of conflicts of all types in each year. Thus in 1946 there were five extrastate conflicts, two interstate conflicts, ten intrastate conflicts and 17 conflicts in total.

It reveals that the number of armed conflicts increased steadily decade by decade throughout the Cold War. Then, in the early 1990s, a steep decline started that continues to this day.

The threefold rise in the overall number of armed conflicts between 1946 and the ending of the Cold War at the beginning of the 1990s is almost all accounted for by a dramatic increase in conflicts *within* states. These now make up more than 95% of all conflicts.

An entire category of armed conflict—extrastate or colonial wars—had virtually ceased to exist by the mid-1970s. Like the end of the Cold War, the end of colonialism eradicated an important global driver of armed conflict.

Figure 1.1 also shows that the number of interstate wars has remained low since the end of World War II. But they include the deadliest wars in this period: the Korean War, the Vietnam War and the Iran-Iraq War, each of which claimed more than a million lives on the battlefield.

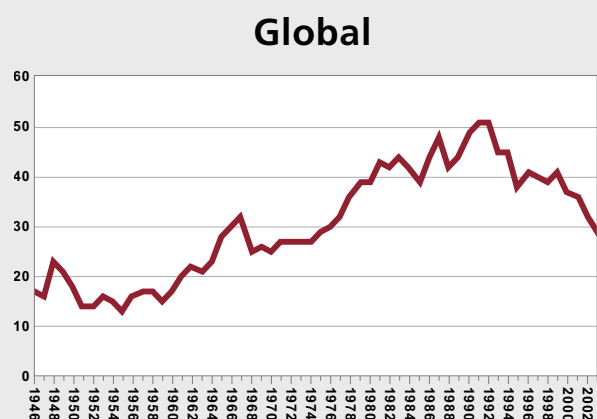
In fact the *risk* of interstate war has declined even more than the low absolute numbers in Figure 1.1 suggest. The number of states in the international system has trebled since the end of World War II, increasing the number of

potential warring parties. If the average risk of war had remained the same there should have been a commensurate increase in the number of wars. But since the number of wars did not increase, it follows that the average risk of conflict has declined.

Part V of this report will briefly review the explanations for the decline in the risk of interstate war. Few of these explanations apply to civil wars, which is one reason why civil wars are today the dominant form of armed conflict.

Like the end of the Cold War, the end of colonialism eradicated an important driver of armed conflict.

Figure 1.2 shows that the pattern of decline in armed conflicts is different from region to region and that most armed conflicts throughout the post-World War II period have taken place in the less developed regions of the world.

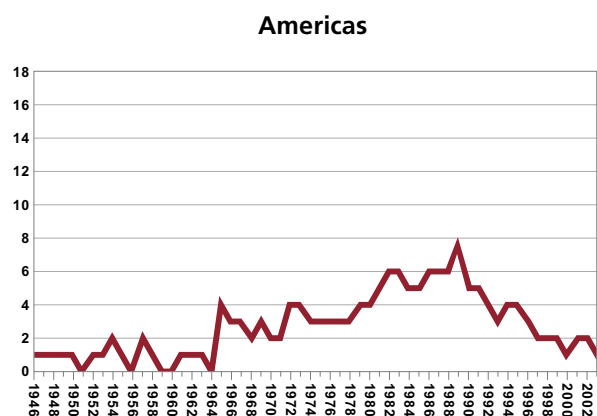
**FIGURE 1.2****Numbers of armed conflicts, 1946-2003: Global and regional breakdowns<sup>11</sup>**

Source: Uppsala/PRIO, 2004

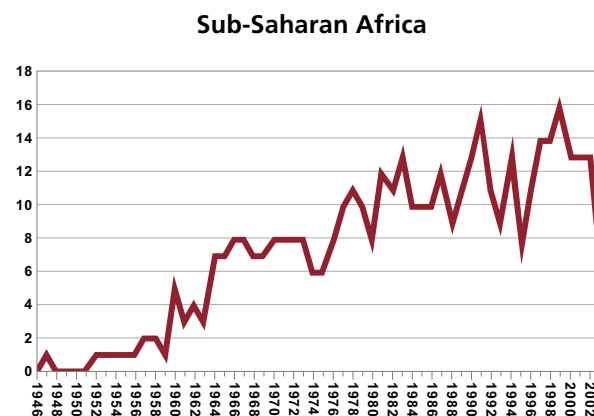
Globally, the number of conflicts rose steadily from the early 1950s until 1992, and then declined sharply. Most regions followed a similar pattern, but in the Middle East and North Africa, and in East Asia, Southeast Asia and Oceania the decline started earlier.



After four decades of relative peace, a series of ethnonationalist wars flared in the Balkans in the 1990s.

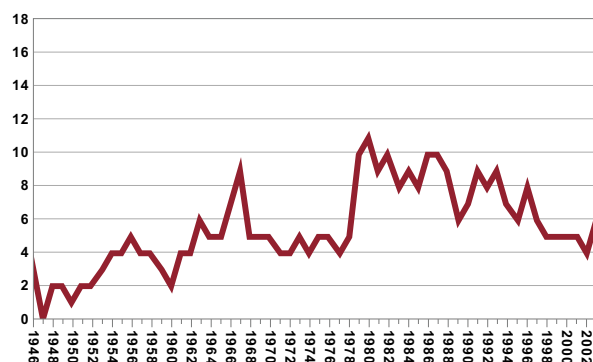


From the 1960s to the 1990s, the number of conflicts, driven in part by Cold War politics, increased steadily. The end of the Cold War saw a dramatic decline in political violence throughout the region.



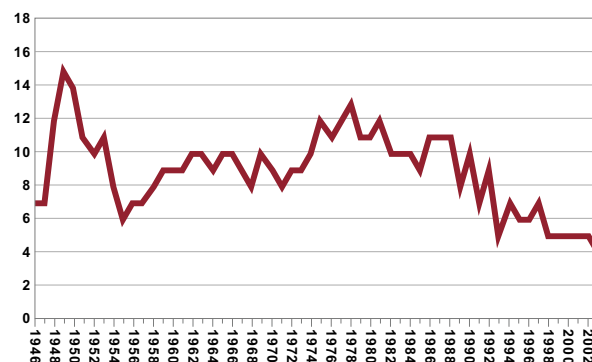
The number of conflicts increased steadily from World War II to 1991, despite the ending of colonial wars. They remained high until 2002, but now seem to be falling.

### Middle East and North Africa



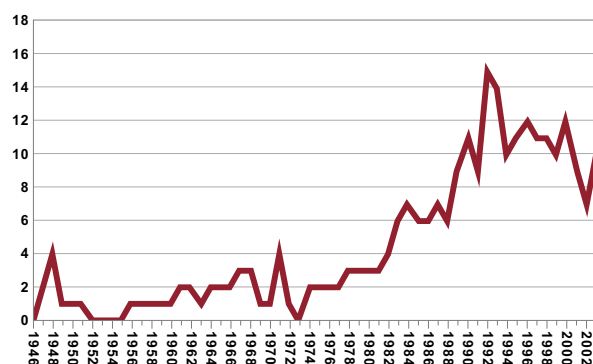
The number of armed conflicts increased steadily from the 1940s to 1980, and has since declined by nearly half.

### East Asia, Southeast Asia and Oceania



In 2003 there were fewer than one-third as many armed conflicts as in 1978. Since 1978 the decline has been associated with rising prosperity, democratisation and the ending of large-scale foreign intervention.

### Central and South Asia



Until the 1970s, conflicts were concentrated in South Asia. The breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 triggered many new conflicts in Central Asia (including the Caucasus).

*These graphs show the total number of conflicts per year, and count only those conflicts with at least 25 battle-related deaths in that year. They include inter-state wars, extrastate wars (colonial wars) and intrastate wars (civil wars) where one of the parties was a state. They do not include ethnic or religious conflicts where neither party was a state, nor cases of one-sided violence such as genocide.*

## The world's most war-prone countries

Which countries have fought the most wars in the past half-century?

- Figure 1.3 shows the countries that have fought the most international armed conflicts, either in another country or against a foreign army on their own soil, between 1946 and 2003.<sup>12</sup>
- Figure 1.4 shows the countries that have experienced the most 'conflict-years' between 1946 and 2003. A conflict-year is a calendar year in which a country has been involved in a state-based armed conflict of any type. Because a country can experience several different armed conflicts at the same time, it can experience two or more conflict-years within a single calendar year.<sup>13</sup>

The UK and France, the two states that had the largest colonial empires, have fought the most international wars, as shown in Figure 1.3. Other colonial powers, the Nether-

lands, Spain and Portugal also make it into the top 25 in this category. However, only a minority of the wars that these states waged were against anti-colonial independence movements—most were either interstate conflicts or interventions in intrastate wars.

The US ranks third, with most of America's wars, like those of the next-in-line Russia, being fought over Cold War issues. US allies Australia, Canada, Italy, New Zealand and Turkey also make the list.

Eight Middle Eastern countries, led by Israel and Egypt, are among the top 25, reflecting that region's violent post-World War II history. They are joined by three countries in East Asia—China, Vietnam (both before and after reunification) and Thailand. In Latin America and Africa, most armed conflicts have been fought within rather than between states. As a consequence, no Latin American countries and only two sub-Saharan African countries, Chad and Ethiopia, are on this list.

**Figure 1.3 The countries that have experienced the highest number of international armed conflicts, 1946–2003**

number of wars	country	number of wars	country
21	United Kingdom	5	Portugal
19	France	5	Canada
16	United States of America	4	Vietnam, Republic of
9	Russia (Soviet Union)	4	Chad
7	Australia	4	Libya
7	Netherlands	4	Spain
6	Israel	4	Syria
6	Egypt	4	New Zealand
6	China	4	Italy
6	Thailand	4	Iran
5	Vietnam, Democratic Republic of	4	Ethiopia
5	Turkey	4	Iraq
5	Jordan		

Source: PRIO, 2005<sup>14</sup>

This table shows the countries that have fought the most international wars. The states that head this list are former colonial powers, and the two Cold War superpowers.

Figure 1.4 The most conflict-prone countries, 1946–2003

number of conflict-years	country	number of wars	country
232	Burma (Myanmar)	40	Chad
156	India	40	South Africa
88	Ethiopia	40	Indonesia
86	Philippines	38	Portugal
79	Israel	36	Cambodia
77	United Kingdom	36	Vietnam, Republic of
66	France	35	Thailand
60	Iraq	34	Sudan
60	Vietnam, Democratic Republic of,	33	Guatemala
51	Russia (Soviet Union)	31	Uganda
49	United States of America	31	Libya
48	Iran	31	Turkey
44	Angola	31	Australia
42	Colombia		

Source: PRIO, 2005

This table shows the countries that have experienced the greatest number of conflict-years. By this measure, Burma (Myanmar) and then India are the two most conflict-prone countries.

As explained above, it is possible for a country to be involved in two or more state-based armed conflicts in a given year and thus accumulate more than one conflict-year for each calendar year.

This is why Burma, which in the early 1960s was embroiled in six different intrastate conflicts, tops the list in Figure 1.4 with 232 conflict-years between 1946 and 2003. India's many long-running intrastate conflicts, plus its wars with neighbouring states, ensured its second place with 156 conflict-years.

Had the measure simply been the number of years a state has been involved in any conflict between 1946 and 2003, as against the number of conflict-years, then Israel would have been at the top of the list.

Former colonial powers, the UK, France, Russia/Soviet Union, the US and Portugal, are high on the list primarily because of their involvement in colonial and

interstate wars. Australia, a US ally, also makes it onto the list.

East Asia's long post-World War II history of both civil and interstate war is evident in the inclusion of the Philippines, Vietnam (before and after reunification), Indonesia, Cambodia and Thailand.

Burma, which in the early 1990s was embroiled in six different intrastate conflicts, is the world's most conflict-prone country.

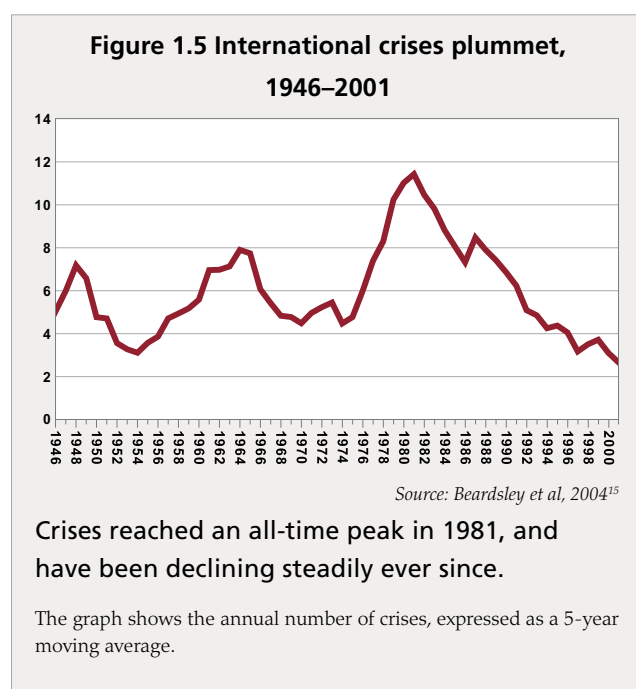
In the conflict-prone Middle East, Israel, Iraq, Iran, Libya and Turkey make it onto the list, as do two Latin American countries, Colombia and Guatemala.

Sub-Saharan Africa has six countries on the list: Ethiopia, Angola, Chad, South Africa, Sudan and Uganda.

### International crises decline

Wars are rarely unexpected bolts-from-the-blue: interstate wars are nearly always preceded by serious international disputes and crises. What is the long-term trend in such crises?

The International Crisis Behavior Project at the University of Maryland has been tracking international crises for many years. It defines crises as situations in which leaders perceive a heightened probability of military hostilities, a grave threat to national values, and a shortened and finite time within which to make decisions. Figure 1.5 uses data from the Maryland project.



The trend line shows an uneven increase in international crises until the 1980s, and then, as the Cold War wound down, a very steep decline. By 2001 the rate at which international crises were occurring was just one-quarter of that in 1981.

In a study commissioned by the Human Security Centre for the *Human Security Report*, Faten Ghosn and Glenn Palmer of Pennsylvania State University examine



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Trying to stop crises becoming armed conflicts: NATO Secretary-General George Robertson and EU special envoy Javier Solana in Macedonia.

recent trends in what are called Militarised International Disputes.<sup>16</sup> This category includes militarised conflict behaviour that falls short of war—threats to use force and displays of force—as well as actual resort to force.

Like international crises, militarised disputes have the potential to escalate into full-scale wars. Most wars are preceded by threats to use force, so other things being equal, the greater the number of militarised disputes between countries the greater the probability that some will escalate into full-scale war.

Ghosn and Palmer found that the frequency of militarised disputes has not changed significantly since the late 1950s, that the severity of militarised disputes appears to have decreased slightly in the past decade, and that the probability that disputes will escalate has declined somewhat too.<sup>17</sup>

The finding that not much has changed with respect to the numbers of militarised disputes might seem to contradict the picture presented here of a marked recent improvement in global security. But, as noted, the number of independent states in the international system has increased threefold since World War II.

If the number of militarised disputes changes little over time, while the number of states has tripled, the average risk to any state of becoming embroiled in such disputes will have decreased quite significantly.