

Addressing Conflict & Fragility in Asia

Violent conflict remains a critical ongoing concern that affects people across Asia as wars and insurgencies persist and new risks emerge. The Asia Foundation is addressing the root causes of violence through locally grounded and context-driven efforts to improve governance, targeted support for peacebuilding, conflict prevention initiatives, and concerted efforts to reduce gender-based violence. Emphasis is placed across programs on partnering with domestic institutions and building better understanding of how violence can be addressed.



CONFLICT IN ASIA TODAY

It will be impossible to achieve the ultimate goal of ending extreme poverty unless conflict and violence are tackled. Fragile and conflict-affected regions will be home to the majority of the world's extreme poor by 2020, and as many as two-thirds of the world's poor by 2030. The United Nations and the World Bank believe that prevention and peacebuilding are cost-effective given the physical destruction resulting from war: for every \$1 spent on conflict prevention, up to \$16 can be saved. Beyond the economic cost is the incalculable impact of violence and conflict on people's lives. Preventing conflict avoids the insecurity and suffering endured by millions of cross-border refugees, families repeatedly displaced by entrenched local warfare, and countless other victims of violence.

While rapid development in Asia has brought many benefits, it has added strains and stresses that leave middle-income nations affected by various forms of conflict. Political instability can rapidly descend into factional or sectarian violence and despite some progress,

gender-based violence remains entrenched and endemic. At the same time, civil war continues in Afghanistan and local conflicts persist in contested corners and border zones of countries across the region.

Conflicts are rarely due solely to weak states failing to provide security or stability; rather they are often caused by the ways in which governments operate. The political systems of many Asian countries can prove to be unpredictable powder kegs. Entrenched elites often struggle to adapt to changing conditions, isolate important groups from decision-making, and limit the scope to settle disputes between factions peacefully. Limited consensus on the constitutional "rules of the game" persists and deficits in security are commonplace. Internationally, as China and other Asian nations rise, new and uncertain power relations shake up old alliances and herald further uncertainty.

Partisan political support for majority ethnic or religious groups and the intentional scapegoating of minorities have spread, leading to rising tensions and in some cases, violent conflict. The manipulation of inter-group

tensions for political gain plays out alongside increasingly authoritarian leadership, which raises the risks of a violent backlash. These risks are exacerbated by shrinking civil space for debate and discourse, including restrictions on mass media.

Accelerating environmental change and climate risk heightens disputes over natural resources such as water and land, exacerbating existing tensions and generating new fault lines. Social media and other transformative technologies change how violent movements are formed, how governments respond, and how conflict is waged in ways which continue to evolve and are not yet well understood.

FOCUS AREAS

Governance: Confronting the problems that cause and perpetuate conflict involves addressing underlying governance challenges. Foundation programs back local efforts to improve engagement between government and citizens by addressing discriminatory policies, promoting just rule of law, and improving accountability. Initiatives have promoted greater understanding of regional disparities in Thailand, supported community policing in Timor-Leste, and improved mental health counseling in Sri Lanka.

Peacebuilding: The Asia Foundation focuses on strategic engagement with national and local partners. Country offices support locally led peace negotiations such as the long-term dialogue between the government and armed groups in the southern Philippines. In Nepal, the Foundation has worked over many years to incorporate diverse community voices in conflict mediation. In Afghanistan, the Foundation supports local leaders in forming dispute resolution forums.

Emerging risks: Increasing identity-based tensions have led to recent protests and perpetuated ongoing conflicts in many Asian countries. Initiatives support communities and generate online content aimed to reduce ethnic tensions and promote religious freedom. Research in several countries has explored the role of social media in mobilizing extremist networks and informed measures to address the problem. The Asia Foundation addresses other emerging risks including the

effect of new technologies and the impact of accelerating environmental change.

Gender and violence: The Asia Foundation partners with local organizations to promote awareness and action on gender-based violence, training local leaders and involving women and men at the community level. Programs seek to improve the policy environment, advance positive gender norms, and increase access to quality health and psychosocial services for women and girls who experience violence. In four years, project partners in Timor-Leste provided over 40,611 unique services to women and children victims of violence including legal assistance, medical forensic examination, shelter, and counseling.

Knowledge generation: Evidence-based analysis is a cornerstone of efforts to address conflict. Key regional publications by The Asia Foundation including *The State of Conflict and Violence in Asia* highlight emerging trends and their causes across Asia. Other assessments focus on more specific challenges, such as a series of reports explaining Myanmar's hugely complex ethnic conflicts to policymakers and the wider public. The Asia Foundation routinely conducts public perception surveys while its support for violence monitoring by independent local researchers generates strong evidence to inform peacebuilding efforts.

National capacity and regional approaches: Specialists at The Asia Foundation offer contextual understanding of conflict and its causes, develop nationally led approaches, and build strong links with local institutions. They are supported by a regional Conflict and Fragility team that manages programs, supports applied research, and engages in relevant policy debate. Growing understanding of cross-border links and international conflict trends has led to new appreciation of the value of working regionally as well as nationally. The X-Border Local Research Network, a policy research initiative supported by UKAid, builds greater understanding of cross-border conflicts and supports local research capacity across the Sulu Sea between Malaysia and Philippines, the border between Bangladesh and Myanmar, the ethnic conflicts where China and Myanmar meet, and the frontier between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The Asia Foundation is a nonprofit international development organization committed to improving lives across a dynamic and developing Asia. Headquartered in San Francisco, The Asia Foundation works through a network of offices in 18 Asian countries and in Washington, DC. Working with public and private partners, the Foundation receives funding from a diverse group of bilateral and multilateral development agencies, foundations, corporations, and individuals.



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