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Is WWIII here?

Sixty one armed conflicts in 36 countries were recorded this year, which is significantly higher than the average for the previous three decades

It is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the tension, violence and uncertainty in the world in recent years. The number of wars is growing, more and more money is being spent on weapons, and the rhetoric of major powers is becoming increasingly decisive.

The latest escalation in the Middle East has reignited the debate about the start of World War III. The consequences of the Israeli and US strikes on Iran are being felt to varying degrees far beyond the region, at least by those who follow oil prices. The interests of numerous great powers are at stake, and third parties are considering their next moves and making political statements. Opinions range widely, from the belief that there can be no Third World War because of the existence of nuclear weapons, to the conviction that it has already begun. So, what is really going on?

A journalistic and academic concept

When historians talk about world wars, they mean two unique events in the past. Their scale, the involvement of a wide range of states, the level of violence and the nature of the consequences put them in a league of their own. To understand how these wars differed from any others, one need only glance at the diagram of human casualties, defence spending, or destruction in various armed conflicts of the 20th century.

However, historians also have different opinions. One of them, better known in his political capacity, Winston Churchill, once described the Seven Years' War as a world war. This protracted 18th-century conflict drew most of the major powers of the time into direct combat; it spanned numerous battlefields in Europe, North America, the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean; and it had serious geopolitical consequences. How was this not a world war?

By the fact that it was not a total war between industrialised states, the scale of the clashes was rather limited, as were the number of armies; and the consequences, although serious, were not systemic — this may be the response of more conservative historians than the British Prime Minister.

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'World War' is both a journalistic and academic concept. To enhance the effect, attract attention or draw conditional analogies, it can be used to describe more events than just the First and Second World Wars. For example, the Thirty Years' War of the 17th century, the Napoleonic Wars of the 19th century or even the Cold War are sometimes referred to as world wars. Within this logic, individual elements of a world war can be seen even today. The number of armed conflicts in the world has been growing over the past few years: 2024 has been a record year since World War II. According to some estimates, 61 armed conflicts in 36 countries were recorded this year, which is significantly higher than the average for the previous three decades. Global military spending is also on the rise: today it has reached 2.5 per cent of the global economy, the highest figure since 2011 and an upward trend since 2021. This is still significantly less than during the Cold War, when a range of 3 to 6 per cent was the norm. Analysing these figures, it is clear that global security has deteriorated in recent years, but how critically?

A more academic approach would be to define a world war as one in which most of the major powers are involved; which has global reach and is total in nature; leads to enormous loss and destruction; and significantly changes the world upon its conclusion. Direct and large-scale armed conflict between major powers is a mandatory criterion. And this is the main argument against the idea that World War III has already begun. No matter how high the level of destabilisation in the modern world, no matter how far large-scale regional conflicts have escalated, and no matter how much money states spend on armaments, this is not enough for a world war. Large-scale military operations involving major powers are needed.

All just fears?

This has not happened in the world for a long time. The interval between the Second and Third World Wars turned out to be much longer than between the First and Second. Nuclear weapons played a central role in this, raising the price of war so high that major powers began to avoid it by any means possible. This safeguard has been in place for over 80 years and looks set to continue.

Peace, or rather the absence of war between major powers, remains one of the central elements of the current international order. International institutions and regimes may collapse or weaken, regional wars may break out, but the likelihood of war between major powers remains extremely low.

Proponents of the Third World War theory sometimes point out that even in the absence of full-scale war between major powers, other manifestations occur: hybrid wars, cyberattacks, or proxy wars. This is true, but all these outbreaks of conflict are several levels below a world war in terms of their destructive potential and are not total in nature. Throughout history, states have fought through proxies or resorted to information, trade or religious wars, but we do not consider these wars to be world wars — except in a symbolic sense.

A systemic war does not necessarily have to be a world war.

Unlike the 2003 war in Iraq, the strikes on Iran are taking place in a world where, instead of US hegemony, there is complex competition between at least two centres of power. This adds nuances and forces other states to respond, directly or indirectly, for example, by supplying weapons or intelligence data, supporting one side or the other. But this does not make the war global. Arms supplies, for example, are a common practice found in most regional conflicts, as is diplomatic or financial support from allies or partners. Even if American troops use the technology or expertise of partners – such as Ukrainian drones – this does not mean that Ukraine is being drawn into the war. Just as American arms supplies to Ukraine during the Russian-Ukrainian war did not mean US involvement in the war.

For a world war, the key ingredient is still missing: direct confrontation between major powers.

In addition to world wars, there are also systemic wars. In these conflicts, it is not so much the scale that is important as the change in the international order to which they lead. The Thirty Years' War, the Napoleonic Wars, and the First and Second World Wars mentioned above were systemic wars: after their completion, the rules of international politics were rewritten and new ones were adopted at peace conferences and congresses. A systemic war does not necessarily have to be a world war.

Moments of hegemonic crisis and the beginning of the struggle for hegemony always carry with them the danger of new wars, arms races and escalations.

The current destabilisation and growth of various risks are largely linked to the struggle for the future of the international order. The United States and China have almost fallen into the 'Thucydides trap' — a strategic logic similar to that which led to the Peloponnesian War in the 5th century BC. At that time, the narrowing of the power gap between the hegemon and the challenger forced the Spartans to start a preventive war. Today, there are well-founded fears that the decline of American hegemony, the rise of China and the approach of a bipolar world will sharply increase the likelihood of direct armed conflict between the superpowers. The decisive, to put it mildly, steps taken by the US administration can also be considered preventive actions aimed at strategically weakening China's position while Washington still has the upper hand. Such moments of hegemonic crisis and the beginning of the struggle for hegemony always carry with them the danger of new wars, arms races and escalations.

We are in the midst of such a crisis. It is systemic in the sense that it is not just a collection of regional conflicts in different parts of the world, which have become more numerous, but a manifestation of a large-scale redistribution of influence and power on a global scale. This redistribution will entail changes in the international order, because the rules of the game are linked to the balance of power. If, at some point, the leaders of major states decide that it is worth taking the risk of war and paying the price, the systemic crisis will turn into a world war. But this, as the Spartans themselves said, is 'if'.



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