

What Are the Trends in Armed Conflicts, and What Do They Mean for U.S. Defense Policy?

Thomas S. Szayna, Stephen Watts, Angela O'Mahony, Bryan Frederick, Jennifer Kavanagh

Key findings

- Examining armed conflict empirically over a decades-long perspective, we find that it has decreased—interstate war has become a rare event, and intrastate conflict has lessened in frequency and magnitude, despite a recent uptick in violence.
- Only a handful of the alternative future scenarios that we examined produced large spikes in expected levels of violence down the road.
- As armed conflict declined, the frequency of deployment of U.S. land forces for military interventions increased.
- Our analyses find that U.S. forward posture may contribute to global declines in armed conflict.
- Our research suggests that the U.S. military has a continuing important role in deterring conventional conflict, underpinning peacekeeping coalitions and possibly in responding to proxy wars by other powers.

SUMMARY ■ As the U.S. national military strategy (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2015) recognizes, the current global security environment is highly unpredictable, leading the United States to face “simultaneous security challenges from traditional state actors and transregional networks of sub-state groups—all taking advantage of rapid technological change.” These security challenges reflect a variety of factors—for example, a highly interconnected and interdependent global economy, the unprecedented stress on the earth’s resources created by population growth, the creation of new and highly fragile sovereign states, and the rapid rise of emerging powers outside the Euro-Atlantic sphere. Some believe that these security challenges have, in turn, increased the potential for armed conflicts to emerge—a potential that seems borne out by conflict in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Ukraine, Yemen, Libya, and elsewhere.

With global and regional security challenges increasing and the world focused on the armed conflicts unfolding now, it would seem that the world has become a much more dangerous place.¹ But viewed from a longer-term perspective, is this really the case? Analysts and conflict

scholars have noted widely that the incidence of armed conflict in the world had actually *decreased* substantially in the past few decades before spiking in 2014–2015. Interstate war (that is, war between states) has become a rare event. And while territorial and other disputes between countries persist, analysts and conflict scholars argue that they are much less likely to escalate to interstate wars. Similarly, from a high-water mark in deadly intrastate armed conflict (that is, civil wars, terrorism, and related political violence) in the early 1990s following the dissolution of the communist

federal states, such scholars contend that intrastate armed conflict had declined steadily for two decades, before the wars in Syria, Ukraine, and elsewhere partially reversed those trends beginning in 2014. When we turn from looking at the number of wars and conflicts to the number of people killed in armed conflict, we find that the human death toll of these disputes remains *lower* than in the early 1990s or in the prior decades, the recent uptick in the number of conflicts notwithstanding. These findings are in line with the projections of the National Intelligence Council's *Global Trends 2030* (2012) and with the large literature in the field of conflict and peace science during the past two decades.

We went further and drew implications for U.S. defense policy. What explains this apparent puzzle of persistent disputes in the world coupled with a decline in longer-term trends in the incidence of armed conflict? Are the current wars in such places as Syria and Ukraine indications of a world order that is fraying, with sectarian and ethnic violence worsening? Are major powers increasingly likely to challenge the United States, ultimately leading to wars between states? Or are the implications of the current set of violent conflicts being overstated? Looking at the deeper determinants of armed conflict, will continued advances in prosperity, economic interconnectedness, democracy, and other factors contribute to a more peaceful world in the long term?

To answer such questions, we took a rigorous empirical approach. Specifically, we (1) analyzed armed conflict data from the past century from conflict-specific databases for both the incidence and intensity of intrastate conflict (i.e., civil wars, insurgencies, and other domestic unrest) and interstate conflict (i.e., wars and other conflicts between states); (2) examined the literature to understand what factors drive such conflict; (3) projected trends in the key factors for the period 2013–2040 and examined alternative future scenarios to understand the implications of unexpected but plausible future events; and (4) assessed what the trends mean for U.S. defense policy.

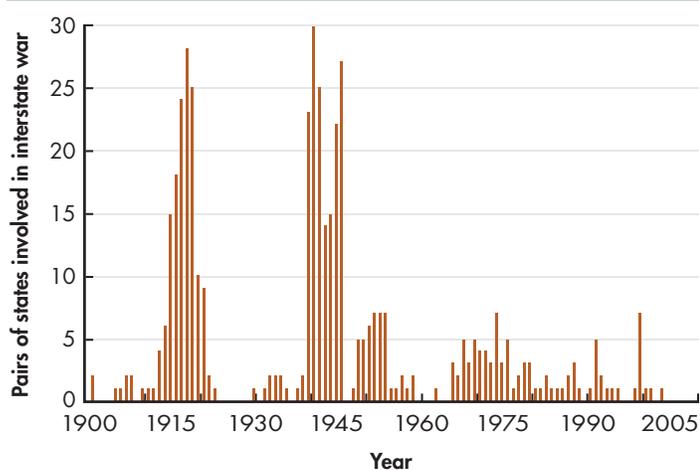
The ultimate goal was to look beyond today's crises and assess long-term trends in armed conflict—particularly the potential for growth in the incidence of deadly political conflict—to better understand the degree and nature of national security risks the United States will face as it makes decisions about force structure, acquisitions, and other issues with long-term implications.

WHAT ARE THE HISTORICAL CONFLICT TRENDS?

Despite the prominence of war and strife in the daily news cycle, our empirical research demonstrated that, up until 2014, the overall levels of deadly political conflict had been declining for decades—since the end of the 1960s in the case of interstate wars (Figure 1) and since the mid-1990s in the case of intrastate conflict (Figure 2).

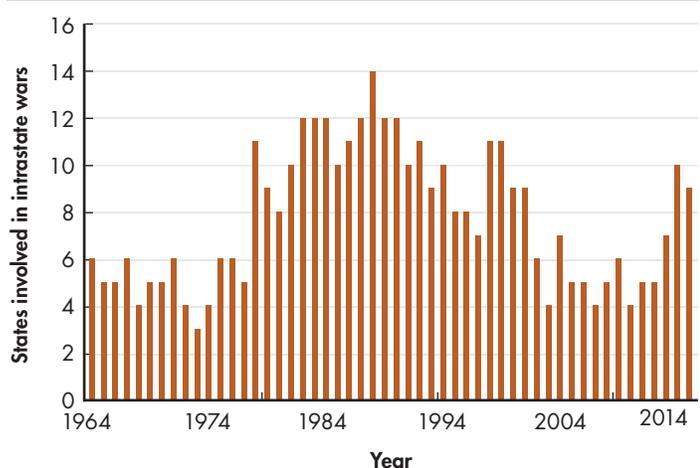
Comparing the two figures, interstate armed conflict has decreased the most, both in the incidence and intensity of armed conflict, so that its incidence is increasingly rare and occurs mostly at lower intensities. Importantly, the same patterns

Figure 1. Trends in interstate wars over time



SOURCE: Sarkees and Wayman, 2010.

Figure 2. Trends in intrastate wars over time



SOURCES: Melander, Pettersson, and Themnér, 2016; Gleditsch et al., 2002.

emerged no matter what databases were used. At least in terms of fatalities stemming from political armed conflict, the world is a safer place than it has been for many decades. While many groups in the world remain willing to pursue violent means to attain their ends, the number of armed conflicts that have resulted from these tensions has declined.

WHAT ARE THE KEY FACTORS AFFECTING CONFLICT?

The key question for policymakers, however, is not whether armed conflict has declined in the past. Rather, it is whether such declines are likely to continue in the future or if the recent uptick in violence is the beginning of a trend that would return the global incidence of conflict to levels last seen decades earlier. We cannot attempt to answer these questions without understanding why peaceful disputes turn violent.

To better understand the drivers of armed conflict, we examined the extensive literature on this subject, focusing on scholarly work that uses rigorous empirical approaches. That research identified 12 key factors as the primary drivers of the incidence of conflict:

- capacity of state institutions
- degree of ethnic and sectarian polarization
- prevalence of consolidated democracies
- rate of economic growth
- extent of economic interdependence
- capabilities of international organizations
- degree of U.S. preeminence
- strength of international norms
- diffusion of lethal technology
- degree of resource stress because of population pressures
- degree of regional hegemony
- degree of territorial contestation.

A quick review of these factors suggests why conflict has declined over the past decades. The world has experienced a dramatic expansion in economic growth and international trade over the past several decades, which has elevated hundreds of millions of people out of poverty in Africa, Asia, and Latin America and has given them a stake in a stable environment conducive to further development and the accumulation of wealth. These trends have been accompanied by the development of many stronger and more-democratic states, allowing for conflict resolution mechanisms that defuse or resolve

conflicts peacefully. Similarly, the emergence of international organizations and norms that aim to promote peaceful relations between states, along with the growth of active peacekeeping and peace enforcement by international actors, has clamped down on some of the conflicts and perhaps deterred others. As these factors have become more prevalent throughout the international system, the incidence of deadly political conflict has generally declined alongside them. These positive trends have not been evenly distributed, and many states or regions continue to be plagued by frequent armed conflict. However, the long-term global trends in these key factors help to explain why deadly political conflicts have generally become less frequent, the wars of the past few years notwithstanding. Moreover, the potential for these trends to continue into the future supports the belief that the observed long-term decline in armed conflict may persist.

WHAT DO THE TRENDS IN FUTURE CONFLICT LOOK LIKE?

We used our historical analysis to better understand future conflict trends and what factors could reverse the long-term trend toward gradually declining levels of war. To do so, we built models of conflict incidence based on both historical conflict data—since 1900 for interstate conflict and since 1964 for intrastate conflict—and historical data for the key factors discussed already. We then projected data for these key factors out to 2040 and used these projections, together with the conflict models, to project the future incidence of conflict out to 2040 as well. These calculations form a “baseline” projection of future conflict and war—that is, the levels of violence that can be expected if the future contains no major surprises.

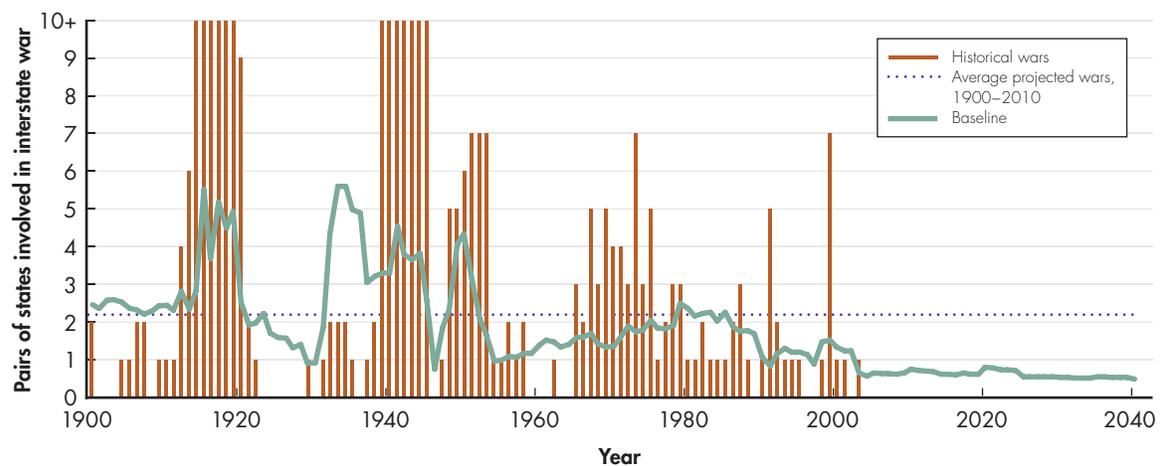
We first compared the levels of interstate war predicted by our model to the historical record to see how well the model

performed. As can be seen in Figure 3, the model predicted surges in armed conflict (represented by the green line in the figure) that roughly corresponded to the spikes in conflict during the two World Wars and the early Cold War (represented by the vertical bars), strengthening confidence in the model. Looking forward with the help of projected data for the key factors that predict the occurrence of armed conflict, the model projects a low, but not zero, incidence of interstate war going forward. Notably, there is a potential modest increase after 2020 following projected power transitions in Eurasia and East and Southeast Asia.

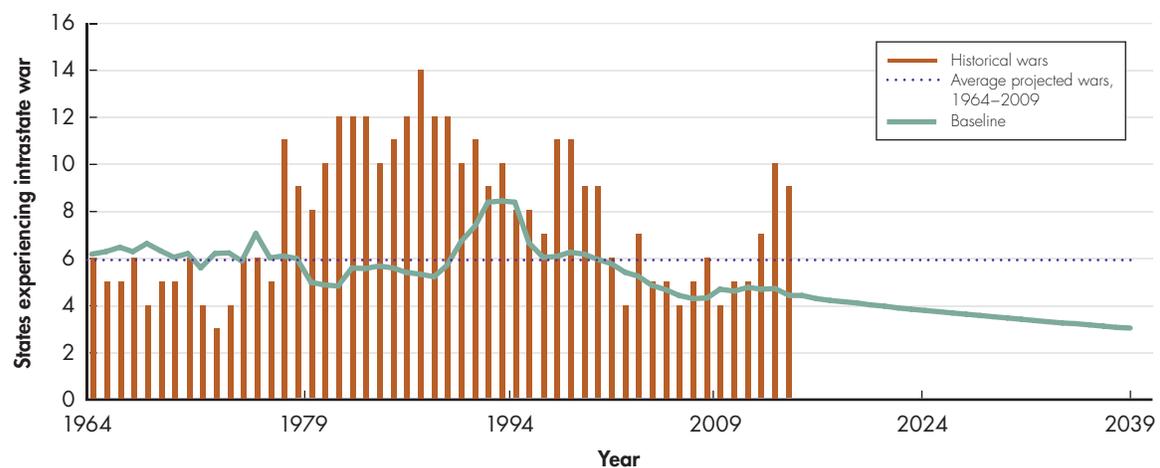
We developed a similar model and conflict projections for the incidence of intrastate war (Figure 4). As with the projections for interstate war, the baseline projection for intrastate war also shows declines in the future.² These projections suggest that the increase in violence in 2014–2015 is likely to prove short-lived unless there is a radical change in the decades-long trend toward higher levels of economic development, guarantees of minority rights, democratic governance, and other factors affecting the incidence of intrastate conflict.

Of course, the future routinely surprises us; projections are littered with examples of unanticipated events that turn things on their heads. We therefore adopted an approach to identify potential conflict risks in the future. We identified four worst-case scenarios that could affect the propensity for conflict: global depression, a revisionist China, state decay, and an environmental catastrophe. These are not all the possible “wild card” events, nor are they necessarily the most likely. Rather, we chose them to represent frequently discussed cases with extreme values on the key factors that drive conflict propensity. They can be seen as “stress tests” of the stability of the international system, roughly analogous to the “stress tests” designed to test the resilience of U.S. and other banking systems following the 2008 financial crisis. The table on page 6 discusses the worst-case scenarios and the rationale for them.

Looking forward with the help of projected data for the key factors that predict the occurrence of armed conflict, the model projects a low, but not zero, incidence of interstate war going forward.

Figure 3. Projected baseline trends in interstate wars

SOURCE: Sarkees and Wayman, 2010. Trend line is RAND analysis.

Figure 4. Projected baseline trends in intrastate wars

SOURCE: Sarkees and Wayman, 2010. Trend line is RAND analysis.

Figures 5 and 6 illustrate the projections for interstate and intrastate conflict and what might happen in the “stress tests.” In these alternative future scenarios, only two show potential for interstate conflict that substantially exceeds the baseline: Global Depression and Revisionist China. A global depression is projected to send levels of interstate war sharply upward, but it will only elevate such level of war to the levels seen in the late Cold War period, well below the historical highs experienced in prior decades. However, a revisionist China would send the projected incidence of war to levels nearly on par with some of the most violent periods of the past century. While not reaching the levels of the two World Wars, these levels do parallel

the early Cold War period, which most notably included the Korean War.

For intrastate war (Figure 6), only Global Depression shows sharp projected increases in the incidence of intrastate war and conflict. The projected levels of intrastate war rise to a level that approaches the peak values projected by the RAND model for the early post-Cold War period. This finding suggests that long-term economic and political trends, such as economic growth and gradual democratic consolidation in many parts of the developing world, are and have been quite positive—positive enough, in fact, to offset the effects of most (but not all) short-term crises on the long-term anticipated likelihood of conflict.

Table 1. Worst-Case Scenarios for Stress Testing

Scenario	Rationale
Global Depression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An economic crisis on the scale of the 2008 financial crisis erupts in the year 2025, but governments and central banks can no longer combat the sharp contraction in demand and plummeting of investor confidence • Economic nationalists surge to the fore in many of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development states and China, working to undo much of the globalized economy • Under severe fiscal pressure, the United States sharply reduces defense spending and its forward posture around the world • Economic catastrophe reverberates in political crises, toppling democratic governments and threatening many authoritarian regimes; China is particularly riven by turmoil, and similar conditions prevail in Russia
Revisionist China	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • China experiences great success in handling various strains with its growth model and thus continues to grow much more rapidly than the United States, Japan, and other major powers • Its influence blossoms, and strong economic performance fuels its military build-up and assertiveness throughout the Asia-Pacific region • Tensions increase between the United States and China, as China makes a choice to challenge the underpinnings of the existing U.S.-led order • A rupture occurs in 2030, and by 2035, a highly unstable U.S.-Sino Cold War has emerged
State Decay	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The influence of individuals and small groups increases relative to states • Disruptive technologies—including precision-strike capabilities, cyber instruments, and bioterror weaponry—become increasingly accessible to individuals and small groups, and groups become increasingly well-organized as a result of improving educational levels worldwide and access to the internet and other communications technologies • At the same time, states may be increasingly challenged by income disparities, the proliferation of “mega-cities,” and transnational flows of people, capital, and pollution • Combination of the two trends sets the stage for conflict and instability, particularly in the weaker states
Environmental Catastrophe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Climate change yields extreme consequences: widespread natural disasters, breakdown of infrastructure networks, loss of rural livelihoods because of extreme water shortages, etc. • Disruptions displace wide swaths of the population, increase intercommunal tensions over scarce critical resources, cause economic growth to plummet, and cause fiscal and political crises among many governments

These four extreme scenarios, however, are only a handful of the possible futures U.S. decisionmakers might encounter. Consequently, we also developed a tool to examine how an enormous number of possible changes in key factor projections affect the baseline conflict projections. This tool allows Army planners to explore 1,160 alternative futures based on combinations of changes in key factor projections.

WHAT DO THE TRENDS MEAN FOR U.S. DEFENSE POLICY?

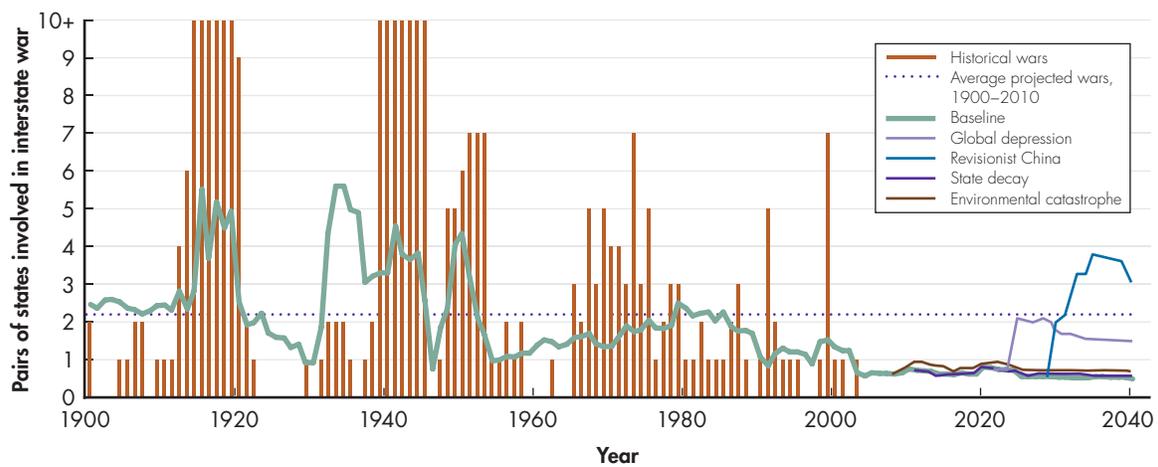
Our long-term perspective looks beyond the headlines in today’s news and provides indications of a more pacific world. Overall, deadly political conflict has been gradually declining,

and anticipated trends in the major drivers of war and peace suggest that such conflict is likely to continue to decline over the next couple of decades. Even the worst-case alternative scenarios examined here—designed to serve as stress tests—did not produce the same extremes of armed conflict seen in the past century, although some of them did yield violence well beyond current levels.

However, the defense policy implications of these findings are not straightforward. The projections for both interstate and intrastate conflict slope downward going into the future, but that does not mean that the demand for military forces also will decline.

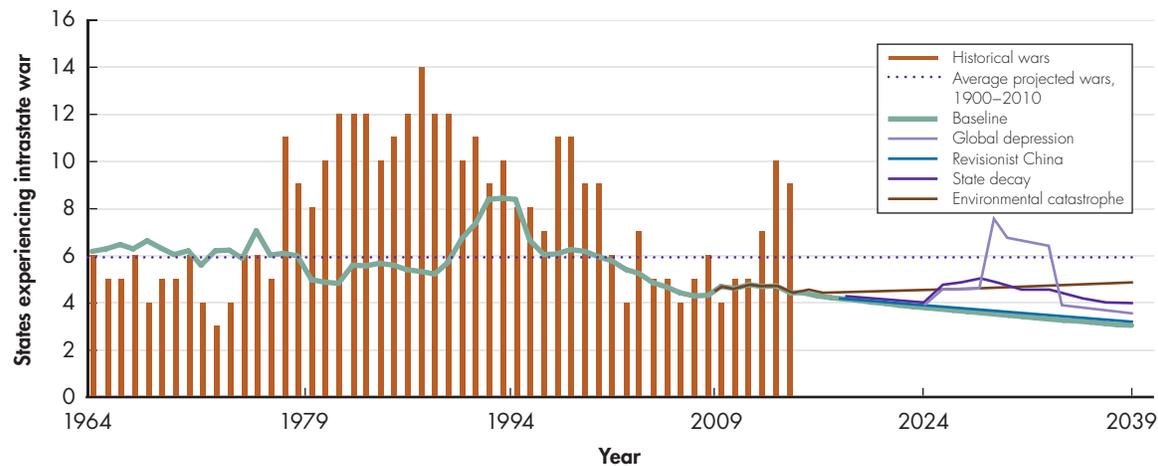
First, as the figures above show, conflict trends do not follow straight lines. Even though armed conflict has *on average* declined over the past several decades, there are periodic spikes

Figure 5. Historical, baseline, and alternative projected levels of interstate war, 1900–2040



SOURCE: Sarkees and Wayman, 2010. Trend line is RAND analysis.

Figure 6. Historical, baseline, and alternative projected levels of intrastate war, 1964–2040



SOURCE: Sarkees and Wayman, 2010. Trend line is RAND analysis.

Overall, deadly political conflict has been gradually declining, and anticipated trends in the major drivers of war and peace suggest that such conflict is likely to continue to decline over the next couple of decades.

Just because deadly political conflict is projected to continue to decline over the long term does not mean that it will do so in any given year, or even decade. The U.S. military prepares to defend the United States in periods of crisis, not just for the “average” level of threat.

in levels of armed conflict followed by periods of relative peace. Just because deadly political conflict is projected to continue to decline over the long term does not mean that it will do so in any given year, or even decade. The U.S. military prepares to defend the United States in periods of crisis, not just for the “average” level of threat.

Second, although levels of armed conflict are slowly declining globally, these trends differ greatly among regions. Many regions of relatively less importance to the United States are among those in which anticipated declines in armed conflict are greatest. In contrast, at least one region of long-standing importance to the United States—the Middle East—was shown by our models to be likely to remain highly unstable over the coming generation. Alternative scenarios analyzed here also show the potential for major war if political relations in East Asia change dramatically in the coming decades, and recent Russian actions have raised questions about armed conflict in Europe.

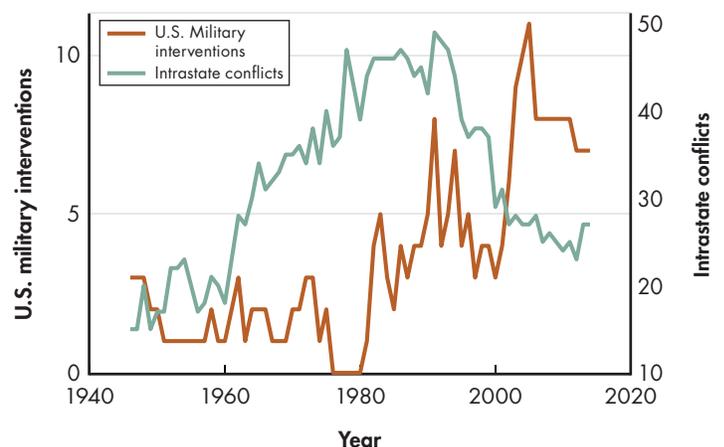
Third, even if armed conflict continues to decline, this fact does not necessarily indicate lower demand for U.S. military forces. In fact, even as armed conflict declined in the post-Cold War era, the frequency of deployments of U.S. land forces for military interventions rose substantially, as Figure 7 shows.

Finally, the United States’ military preponderance may be a part of the explanation for the decline in armed conflict in the first place. We assessed the role of U.S. forward military posture and nuclear capabilities, finding that *both* deterred some level of interstate conflict. U.S. preeminence may also have subtler effects that our research could not isolate—such effects as the creation and support of international institutions and norms that some rising powers are challenging. The statistical modeling conducted did not allow full testing of the deterrent effect of U.S. military power, but partial tests suggested

the importance of U.S. defense capabilities in contributing to the trends in decline in armed conflict. Further research on the influence of U.S. force structure and military interventions, as well as on the indirect effects of U.S. military power on maintaining existing international institutions and norms, is critical in understanding the full effects of U.S. defense capabilities on broader patterns of stability and instability.

Trends suggest that the U.S. military will continue to play an important role in deterring conventional conflict and possibly in responding to proxy wars by other powers. The military also has important indirect functions that might help reduce the future incidence of armed conflict. Through its military-to-military engagements and other forms of security cooperation, the U.S. Department of Defense seeks to strengthen both the capabilities and accountabil-

Figure 7. Ongoing conflicts and U.S. interventions



SOURCES: Gleditsch et al., 2002; Sullivan and Koch, 2009; Pickering and Kisangani, 2009; Kavanagh, 2013; Melander, Petterson, and Themné, 2016.

ity of partner military forces. Such activities can help other countries contribute positively to multi-lateral peace operations, deter armed challenges to legitimate state authorities, and strengthen civil-military relations in ways that reinforce democracy—all factors that reduce the incidence of conflict according to our study and many similar ones.

This research also has important implications for the U.S. Army specifically. It suggests that, to deter interstate challenges and reduce the likelihood that the United States will become embroiled in proxy interstate conflicts, the Army must be prepared for interstate conflict against a range of state actors. However, the analysis reported here suggests that future Army operations are more likely to be interventions in intrastate con-

flicts, and Army forces must also be ready for the operational environments typically associated with intercommunal (ethnic and sectarian) conflicts and insurgencies.

The projection of a continued, albeit gradual, decline in armed conflict rests partly on the assumption that the United States will retain a critical role in the international system. Continued U.S. commitment to an open economic order and global norms of peaceful conflict resolution is an important factor, but so is its continued investment in the military defense of this international order. It may not be a coincidence that the period of clear U.S. primacy also has been the period of lowered incidence of deadly political conflict, despite the persistence of numerous disputes throughout the world.

Notes

¹ In our usage, *armed conflict* refers to both interstate and intrastate conflict. Interstate conflict involves violence between two or more states. Intrastate violence occurs within a single state. We define these terms in greater detail in Chapter Two of Szayna et al., 2017.

² The decline is more pronounced for intrastate *war* (disputes with more than 1,000 fatalities annually) than it has been for lower-intensity intrastate *conflicts* (fewer than 1,000 fatalities).

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About This Report

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