Trends in Armed Conflicts, Militarization and Global Insecurity

Dan Smith and Ian Davis

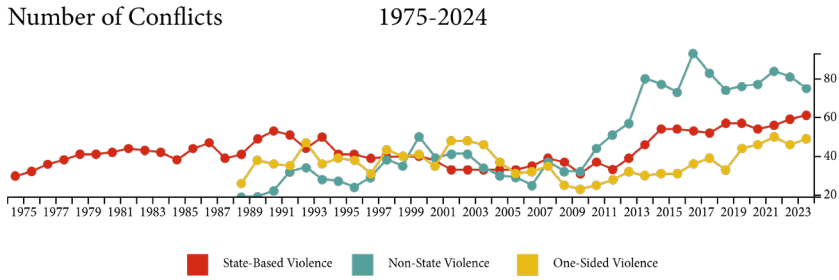
Introduction

The global landscape of armed conflict has darkened in the 2020s. The number of people dying, injured, displaced and in need of humanitarian assistance because of armed conflict is higher than at any time this century. Recent years have seen large-scale conventional inter-state war in Europe, cross-border aggression in the Middle East, major civil wars in Ethiopia and Sudan, and continuing conflicts with fluctuating levels of violence in, among others, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the Sahel region and Myanmar. In Haiti, gang violence has led to the virtual collapse of the state. On too many of these battlefronts, peacemaking has been ineffective. The most recent actual peace agreement – one that terminates a conflict by agreement rather than through the military superiority or victory of one party – was in 2016, in Colombia. In the past decade, overall, the international capacity for peaceful conflict management has been unable to meet its extraordinarily challenging tasks.

Violent Conflict

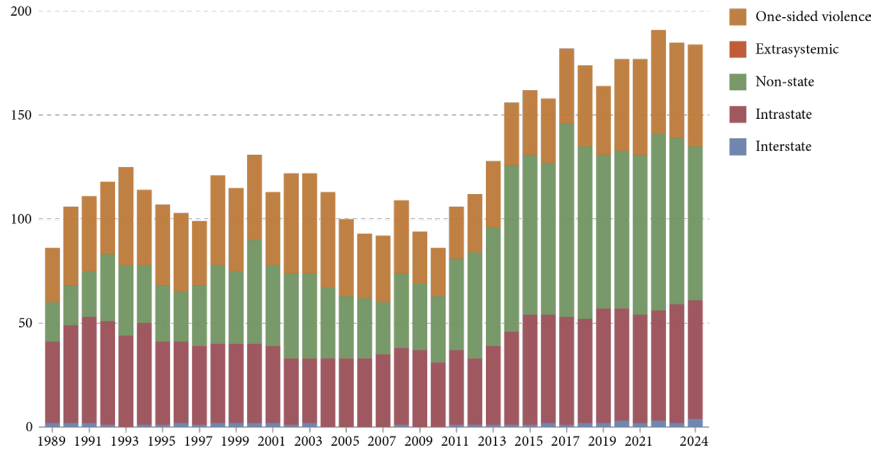
According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Project, as Figures 1 and 2 show, these diverse forms of conflict and systematic violence amounted to 177 separate violent conflicts in 2024. With fluctuations from year to year, there is, as the figures also show, a significant rise in the incidence of violent conflict since approximately 2010, coinciding with the fallout from the 2008–2009 global economic crisis and the events that were, at the time, known as the "Arab Spring".

Figure 1. Armed Conflicts 1975-2024



Source: Uppsala Conflict Data Program, https://ucdp.uu.se
Definitions:
Armed conflict: An armed, active, contested incompatibility about government and/or territory, in which at least one party is the government of a state, with at least 25 battle-related deaths in one calendar year
State-based: A conflict in which at least one state is involved
Non-state violence: The use of armed force between two organised non-state armed groups
One-sided violence: Armed force deliberately used against civilians by government or non-state group

Figure 2. Armed Conflicts 1989-2024



Source: Uppsala Conflict Data Program, https://ucdp.uu.se; revised by Our World in Data, https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/number-of-armed-conflicts?time=earliest..2023
Definitions: See Figure 1

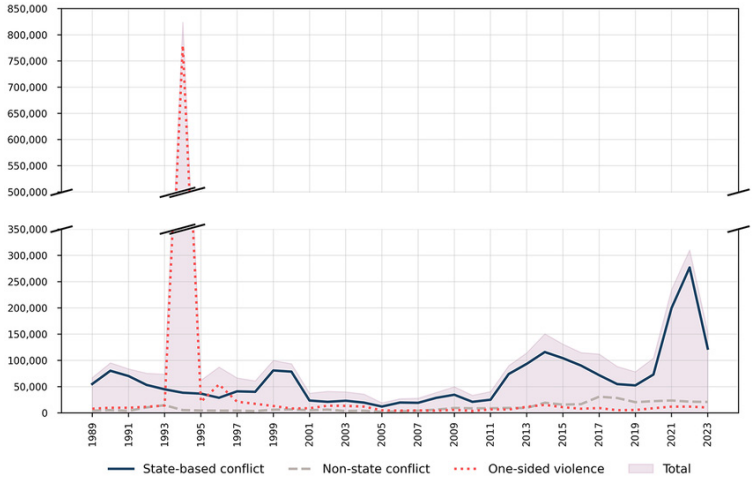
The high number of armed conflicts today is a key marker of a deteriorating security horizon. Among them is Russia's war in Ukraine, launched in 2014 and escalated in February 2022 with a full-scale invasion. Russia's aggression is a clear violation of the UN Charter, Article 2 of which binds member states to "settle their international disputes by peaceful means" and "refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state". Similarly, the war in Gaza is characterized by systematic violations of international humanitarian law.[1] While Israel's initial war aim following the incursion, atrocities and hostage-taking by Hamas on 7 October 2023 –

[1] Vincent Chetail, "Did humanitarian law die in Gaza?" Geneva Graduate Institute, 16 May 2025. Available at https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/communications/news/did-humanitarian-law-die-gaza (accessed on 23 November 2025).

to remove Hamas from political power and destroy its military capabilities – fell within the legitimate boundaries of self-defence, its conduct of the war has long since exceeded the bounds of proportionality.[2] Israeli forces have blocked humanitarian access, attacked civilians seeking emergency aid, used starvation as a weapon of war, forced almost the entire population of Gaza from their homes and inflicted indiscriminate death and destruction.[3] In June 2025, Israel attacked Iran without due cause when facing no immediate threat, an illegal act of aggression that the United States supported with its own airstrikes.[4]

The human toll of war has climbed in each succeeding decade this century. While war-death data are always unreliable, usually contested, and sometimes pure propaganda, the general trend is clear. According to Uppsala University, war deaths approximately doubled in the decade 2011–2020 compared to the previous decade (see Figure 3). Making allowances for irreducible data uncertainties, in the current decade, the world has already surpassed the 2011–2020 war death toll, with the most recent four years (2021–2024) among the five deadliest in the last 35 years. Only 1994, the year of the Rwandan genocide, was more lethal.

Figure 3. Fatalities by Type of Violence 1989-2024



Source: Uppsala Conflict Data Program, https://ucdp.uu.se

[2] Bailey Ulbricht and others, "There is nothing left': jus ad bellum proportionality and Israel's war against Hamas in Gaza", Stanford Public Law Working Paper (Stanford, CA, Stanford Law School, 2025). Available at https://ssrn.com/abstract=5283689 (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[3] United Nations General Assembly, "Report of the special committee to investigate Israeli practices affecting the human rights of the Palestinian people and other Arabs of the Occupied Territories", A/79/363, 20 September 2024, p. 2; United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "UN Special Committee finds Israel's warfare methods in Gaza consistent with genocide, including use of starvation as weapon of war", press release, 14 November 2024. Available at https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/11/un-special-committee-finds-israels-warfare-methods-gaza-consistent-genocide (accessed on 23 November 2025)

[4] Marko Milanovic, "The illegal Israeli-American use of force against Iran: a follow-up", EJIL:Talk!, 23 June 2025. Available at https://www.ejiltalk.org/the-illegal-israeli-american-use-of-force-against-iran-a-follow-up/ (accessed on 23 November 2025).

Among the most violent ongoing conflicts are those in DRC, Gaza, Myanmar, Sudan and Ukraine. In mid-2025, estimates of Ukrainian war deaths by independent observers ranged from 70,000 to 100,000 (plus 300,000 injured), while on the Russian side, estimates were as high as 250,000 troops killed and 750,000 wounded.[5] This war, in which approximately 250,000 Ukrainian troops confront about 400,000 Russian and 11,000 North Korean troops along a frontline of some 1,600 km, with intense activity throughout but little change in the frontlines since late 2022,[6] is very different from most other current armed conflicts. More typical is the less structured violence of the wars in eastern DRC, Myanmar and Sudan. By March 2025, wars were responsible for the displacement of 7.4 million Congolese,[7] the expulsion of 1 million Rohingya from Myanmar into Bangladesh coupled with the displacement of 2 million people inside Myanmar,[8] and the forcible displacement of more than 12 million Sudanese.[9] In a different kind of war, Israel's land and air offensives on Gaza since the Hamas incursion on 7 October 2023 had killed some 64,000 people by June 2024[10] and displaced over 1.9 million (90 per cent of the population) by March 2025.[11] The death toll has continued to climb as Israel persists in attacking targets in Gaza despite orders to the contrary from the International Court of Justice in May 2024[12] and in violation of the ceasefire agreed in January 2025. [13]

In these conflicts and others, two points in common stand out: human suffering and the extreme difficulty for regional or global institutions to do anything about it.

---

[5] Pjotr Sauer, "One million and counting: Russian casualties hit milestone in Ukraine war", *The Guardian*, 22 June 2025. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2025/jun/22/one-million-and-counting-russian-casualties-hit-milestone-in-ukraine-war (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[6] See the Russian Offensive Campaign Assessments by the Institute for the Study of War. Available at https://understandingwar.org/analysis/russia-ukraine/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment (accessed on 23 November 2025); BBC, "Ukraine in maps: tracking the war with Russia", 13 March 2025. Available at https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60506682 (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[7] UNHCR, "DR Congo emergency". Available at https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/situations/democratic-republic-congo-situation (accessed on 15 March 2025).

[8] UNHCR, "Myanmar emergency". Available at https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/situations/myanmar-situation (accessed on 15 March 2025); S. Naing, "Myanmar's war-torn Rakhine faces famine with 2 million people at risk, UN says", Reuters, 8 November 2024. Available at https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/myanmars-war-torn-rakhine-faces-famine-with-2-million-people-risk-un-says-2024-11-08/ (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[9] UNHCR, "Sudan situation". Available at https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/sudansituation (accessed on 15 March 2025).

[10] Z. Jamaluddine and others, "Traumatic injury mortality in the Gaza Strip from Oct 7, 2023, to June 30, 2024: a capture–recapture analysis", *The Lancet*, vol. 405, No. 10477 (8 February 2025).

[11] UNRWA, "UNRWA situation report #162 on the humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem", 9 March 2025. Available at https://www.unrwa.org/resources/reports/unrwa-situation-report-162-humanitarian-crisis-gaza-strip-and-west-bank-including (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[12] *Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v. Israel), Request for the Modification of the Order of 28 March 2024, Order of 24 May 2024, I.C.J. Reports 2024, p. 649.*

[13] Middle East Monitor, "Israel kills over 150 Palestinians since ceasefire, including 40 in past two weeks: Gaza Media Office", 15 March 2025. Available at https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20250315-israel-kills-over-150-palestinians-since-ceasefire-including-40-in-past-two-weeks-gaza-media-office/ (accessed on 23 November 2025).

Peace Activity

The increasing level of armed conflict and its human costs might give the impression that little peace-oriented activity is underway worldwide, but as Table 1 shows, this would be a serious misapprehension. Including ceasefires and agreements on humanitarian access, process, implementation and next steps, an average of 35 agreements have been reached annually during the 2020s thus far. Nevertheless, this falls far short of an annual average of just under 100 in the previous two decades. (It should be noted that the PA-X database, on which these figures are based, uses a broad definition of peace agreement. These are largely process agreements, steps along the way towards peace, often starting journeys that have not been completed.)

Table 1. Number of Peace Agreements, 1990-2024

Conflict type	*1990-94*	*1995-99*	*2000-04*	*2005-09*	*2010-14*	*2015-19*	*2020-24*
Inter-state	14	32	7	8	4	7	10
Inter-state/intra-state	70	46	30	22	44	27	17
Intra-state	300	272	229	186	173	134	119
Intra-state/local	12	7	12	40	54	201	31
Total	**396**	**357**	**278**	**256**	**275**	**369**	**177**

Source: Political Settlements Research Programme, University of Edinburgh, "Peace agreements database", PA-X database, https://www.peaceagreements.org (accessed 8 June 2025).

There were several noteworthy developments in peace processes in 2024. Following a four-year military standoff, India and China struck a deal in October to help defuse tensions along the disputed border, agreeing in December to work towards a resolution of the conflict.[14] China and the Philippines also agreed to set up new lines of communication to improve their handling of maritime disputes,[15]while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan resolved a long-standing border dispute in December 2024 that had flared into deadly violence in 2021–2022.[16]

Important developments in 2025 include the June agreement between DRC[17] and Rwanda,

[14] V. Pandey, "India and China agree to de-escalate border tensions", BBC, 21 October 2024. Available at https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ckg0gwy0nlyo (accessed on 23 November 2025); K. Moritsugu, "China and India agree to work on solution to their border dispute in the Himalayas", Associated Press, 19 December 2024. Available at https://apnews.com/article/china-india-border-dispute-d808afcdb6eb7a5deab3babea425bc6f (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[15] Reuters, "China, Philippines agree on 'provisional arrangement' for South China Sea resupply missions, Manila says", 21 July 2024. Available at https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/philippines-resupply-ship-south-china-sea-shoal-without-us-help-2024-07-21/ (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[16] C. Putz, "After 33 years, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan announce border agreement", The Diplomat, 4 December 2024. Available at https://thediplomat.com/2024/12/after-33-years-kyrgyzstan-and-tajikistan-announce-border-agreement/ (accessed on 23 November 2025)

[17] Gershwin Wanneburg, "Turning point or pointless turn: will DR Congo-Rwanda deal bring peace?", Al Jazeera, 1 July 2025. Available at https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/7/1/turning-point-or-pointless-turn-will-dr-congo-rwanda-deal-bring-peace (accessed on 23 November 2025).

achieved with US backing, to end the fighting in eastern DRC.[18] While Nobel Laureate Denis Mukwege criticised the deal as a "scandalous surrender of sovereignty" that validated foreign occupation and exploitation of the people and mineral resources of the DRC, it is uncertain whether the agreement will indeed end the fighting. (Whether President Trump deserves credit for achieving peace is a separate question.[19]) M23, the main militia force in eastern DRC, was not a party to the agreement and fighting has continued.[20] In August 2025, Armenia and Azerbaijan, again with US backing, concluded an agreement (Joint Declaration on Future Relations) in which they committed themselves to signing the Agreement on Establishment of Peace. The final draft of the latter accord had been hammered out in March, facilitated by memoranda of understanding with the US on future economic partnerships and possibilities,[21] as part of efforts to settle remaining contentious issues between the two countries after three decades of intermittent warfare ended with Azerbaijan's victory in 2023. The March agreement, however, has not yet been formally signed and ratified because Azerbaijan is insisting that Armenia must first amend its constitution.[22]

The problem, then, is not a lack of activity. There has been plenty – albeit less than in the previous two decades – but without the results to show for it. It is the contention of this chapter that the explanation for this lack of impact does not lie with the mediators, nor with their tools and techniques. These are well-established now, with several decades of experience that goes far beyond traditional inter-state diplomacy. It is undoubtedly true that errors and missteps have occurred and continue to occur in implementation processes, among them the persistent tendency to underplay, on the one hand, important dimensions of cultural differentiation and, on the other, the importance of inclusivity – especially but not only on gender lines – in achieving sustainable agreements. Nonetheless, those who are engaged in supporting peace processes have access to a variety of flexible instruments that

[18] Gershwin Wanneburg, "Turning point or pointless turn: will DR Congo-Rwanda deal bring peace?", Al Jazeera, 1 July 2025. Available at https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/7/1/turning-point-or-pointless-turn-will-dr-congo-rwanda-deal-bring-peace (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[19] Nimi Princewill, "As two African nations sign a peace deal, Trump wants credit. But some fear peace may still elude them", CNN, 27 June 2025. Available at https://edition.cnn.com/2025/06/27/africa/trump-drc-rwanda-peace-deal-intl (accessed on 23 November 2025); Arab News, "Trump confirms DR Congo-Rwanda peace deal, gripes about Nobels", 21 June 2025. Available at https://www.arabnews.com/node/2605240/world (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[20] UN News, "DR Congo: rising insecurity in the east impedes diplomatic progress, Security Council hears", 22 August 2025. Available at https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/08/1165707 (accessed on 23 November 2025); Jospin Mwisha, "DRC's latest peace deal is breaking down and it isn't the first – what's being done wrong", The Conversation, 2 September 2025. Available at https://theconversation.com/drcs-latest-peace-deal-is-breaking-down-and-it-isnt-the-first-whats-being-done-wrong-264064 (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[21] M. Abrahamyan, "A fragile framework for lasting peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan?", International Center for Transitional Justice, 10 October 2025. Available at https://www.ictj.org/latest-news/fragile-framework-lasting-peace-between-armenia-and-azerbaijan (accessed on 23 November 2025); Thomas de Waal, "Armenia and Azerbaijan's major step forward", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 17 March 2025. Available at https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2025/03/armenia-azerbaijan-peace-deal-next-steps?lang=en (accessed on 23 November 2025); Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Publication of the initialed agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan", 11 August 2025. Available at https://www.mfa.am/en/press-releases/2025/08/11/Initialed%20Arm-Az%20Peace%20Agreement%20text/13394 (accessed on 23 November 2025); US Department of State, "United States publishes documents from historic Armenia and Azerbaijan meeting", press release, 29 August 2025. Available at https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/08/united-states-publishes-documents-from-historic-armenia-and-azerbaijan-meeting (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[22] Lucy Papachristou and Nailia Bagirova, "Azerbaijan, Armenia publish text of US-brokered peace deal", Reuters, 11 August 2025. Available at https://www.reuters.com/world/azerbaijan-armenia-publish-text-us-brokered-peace-deal-2025-08-11/ (accessed on 23 November 2025).

can be and are used in relation to diverse conflict types and peace processes in local, national and regional settings.[23]

As real as the constraints in process may be, the core explanation for the limited record of achievements lies elsewhere, in a broader context of insecurity. The high incidence of armed conflict today is but one deficiency in the world order. In general theoretical terms, the concept of world order refers to the arrangement and conduct of international relations institutions, treaties, laws and norms, and the full range of dealings between states. Looked at more closely, the whole can be broken down into a set of different orders dealing with economic relations, questions of peace and security, the natural environment, human rights, health, cultural heritage and more. Some aspects of the world order are formalized, some not; some are more or less universally acknowledged, some not. Among other consequences, this means that world order is both contested and constantly evolving. In reflecting on how to strengthen peace mediation and conflict management, it is essential to assess these broader issues of global institutional performance and the ways they interconnect.

Military Spending

Trends in global military spending offer a useful starting point for understanding how the changes in the international order are affecting global peace and security. Global military spending is the product of decisions made by all governments in response to perceived security threats and opportunities. As the sum of all those decisions, spending is an interesting indicator of the overall perceived level of security. Other things being equal, when domestic and external security conditions are under control and threat perceptions are low, military spending will be lower than when the prevailing sentiment is one of insecurity and a high risk of conflict. It is therefore worth noting that global military spending has never been higher. It has increased every year for the past decade – the longest run of annual increases recorded in the definitive database of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). In 2024, the global total increased by a record 7 per cent to its highest ever level, exceeding $2.7 trillion.[24] This overall pattern of increase masks quite wide variations. East Asia, Europe (including Russia) and North America show the highest increases; China's military spending has risen each year for 30 years, a uniquely long run. By contrast, military spending in sub-Saharan Africa and Central and South America is stable or declining.

"Global military spending has never been higher. It has increased every year for the past decade — the longest run of annual increases recorded in SIPRI's definitive database."

Although global spending is at an all-time high, that does not mean it has peaked. Today's global economic burden of military spending is not especially large by historical standards. In 2024, military expenditures accounted for 2.5 per cent of global GDP. A World Bank estimate using SIPRI data indicates that comparable figures were 4.2 per cent in 1984 and 5.4 per cent in 1964.[25] Increasing military spending will doubtless be politically contentious

[23] Julia Cournoyer, Leena Badri and Marion Messmer, "Conflict prevention under pressure", International Security Programme Research Paper (London, Chatham House, 2025).

[24] SIPRI, *SIPRI Yearbook 2025: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2025), Table 3.1.

[25] Ibid., Table 3.2; World Bank Group, "Military expenditure (% of GDP)", World Bank database. Available at https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS (accessed on 12 March 2025).

in many countries, with adverse social effects if other needs go unmet, but further increases in military spending are both feasible and likely. In June 2025, NATO announced plans for significant increases in military spending, with the aim of bringing member states' expenditures up to 5 per cent of GDP by 2035.[26] In summary, there is no evidence to suggest that perceptions of insecurity and the inclination to address them through increased military strength will diminish in the near future.

Nuclear Risk

Indicators of equally profound problems are to be found in the nuclear field. On the one hand, there is good news. The world's nuclear stockpile has been shrinking for almost 40 years, from approximately 64,000 bombs and warheads in the mid-1980s to 12,240 at the start of 2025.[27] While some of these munitions are held in storage waiting to be dismantled and disposed of, others are stored ready for use or are deployed as missile warheads and are immediately available to be loaded onto bombers.

That was the good news; now for the bad.

In the last few years, the number of deployed nuclear weapons has begun to increase. Thus far, this is confined to China and, on a much smaller scale, India. Combined, the estimated increase by these two states from 2024 to 2025 amounted to 102 warheads – just under 1 per cent of the world's total stockpile, and fewer than the number that were retired and dismantled. As small as the figure is, it is one sign that the era of nuclear weapons reductions has come to an end.

The second sign lies in nuclear diplomacy. Bilateral nuclear arms control between Russia and the US is almost over.[28] The only remaining bilateral US-Russian nuclear arms control agreement is the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START). The treaty was signed in 2010 and came into force in 2011, with a ten-year term that can be extended for five years by mutual agreement. It was extended in 2021, but there has been no further action. New START is scheduled to expire in early 2026. There are no signs of negotiations to renew or replace it, and neither side has shown much interest in doing so. President Putin suspended Russia's participation in the treaty in February 2023, though he affirmed that Russia would continue to abide by the treaty's numerical limits, and in September 2025, he offered to continue with that voluntary constraint for one year if President Trump would agree to the same.[29] For his part, President Trump has long regarded New START as "one-sided" and

[26] Paul Kirby, "Trump says Nato's new 5% defence spending pledge a 'big win'", BBC, 25 June 2025. Available at https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cj4en8djwyko (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[27] E. H. Dyvik, "Number of nuclear warheads worldwide from 1945 to 2024", Statista, 4 July 2024; H. M. Kristensen and R. S. Norris, "Global nuclear weapons inventories, 1945–2013", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 69, No. 5 (2013); on the numbers at the start of 2025, see *SIPRI Yearbook 2025*, chapter 6.

[28] SIPRI, S*IPRI Yearbook 2019: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019), chapter 1, pp. 4–9.

[29] President of Russia, "Presidential address to Federal Assembly", transcript, 21 February 2023. Available at http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70565 (accessed on 23 November 2025); A. Osborn, V. Soldatkin and J. Landay, "Putin offers Trump one-year extension to nuclear weapons treaty", Reuters, 23 September 2025. Available at https://www.reuters.com/world/putin-offers-trump-temporary-nuclear-arms-control-deal-that-would-extend-status-2025-09-22/ (accessed on 23 November 2025).

"just another bad deal that the country made".[30]

The third sign that the nuclear good news story is coming to an end lies in the reluctance of nuclear-armed states to pursue further reductions. This has generated huge impatience among many of the strongest advocates for nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. Successive review conferences of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty seem only to produce disagreement over disarmament.[31] The risk is that the process might reach breaking point. Since the end of the Cold War in 1989–1991, three new states have acquired nuclear weapons: India, Pakistan and North Korea. Compared to fears in the 1970s about nuclear proliferation,[32] three additional states going nuclear counts as a relative success for the non-proliferation regime. But in Europe, the Middle East and Northeast Asia, there is clear potential for more states to join the nuclear club,[33] possibly including Iran, especially after the Israeli and US bombing of its nuclear energy facilities in June 2025.[34]

At the same time, a new nuclear arms race is gearing up. Compared to the last one, the risks are likely to be more diverse and more serious.[35] In part, this is because it is a triangular arms race – three great powers, not two superpowers. It is also because key arenas of competition will include cyberspace, outer space and ocean-space. Thus, the arms race may be more qualitative than quantitative, and the idea of who is ahead will be even more elusive and intangible than it was last time. Consequently, the old, largely numerical formulas of arms control will no longer suffice.

Eighty years into the nuclear age, there are no credible circumstances in which it would make rational sense to launch a nuclear war. To do so would be an obvious act of self-destruction, even if facing defeat in a conventional war, whatever happens in the technological competition and even if one side thinks it has a comprehensive advantage. But the risk of a nuclear war occurring inadvertently persists, occasioned, perhaps, by a technical glitch that is compounded by human fallibility against a background of hostility and mutual suspicion.

[30] S. Holland, "Trump wants to make sure U.S. nuclear arsenal at 'top of the pack'", Reuters, 24 February 2017.

[31] Gaukhar Mukhatzhanova, "10th NPT review conference: why it was doomed and how it almost succeeded", Arms Control Today, October 2022. Available at https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2022-10/features/10th-npt-review-conference-why-it-was-doomed-and-how-it-almost-succeeded (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[32] Robert G. Gard, Jr., "JFK's nuclear proliferation warnings: up to 25 countries with nuclear weapons", Council for a Livable World, 11 May 2012. Available at https://livableworld.org/jfks-nuclear-proliferation-warnings-up-to-25-countries-with-nuclear-weapons/ (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[33] Cienski and W. Kość, "Poland seeks access to nuclear arms and looks to build half-million-man army", Politico, 7 March 2025; G. G. Chang, "Japan's new leader wants nuclear weapons", *Newsweek*, 13 October 2024; J. Borger, "Crown Prince confirms Saudi Arabia will seek nuclear arsenal if Iran develops one", *The Guardian*, 21 September 2023. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/21/crown-prince-confirms-saudi-arabia-seek-nuclear-arsenal-iran-develops-one (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[34] Julian Barnes, "After U.S. strikes, Iran may be determined to build a nuclear weapon", *The New York Times*, 22 June 2025. Available at https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/22/us/politics/iran-nuclear-weapon.html (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[35] See J. T. Mathews, "The race that can't be won", *The New York Review*, 17 October 2024.

Ecological Risk and Insecurity

In the background – usually far too far into the background – of this discussion, the ecological crisis continues to worsen. On 22 July 2024, the Earth experienced its hottest day on record.[36] On some days in that month, the temperature in the Antarctic winter was around 28°C warmer than normal.[37] Overall, 2024 was the warmest year on record.[38] Likewise, the period from 2015 to 2024 is the warmest ten-year period on record.[39] The 2015 Paris Agreement set the goal of limiting global warming to "well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels" (defined as the period from 1850 to 1900), while trying to stay below a 1.5°C increase.[40] A decade later, 2024 marked the first year on record in which the average global temperature was clearly more than 1.5°C above the pre-industrial average. As the World Meteorological Organization noted, the Paris goal is "not yet dead but in grave danger".[41] The current trajectory of warming is towards approximately 3°C above the pre-industrial average.[42] Among the distressing consequences of this is the increasing frequency of deadly humid heatwaves, which bring a combination of high temperatures and high humidity that the human physiology cannot survive.[43]

The argument that climate change is a driver of human insecurity and conflict risk was, at one time, contested but the evidence has become clearer with each passing year.[44] The challenge of climate change can only be fully addressed through international cooperation. There is a shared interest in responding to it and joint action is a necessary part of the solution. This lesson is ignored by far too many politicians and opinion-makers today, yet climate change is but one part of the current ecological crisis.

Some other aspects of ecological disruption are on the international political agenda, but outcomes are little better than they are on climate action. The world is currently experiencing the sixth mass extinction of species, losing biodiversity and biomass at an unprecedented

[36] European Commission, Copernicus Programme, "New record daily global average temperature reached in July 2024", 25 July 2024. Available at https://climate.copernicus.eu/new-record-daily-global-average-temperature-reached-july-2024 (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[37] D. Gayle and D. Noor, "Antarctic temperatures rise 10C above average in near record heatwave", *The Guardian*, 1 August 2024. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/aug/01/antarctic-temperatures-rise-10c-above-average-in-near-record-heatwave (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[38] European Commission, Copernicus Programme, "Global climate highlights 2024", 10 January 2025. Available at https://climate.copernicus.eu/global-climate-highlights-2024 (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[39] World Meteorological Organization, "WMO confirms 2024 as warmest year on record at about 1.55°C above pre-industrial level", 10 January 2025. Available at https://wmo.int/news/media-centre/wmo-confirms-2024-warmest-year-record-about-155degc-above-pre-industrial-level (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[40] T. di Liberto, "What's in a number? The meaning of the 1.5-C climate threshold", Climate.gov, 9 January 2024. Available at https://www.climate.gov/news-features/features/whats-number-meaning-15-c-climate-threshold (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[41] World Meteorological Organization, "WMO confirms".

[42] United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), *Emissions Gap Report 2024* (Nairobi, 2024).

[43] C. M. Powis and others, "Observational and model evidence together support wide-spread exposure to noncompensable heat under continued global warming", *Science Advances*, vol. 9, No. 36 (September 2023).

[44] K. Tarif and others, "Insights on climate, peace and security", Climate, Peace and Security Research Paper (Stockholm, SIPRI, 2023).

rate.[45] Up to 1 million species of animals and plants are at risk of extinction; this may be close to one eighth of all species on the planet.[46] In 2022, the Conference of Parties (COP) to the Convention on Biological Diversity agreed on the Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), a set of radical measures to slow the losses.[47] Two years later, the next Biodiversity COP ended in clamorous disunity.[48] A February 2025 extension of the COP did manage an outline agreement on financing to support the GBF, but a decision on a new fund will only be taken in 2028, if then, leaving almost no time to achieve the GBF targets, which were set for 2030.[49] The loss of biodiversity has potentially profound consequences for health and food security.

Similarly challenging for food security are microplastics, which hinder photosynthesis in plants, significantly reducing food production.[50] Appropriately, plastic pollution has received international political attention; in March 2022, the UN Environment Assembly agreed to develop a legally binding international instrument on plastic pollution by the end of 2024.[51] The deadline came and went, however, without agreement, and in August 2025 the extended talks collapsed with fundamental issues of what to include in the treaty text unresolved.[52]

At least climate change, biodiversity and plastic pollution are established on the international political agenda, even if the record so far leaves much to be desired. Other issues are well-established on the scientific agenda and equally serious yet have no political platform for discussion and possible action. One example is antimicrobial resistance (AMR). It is estimated that antibacterial resistance, a subset of AMR, is likely to contribute to 10 million premature deaths annually by 2050, and will lengthen recovery times from illnesses that, since the large-scale manufacture and provision of penicillin and other antibiotics began,

[45] E. Kolbert, The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History (Henry Holt and Company, New York, 2014); World Wildlife Fund, "What is the sixth mass extinction and what can we do about it?" Available at https://www.worldwildlife.org/stories/what-is-the-sixth-mass-extinction-and-what-can-we-do-about-it (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[46] Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), *Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services* (Bonn, 2019); C. Mora and others, "How many species are there on earth and in the ocean?", *PLoS Biology*, vol. 9, No. 8, August 2011.

[47] UNEP, "Conference of the parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, 15th meeting, Part II, Kunming–Montreal global biodiversity framework", CBD/COP/15/L.25, 18 December 2022.

[48] P. Greenfield and P. Weston, "COP16 ends in disarray and indecision despite biodiversity breakthroughs", *The Guardian*, 3 November 2024. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/nov/03/cop16-ends-in-disarry-and-indecision-despite-biodiversity-breakthroughs (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[49] A. Chandrasekhar and others, "COP16: key outcomes achieved at the resumed UN biodiversity conference in Rome", Carbon Brief, 28 February 2025; P. Weston, "COP16 nature summit agrees deal at 11th hour but critics say it is not enough", *The Guardian*, 28 February 2025. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/feb/28/cop-16-climate-nature-funding-agreement (accessed on 23 November 2025).

[50] R. Zhu and others, "A global estimate of multiecosystem photosynthesis losses under microplastic pollution", *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, vol. 122, No. 11 (10 March 2025).

[51] UNEP Environment Assembly, Resolution 5/14, 2 March 2022.

[52] Karen McVeigh and Emma Bryce, "Plastic pollution talks fail as negotiators in Geneva reject draft treaties", *The Guardian*, 15 August 2025. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/aug/15/plastic-pollution-talks-geneva-treaty (accessed on 23 November 2025).

have generally been straightforward to treat.[53] Another example is air pollution, which, wwaccording to the World Health Organization, affects well over 90 per cent of the world's population. Robust research links it to increased aggression among children and to violent crime.[54]

The natural foundations on which all social and economic life is based are changing and weakening. Though all the connections and interactions have not yet been identified, it is clear that this has serious and significant implications for peace and security.[55] Choosing effective response strategies will both influence and be shaped by geopolitical alignments, as well as by governments' choices about where to stand on the spectrum between all-inclusive international cooperation and the erection of barriers against all comers. As the global security situation worsens, it will likely complicate ecological cooperation and make it more difficult to achieve. And as the ecological crisis intensifies, it will exacerbate challenges for regional, national and global security.

Conflict Management and Mediation in an Insecure World

To summarize, failures in international institutions, cooperation and system dynamics are adding to the challenges of conflict management and peace mediation. Global institutions tasked with international stability and human security are not only currently unable to manage conflict, but they are also deficient in responding to the ecological and nuclear proliferation crises. Neither the UN and its various agencies, nor regional organizations like the African Union and European Union, nor international financial institutions like the World Bank, nor the great powers and their alliances are handling these major, epoch-defining challenges well.

Among the operational implications of this are, first, that stakeholders in dialogue and mediation cannot rely on international institutions to come in and underpin initial achievements in a peace process. Assistance from these institutions should not be spurned, but they are no longer dependable. If new major peace agreements can be concluded, they should be crafted in ways that do not depend for their viability on, for example, international peace operations. These may serve a supporting role, but until their health improves, they will not take on the core role. Additionally, any assumption that generous international financial assistance will be available to support the implementation of peace agreements is unlikely to be borne out in practice. The current level of global insecurity and the resulting increase in military spending mean that international financing will be limited compared to

53 J. O'Neill and others, Tackling Drug-Resistant Infections Globally: *Final Report and Recommendations* (London, Review on Antimicrobial Resistance, 2016); World Health Organization, "Antimicrobial resistance", 21 November 2023. Available at https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/antimicrobial-resistance (accessed on 23 November 2025); M. Naghavi and others, "Global burden of bacterial antimicrobial resistance 1990–2021: a systematic analysis with forecasts to 2050", *The Lancet*, vol. 404, No. 10459 (2024).

54 World Health Organization, "Air quality database: update 2022". Available at https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/themes/air-pollution/who-air-quality-database/2022 (accessed on 23 November 2025); A. Reuben and others, "Association of air pollution exposure in childhood and adolescence with psychopathology at the transition to adulthood", *JAMA Network Open*, vol. 4, No. 4. (2021); J. Burkhardt and others, "The effect of pollution on crime: evidence from data on particulate matter and ozone", *Journal of Environmental Economics and Management*, vol. 98 (November 2019), 102267; M. Bondy, S. Roth and L. Seger, "Crime is in the air: the contemporaneous relationship between air pollution and crime", *Journal of the Association of Environmental and Resource Economists*, vol. 7, No. 3 (2020).

55 R. Schoonover and D. Smith, "Five urgent questions on ecological insecurity", SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security, No. 2023/05 (Stockholm, SIPRI, 2023).

the turn of the century.

Opportunities to foster dialogue and peace mediation are also increasingly shaped by global and regional geopolitics. It is evident, for example, that President Trump's various ceasefire proposals and offers to negotiate or mediate in DRC, Gaza, Israel-Iran, Russia-Ukraine and others are driven by prospects for US geopolitical and economic advantage. The same is also true in other cases – the UAE in Sudan, for example, or China in the case of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Activities on the margins of these larger processes are also part of an overall geopolitical equation. That is not necessarily negative, but risks being so if those facilitating dialogue are unaware of the broader ramifications.