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HAS WORLD WAR III ALREADY BEGUN?

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Abstract

The growing number of armed conflicts and deteriorating relations among major powers have revived speculation about a third world war. Yet neither international law nor conflict research provides an agreed definition of world war. This paper examines the historical origins of the two world wars, the changing character of contemporary warfare and the conditions under which separate conflicts might become strategically integrated. It distinguishes the probability of simultaneous confrontations from the more demanding conditions required for systemic global war. The evidence does not suggest that World War III has begun. It does, however, indicate that the mechanisms through which regional conflicts could reinforce one another are becoming more consequential. It identifies the warning signs of this convergence and the opportunities for governments to prevent it.

Introduction

An uncomfortable question is gaining currency in diplomatic circles and military headquarters. Has World War III already begun? Russia's grinding assault on Ukraine and the widening confrontation involving Iran, Israel, the United States and the Gulf are reviving fears of a global conflagration. Mounting tensions between Washington and Beijing add another dimension. These crises are increasingly entangled through military assistance and competing geopolitical interests, even as great-power rivalries paralyze the UN Security Council and weaken the international mechanisms designed to prevent and contain war. Although these conflicts remain distinct, escalation in one theatre increasingly risks triggering a wider confrontation involving other major powers.

This paper examines whether the proliferation of armed conflicts signals the emergence of a third world war and what conditions might bring one about. It begins by examining how governments and societies are preparing for conflict, before considering the legal and historical difficulties of defining a world war. It then assesses how separate conflicts could become strategically integrated, drawing on historical precedents, and considers the potential consequences and warning signs of a wider confrontation.

Preparing for war

The world's governments are preparing for a war that most still hope can be avoided. European military leaders are increasingly explicit about the possibility of confrontation with Russia. Public authorities are advising citizens to maintain emergency supplies, reviving civil defence plans and expanding arms production. NATO is strengthening its eastern defences while American forces reinforce their posture in the Indo-Pacific. Chinese military exercises around Taiwan have intensified concerns about a possible blockade or invasion. Meanwhile, fighting in the Middle East has demonstrated how quickly regional hostilities can disrupt global commerce.

The Pentagon is preparing for a particularly unsettling scenario. In their estimation, a major war could begin with cyberattacks and sabotage that cripple electricity grids, interrupt supply chains and undermine military operations before American forces can deploy. Its FORTRESS America initiative seeks to make military installations less dependent on vulnerable civilian infrastructure (Hadley, 2026). The objective is for major bases to sustain essential operations independently for at least 90 days (Trevithick, 2026). The initiative remains at an early stage, but reflects growing concern that attacks on civilian infrastructure could significantly undermine US military readiness and its capacity to sustain operations during a major conflict.[1]

For populations that have long regarded interstate peace as normal, military confrontation is becoming a more immediate concern

Such preparations are not confined to the United States. More than two dozen governments, including several G7 and G20 members, have issued or updated household emergency guidance since 2024. The United States and Canada recommend maintaining at least three days of essential supplies. Britain and France offer similar advice, while Germany recommends food and water reserves for ten days. Japan has advised households to prepare for at least three days, preferably a week. Italy, Australia, Brazil, Mexico and South Korea also promote household preparedness (Muggah, 2026a). The European Union's preparedness strategy encourages citizens to manage at least 72 hours without outside assistance (European Commission, 2025). Much of this guidance predates the current crises, although military conflict and cyberattacks now feature more prominently alongside natural disasters.

The warnings are beginning to influence public behaviour. Britain launched its *Be Ready* campaign in October 2026, encouraging households to prepare for three days without essential services (Cabinet Office, 2026a). Officials insist that the advice is not linked to an imminent military threat. Nevertheless, retailers reported increased purchases of bottled water, tinned food and emergency equipment. One supermarket chain recorded a 40 percent weekend increase in tinned-food sales, while an electronics retailer reported that torch sales had almost quadrupled (Butler, 2026). These were localized increases rather than widespread shortages, but they suggest that official warnings are registering.

Public anxiety is also measurable. A 2026 British government survey found that 28 percent of respondents considered war likely to affect their local area within two years, up from 19 percent in 2025 (Cabinet Office, 2026b). Another 42 percent expected a cyberattack affecting critical infrastructure, compared with 39 percent the previous year (Cabinet Office, 2026b). Across the European Union, a Eurobarometer survey found that 72 percent of respondents were worried about active conflicts (European Parliament, 2026). For populations that have long regarded interstate peace as normal, military confrontation is becoming a more immediate concern.

[1] Washington is also concerned about the vulnerability of its electricity network. In August, the White House declared a national emergency over weaknesses in the bulk-power system, citing foreign interference and malicious cyber activity (White House, 2026). An adversary able to exploit these vulnerabilities could disrupt electricity supplies essential to national defence. The consequences would extend well beyond military installations.

Governments are also warning about sabotage, cyberattacks and other forms of so-called hybrid warfare. Cyber operations pose particular risks because they can disable essential infrastructure without a conventional military assault. In October 2026, a cyberattack disrupted refrigeration systems in hundreds of French supermarkets. On November 2, similar incidents affected retailers in nine other European countries, forcing some stores to discard spoiled food (AFP, 2026). Several retailers confirmed cyber intrusions, although the causes of other incidents remain under investigation. The incidents demonstrate the vulnerability of interconnected commercial infrastructure.

NATO's 2026 Resilience Baseline Requirements warn that increasingly damaging attacks could cripple civilian services and undermine military operations (NATO, 2026). The EU's 2026 cybersecurity threat assessment found that 73 percent of organizations targeted in its incident dataset were classified as essential or important under European legislation (ENISA, 2026). The dependence of military forces on civilian electricity, communications and logistics networks has made infrastructure resilience an increasingly important element of defence planning.

Military spending provides another index of growing insecurity. Global expenditure reached a record $2.887 trillion in 2025, the eleventh consecutive annual increase (SIPRI, 2026a). Spending has risen 41 percent over the past decade. European military expenditure increased by 14 percent in 2025, while spending in Asia and Oceania rose by 8.1 percent (SIPRI, 2026a). Although American expenditure declined, China and Russia continued to expand their military budgets. Governments are committing substantial resources to military preparedness even as international cooperation becomes more difficult.

Comparisons with 1914 and the late 1930s have become commonplace. Yet increased military spending, civil defence measures and public anxiety do not establish that another world war has begun. Determining whether contemporary conflicts amount to something more than a collection of regional wars requires a clearer understanding of what constitutes war and how separate confrontations become strategically connected.

The trouble with defining war

The debate over whether World War III has started suffers from a basic conceptual problem. There is no universally accepted definition of war that resolves every political and legal question, much less an agreed standard for determining when several conflicts constitute a world war. Different institutions apply different thresholds for legitimate purposes. Yet political debate and punditry frequently moves between these categories as though they were interchangeable.

The ambiguity has analytical consequences. If almost any hostile activity qualifies as warfare, the term loses explanatory value. A definition restricted to conventional military operations overlooks important forms of contemporary coercion. Conversely, defining world war simply as the simultaneous occurrence of serious conflicts would produce a category so broad that it would encompass several historical periods not generally regarded as world wars.

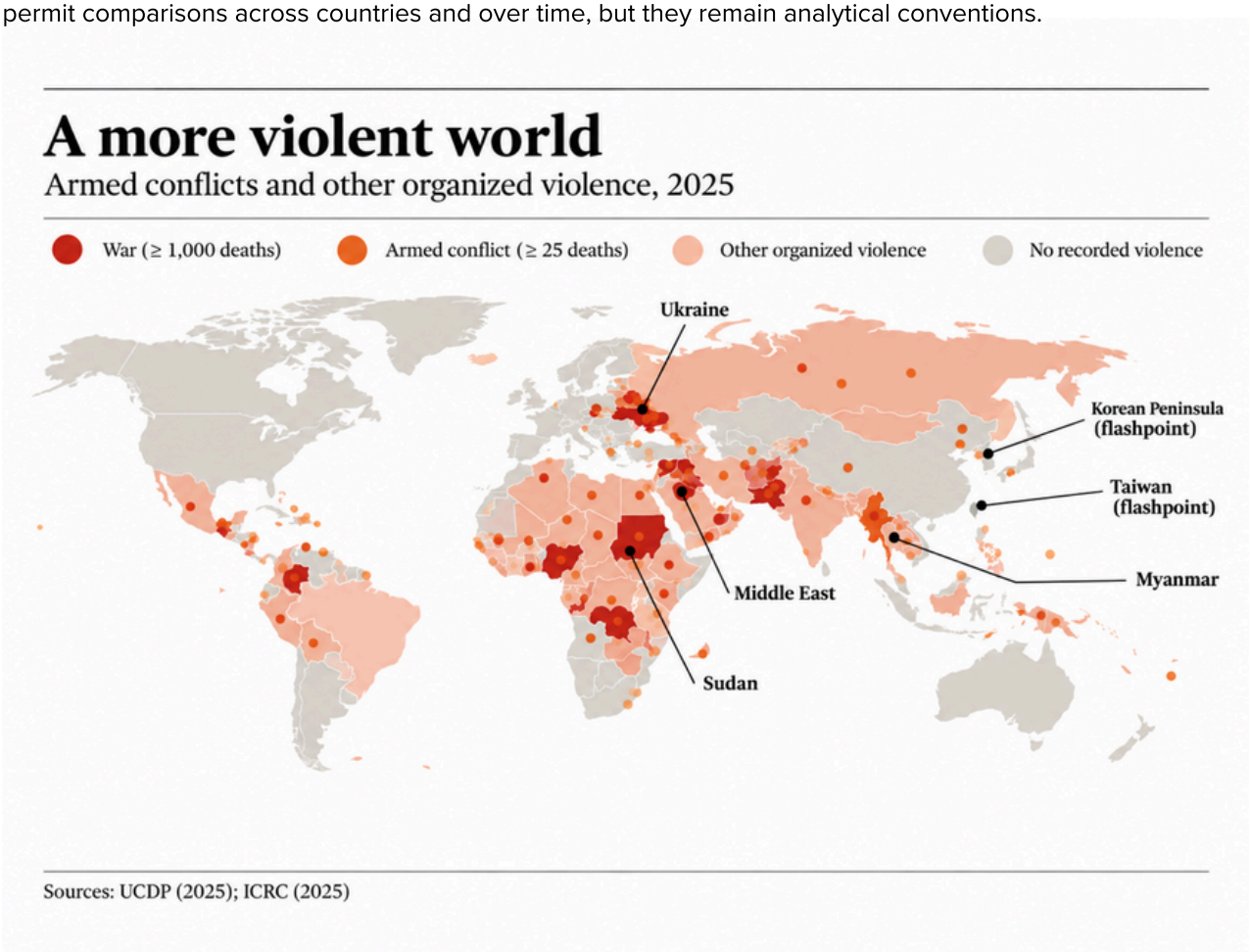
A more useful approach requires distinguishing the existence of armed conflict from the processes through which conflicts spread and become interconnected. The central issue is not simply how much violence is occurring, but whether separate confrontations are becoming parts of a wider strategic struggle. International humanitarian law provides a starting point. The Geneva Conventions of 1949 largely displaced the traditional emphasis on formal declarations of war with the more practical concept of armed conflict (ICRC, 2024). Governments cannot evade humanitarian obligations simply by declining to acknowledge that they are fighting.

International humanitarian law recognizes two principal categories. An international armed conflict arises when one state resorts to armed force against another. There is generally no minimum requirement for the duration or intensity of fighting (ICRC, 2024). Even a relatively minor military confrontation may qualify. A non-international armed conflict, involving a government and organized armed groups or such groups fighting one another, requires a higher threshold. The armed groups must demonstrate sufficient organization and the violence must reach a certain intensity.

These distinctions establish when the laws of war apply and who must observe them. They do not determine whether a country is participating in a world war. Separate legal tests govern the prohibition on the use of force and self-defence under the United Nations Charter. NATO's Article 5 introduces additional considerations concerning collective defence (NATO, 1949). An isolated exchange of fire between two countries might therefore constitute an international armed conflict. A sustained campaign of cyber intrusions and economic coercion could inflict considerable damage without necessarily qualifying as one. A cyberattack that destroys a power station raises different legal questions from an operation intended to steal intelligence (ICRC, 2024). The boundaries remain contested, particularly where cyber operations produce indirect or delayed effects.

The familiar expression "below the threshold of war" is consequently imprecise. It may refer to the threshold for applying humanitarian law, exercising self-defence or invoking an alliance commitment. Governments may also interpret the same incident differently. Much of the debate over grey-zone conflict reflects these competing legal and strategic judgments.

Social scientists encounter related difficulties. The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), one of the world's leading repositories of systematic conflict data, defines a state-based armed conflict as a dispute over government or territory involving at least 25 battle-related deaths in a calendar year. It reserves the designation *war* for conflicts producing at least 1,000 such deaths annually (UCDP, n.d.). These thresholds permit comparisons across countries and over time, but they remain analytical conventions.



By these standards, there were 65 state-based armed conflicts in 2025, the highest number since UCDP began collecting data in 1946. Thirteen qualified as wars, while eight involved direct fighting between states, also a postwar record (Uppsala University, 2026). Across the broader categories of organized violence it tracks, approximately 245,000 people were killed (Uppsala University, 2026). The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), applying its own legal assessments, described more than 130 armed conflicts worldwide in its 2025 reporting (ICRC, 2026).

These estimates are not contradictory. UCDP uses numerical thresholds to count conflicts and deaths, while the ICRC applies legal criteria to determine when humanitarian protections apply. Both approaches are useful, but neither establishes whether the world is experiencing a single global war. The rise in interstate fighting is especially concerning, yet the decisive question is whether separate military campaigns are becoming strategically integrated. More wars do not necessarily amount to a world war.

How world wars begin

History offers less guidance than conventional chronologies suggest. The First World War began as a European crisis that spread through imperial possessions and military alliances. The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in June 1914 set off a series of mobilizations that eventually drew more than 30 countries into the conflict. Fighting extended into the Middle East and Africa, while naval campaigns spread across the world's oceans.

The origins of the Second World War are more contested. The conventional European chronology begins on September 1, 1939, when Germany invaded Poland. Britain and France declared war two days later. Gerhard Weinberg defends this starting point, emphasizing that the conflict acquired an international character as Britain and its empire entered a war that would reshape the international order (Weinberg, 2014).

Other historians question the primacy of 1939. Richard Overy, in *Blood and Ruins*, traces the origins of the global confrontation to Japan's seizure of Manchuria in 1931. He places the subsequent wars in Asia and Europe within a broader struggle over imperial power and territorial domination (Overy, 2021). From this perspective, Japanese expansion was not simply a prelude to a European war. It formed part of a wider breakdown of the international order.

Rana Mitter places particular emphasis on July 1937, when fighting near Beijing escalated into Japan's full-scale invasion of China. Chinese forces had already been resisting Japanese expansion for years before Germany attacked Poland. By September 1939, the fighting had displaced millions and devastated substantial parts of China. Mitter argues that the conventional European chronology obscures both China's central role and the scale of the war already underway in Asia (Mitter, 2013).

A further interpretation identifies December 1941 as the decisive moment of convergence. Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor brought the United States into the Pacific war, while Germany's subsequent declaration of war on Washington tied the European and Asian theatres together more directly. Historians such as Donald Miller have emphasized this transformation, rather than the initial outbreak of hostilities in either region (National WWII Museum, 2009).

These interpretations reflect different historical questions. A chronology concerned with the first major acts of imperial aggression may begin in 1931. An account emphasizing China's sustained resistance favours 1937. A history centred on European aggression places greater weight on 1939. An analysis of the emergence of an integrated global conflict may regard December 1941 as decisive.

The disagreement is instructive. The Second World War did not begin with all its principal belligerents fighting in a single military system. It developed through conflicts with distinct origins that subsequently became connected through alliances and strategic commitments. What eventually became recognizable as one war was not necessarily understood that way by governments making decisions at the time.

Neither world war acquired its historical identity through an internationally recognized checklist. Their designation reflected judgments about the scale and interconnectedness of the fighting, often after decisive transformations had occurred. The integration of previously separate confrontations into broader military systems was a defining characteristic (Overy, 2021; Weinberg, 2014). Major powers committed substantial resources to struggles whose outcomes would determine the future international order.

The historical analogies remain useful, although they require care. In 1914, alliance commitments and mobilization plans helped transform a Balkan crisis into a continental war. During the 1930s, repeated territorial aggression exposed the weakness of deterrence and international institutions. Contemporary governments face comparable risks of miscalculation. Yet the strategic and technological conditions are substantially different.

Nuclear weapons are the most important distinction. The major powers possess arsenals capable of destroying cities within minutes (SIPRI, 2026b). Precision missiles and uncrewed systems can strike targets thousands of miles away. Cyber operations can interrupt electricity supplies and financial services (Muggah 2026b). Satellites underpin military navigation and communications, while artificial intelligence increasingly supports targeting and operational planning.

AI is also changing the potential scale of military operations. Armed forces are developing systems capable of coordinating larger numbers of uncrewed aircraft, potentially overwhelming conventional defences (Muggah, 2026a). The autonomy of these systems varies considerably, and fully independent swarms remain an emerging capability. Their development nevertheless raises questions about human control over the use of force, particularly when engagements unfold at speeds that make intervention difficult.

These technologies also complicate the distinction between civilian and military infrastructure. Commercial satellite networks support weapons guidance while sustaining civilian communications. Data centres process military intelligence while supporting ordinary commerce. Undersea cables carry financial transactions alongside sensitive government information. The growing dependence of armed forces on civilian systems exposes vulnerabilities that traditional concepts of the battlefield do not adequately capture.

The dependence of military installations on civilian power and communications networks is especially consequential. A coordinated cyberattack could disrupt logistics or disable communications before conventional hostilities had fully developed. The Pentagon's FORTRESS America initiative reflects recognition that military effectiveness increasingly depends on the resilience of infrastructure outside the direct control of armed forces (Hadley, 2026; Trevithick, 2026).

Advances in AI-assisted biological research introduce another potential danger. Increasingly capable systems may lower some technical barriers to designing or modifying dangerous pathogens. Producing and deploying an effective biological weapon remains difficult, and the extent of AI's contribution to these risks is uncertain. Nevertheless, a suspected deliberate biological attack during a major crisis could generate pressure for retaliation before attribution had been reliably established.

A future world war could therefore extend far beyond conventional military theatres. Attacks on strategic infrastructure might precede sustained conventional hostilities. Civilian populations could experience the consequences of military confrontation thousands of miles from the front lines, sometimes without knowing who was responsible.

Nuclear deterrence introduces an additional complication. The prospect of mutual destruction could discourage direct major-power combat even as governments intensify proxy warfare and covert operations. States might supply weapons or intelligence without becoming formal belligerents. Others could conduct limited military operations without declaring war. A wider confrontation might consequently develop without a universally recognized starting point.

Recent experience also demonstrates that escalation is not inevitable. During the brief India–Pakistan conflict in May 2025, two nuclear-armed states exchanged conventional strikes, including against military installations with potential nuclear-related functions, but ultimately avoided a wider confrontation. The crisis exposed the dangers of miscalculation while demonstrating that political restraint and efforts to limit escalation can still matter.

From rivalry to world war

A practical definition of world war should distinguish the geographic spread of violence from the strategic integration of military campaigns. The number of conflicts is relevant, but insufficient. The crucial question is whether decisions in one theatre increasingly determine military operations elsewhere. In an earlier Foreign Policy analysis, Jo Inge Bekkevold emphasized direct great-power confrontation and systemic consequences among the defining characteristics of a world war (Bekkevold, 2026). These are useful criteria. The more difficult question concerns how separate conflicts might cross the thresholds they imply.

Strategic integration can be observed through changes in military conduct, including significant transfers of forces or munitions between theatres, synchronized operations intended to exploit simultaneous vulnerabilities, and attacks on communications, logistics or other infrastructure supporting operations in distant regions. These indicators are more discriminating than the geographic spread of violence alone.

Strategists have long used escalation ladders to describe how military confrontations intensify. Herman Kahn's influential 1965 framework proposed 44 rungs, ranging from political crises to catastrophic nuclear exchanges (Kahn, 1965). The ladder was designed to clarify choices and thresholds, rather than predict that governments would move through each stage sequentially.

Contemporary warfare makes those thresholds harder to identify. A cyberattack may provoke conventional retaliation. Fighting in one region can alter calculations elsewhere. Governments may escalate through proxies while avoiding direct military confrontation. The risk is not simply that conflicts will intensify, but that escalation may occur across different domains without a common understanding of what constitutes a significant threshold.

AI introduces additional uncertainty. A formation of autonomous drones could overwhelm air defences or strike unintended targets before commanders can intervene. AI-assisted targeting might accelerate retaliation based on incomplete intelligence. A suspected biological attack involving an engineered pathogen could prompt military action before its origin had been established. These remain plausible scenarios rather than established patterns of warfare. Their relevance lies in the possibility that they could reduce the time available for verification and diplomatic intervention.

Military strategist Martin Libicki examines this problem in *The New Calculus of Escalation*. He argues that contemporary confrontation resembles a lattice of possible actions more closely than a conventional ladder (Libicki, 2025). Governments can shift between forms of coercion without following a predictable sequence. Escalation depends heavily on how adversaries interpret one another's actions and intentions.



For analytical purposes, several forms of confrontation can be distinguished. At the lower end is *militarized rivalry*. Governments threaten force, expand arsenals and support proxies. Cyberattacks and sabotage may intensify without sustained direct combat between the principal rivals. The confrontation between China and the United States largely remains in this category, despite the potential for rapid escalation around Taiwan.

A more serious condition is *direct but geographically concentrated armed conflict.* States or organized armed groups conduct sustained military operations against identifiable adversaries. Outside powers may provide weapons and intelligence while avoiding direct belligerency. Russia's invasion of Ukraine demonstrates how destructive such a conflict can become, even when external supporters seek to avoid direct war with Moscow.

The confrontation involving Iran, Israel, the United States and armed groups across the Middle East demonstrates how warfare can acquire a wider geographic footprint

Regionalization occurs when fighting spreads across borders and additional belligerents enter. Regional infrastructure and maritime routes become targets. The confrontation involving Iran, Israel, the United States and armed groups across the Middle East demonstrates how warfare can acquire a wider geographic footprint. Such conflicts may impose substantial costs on the global economy while remaining strategically distinct from hostilities elsewhere.

The more consequential threshold is the *integration of separate theatres*. Conflicts in different regions begin to affect one another's military conduct. Decisions in one theatre influence the allocation of forces elsewhere. Governments adjust military deployments in response to simultaneous pressures, while alliances may move from supplying partners to direct participation in hostilities (Muggah, 2026a).

Consider a confrontation over Taiwan occurring alongside a Russian offensive against NATO territory. Robert Blackwill and Richard Fontaine have warned that simultaneous aggression could stretch Western military capabilities, even if Moscow and Beijing acted opportunistically rather than through a coordinated plan (Blackwill and Fontaine, 2024). Were the two powers deliberately to exploit each other's campaigns, the United States and its allies could face simultaneous military demands in Europe and Asia. Decisions in either theatre would affect the conduct of operations in the other.

Some connections between contemporary conflicts are already apparent. Russia's war in Ukraine draws on Iranian-designed drone technology and North Korean forces and munitions. Ukrainian specialists have assisted Gulf partners in defending against Iranian-designed drones. Such exchanges connect distant theatres through military expertise and equipment, although they do not establish the existence of a coordinated global military campaign (Muggah, 2026a). The distinction matters. Military assistance does not necessarily make a supporting state a direct belligerent. Nor does a common strategic interest amount to operational coordination. A more dangerous transition would occur if governments deliberately synchronized military campaigns to exploit an adversary's vulnerabilities in another region.

This distinction helps clarify how a wider conflict might emerge. The ongoing US–Iran confrontation is already placing demands on American naval and air-defence capabilities. A further escalation could require Washington to commit additional forces and munitions to the Gulf, reducing its flexibility elsewhere. Beijing might conclude that competing American commitments created an opportunity to intensify pressure on Taiwan. Moscow could judge that Western attention elsewhere limited NATO's capacity to respond to additional aggression. None of these decisions would require an initial agreement to conduct a global war.

The risks would increase if such actions became deliberately coordinated. Military campaigns might be timed to coincide with attacks on satellite communications, shipping or strategic infrastructure. Governments could find themselves committed to simultaneous operations whose outcomes were increasingly interdependent.

Direct great-power combat would represent a more decisive threshold. Sustained fighting between the United States and China, or between Russia and NATO forces, would mark a fundamental departure from today's fragmented confrontations. The danger would increase further if campaigns across different regions became operationally connected.

At the upper end is *systemic global war*. Multiple major powers engage in sustained direct hostilities across strategically integrated theatres. Military coalitions mobilize substantial national resources and economies shift toward war production. Governments expand military recruitment and redirect civilian industry to meet wartime requirements. International trade becomes increasingly constrained by the needs of belligerents.

These characteristics suggest a practical definition. A world war is a sustained, strategically integrated armed confrontation involving multiple major powers and their allies across geographically distinct theatres, accompanied by extensive military mobilization and systemic international consequences. Nuclear use would introduce an additional and potentially catastrophic dimension, although nuclear weapons are not necessary for a world war. Sustained conventional fighting among major powers across interconnected theatres could satisfy the definition.

The risk of systemic escalation depends substantially on which powers become involved and how their campaigns interact

The institutions designed to constrain nuclear competition are also under strain. The New START treaty expired on February 5, 2026, removing the last legally binding limits on American and Russian strategic nuclear arsenals. Its verification arrangements had already been substantially weakened following Russia's suspension of participation in 2023. The absence of a successor agreement leaves both countries with fewer formal constraints and diminished transparency as they modernize their forces.

Even limited nuclear employment would fundamentally alter the strategic environment. Russia warned in September that it could use nuclear weapons if NATO attempted to isolate Kaliningrad, a threat that NATO rejected while stressing that it saw no imminent attack on alliance territory (Bayer and Trevelyan, 2026; Roos, 2026). Analysts have also warned that conventional attacks on dual-use command systems could be misinterpreted as attempts to disable an adversary's nuclear forces, increasing the risk of inadvertent escalation (van Hooft et al., 2026).

Cyber operations could compound this uncertainty. On November 1–2, hackers circulated false nuclear-attack warnings through civilian emergency-alert applications in Ukraine and Russia (Reuters, 2026). There is no evidence that strategic nuclear early-warning or launch-control systems were compromised. Nevertheless, the episode illustrates how disinformation can exploit fears of nuclear attack during an active military confrontation.

The distinction between intensity and strategic integration is important. Sudan and Myanmar have experienced devastating levels of violence, yet their severity alone does not make them central to a prospective world war. Conversely, a confrontation over Taiwan could acquire exceptional international significance before its casualties approached those of either conflict. The risk of systemic escalation depends substantially on which powers become involved and how their campaigns interact.

These thresholds should be treated as indicators rather than fixed stages. Governments could move abruptly from rivalry to direct great-power combat. Escalation in cyberspace might continue during a conventional ceasefire. States could reduce their involvement in one confrontation while intensifying another. The pathways into a wider war need not provide equally accessible routes out.

Counting the cost

History provides sobering benchmarks. The First World War killed an estimated 16 million people (Australian War Memorial, n.d.). Estimates for the Second typically range from 60 million to 75 million deaths (National WWII Museum, n.d.). Large numbers died from starvation and disease far from the front lines. Both wars destroyed political orders and left economies facing prolonged reconstruction.

A predominantly conventional third world war could produce millions or tens of millions of deaths if sustained over several years, although no credible model can assign a precise toll. **Precision-guided weapons can improve targeting accuracy, but their use does not necessarily reduce civilian harm, particularly in densely populated areas or when targeting practices disregard civilian protection.** At the same time, inexpensive drones and long-range missiles could expose populations deep inside national territory to sustained attack. The humanitarian consequences would depend heavily on the duration of hostilities and the conduct of belligerents..

The economic consequences could be unprecedented in absolute terms. More than four-fifths of international merchandise trade by volume moves by sea (UNCTAD, 2025). A major confrontation involving the Western Pacific and Middle Eastern energy routes could disrupt manufacturing and international finance simultaneously. Governments might impose capital controls or restrict exports of critical goods. A prolonged conflict involving the world's largest economies could produce losses measured in trillions of dollars.

Consider simultaneous interruptions to semiconductor production in East Asia and energy shipments from the Persian Gulf. The consequences would extend across industries far removed from the fighting. Higher energy and fertilizer prices could reduce agricultural production and raise food costs. Hospitals might struggle to obtain pharmaceuticals, while governments competed for scarce industrial components. Countries with limited foreign exchange reserves would be particularly vulnerable, even if they remained outside the conflict.

Such disruptions could also influence military calculations. Shortages of critical materials may constrain industrial production, while attacks on transport networks could delay military deployments. Economic pressure could encourage governments to seek negotiated settlements, but it might also strengthen incentives to seize strategic resources or deny them to adversaries. The direction of these effects would depend on the distribution of costs and the political decisions of belligerents.

The nuclear dimension greatly expands the range of possible outcomes. According to the SIPRI, the world's nine nuclear-armed states possessed an estimated 12,187 nuclear warheads at the beginning of 2026. Approximately 4,000 were deployed with missiles and aircraft (SIPRI, 2026b). A 2022 study modelled how soot from burning cities following nuclear exchanges could reduce global agricultural production. Under its assumptions, a large-scale nuclear war between the United States and Russia could generate food shortages resulting in more than five billion deaths (Xia et al., 2022). The estimate is sensitive to assumptions about weapons use, atmospheric effects and agricultural production. It describes a modelled scenario rather than a prediction.

Emerging technologies introduce additional uncertainty. AI-coordinated drone attacks could overwhelm defences protecting populated areas, while cyber operations might disable civilian services essential to public health (Muggah, 2026b). Deliberate biological attacks could cause outbreaks extending beyond their intended targets. These possibilities remain uncertain and should not be treated as inevitable consequences of technological development.

Their significance lies in the difficulty of anticipating how new capabilities might alter escalation incentives during a major confrontation. Technologies that increase the speed or geographic reach of attacks may leave governments less time to assess events and negotiate restraint. The potential costs explain why the term *world war* warrants a demanding threshold. It should identify a transformation in the organization and consequences of warfare, rather than serve as a description of any particularly violent period in international affairs.

The danger of naming it too soon

Has World War III already begun? On a defensible operational definition, probably not. The world is experiencing multiple serious armed conflicts and a resurgence of direct confrontation between states. Connections among regional crises are becoming more consequential (Muggah, 2026a). Yet there is insufficient evidence of sustained, strategically integrated warfare among the principal great powers across multiple theatres.

China and the United States remain strategic competitors rather than direct military belligerents. Russia is fighting Ukraine, while NATO members have sought to avoid direct war with Moscow. The confrontation involving Iran, Israel and the United States has widened across the Middle East, but it has not become part of a coordinated global military campaign involving the other major powers (Congressional Research Service, 2026).

That assessment offers limited reassurance. Separate conflicts can become connected through military assistance and overlapping commitments. They may also begin to reinforce one another without deliberate coordination. An incident involving an aircraft carrier or a misidentified missile could provoke decisions whose consequences extend well beyond the original confrontation. AI-assisted military systems may further compress the time available to establish whether an attack was deliberate or accidental.

The experience of the 1930s does not establish that today's crises will produce the same outcome

The disagreement among historians over when the Second World War began offers a useful caution. Some locate its origins in Manchuria in 1931, others in China's war with Japan in 1937 or Germany's invasion of Poland in 1939. Still others emphasize December 1941, when the European and Asian conflicts became more directly integrated. These interpretations reflect different judgments about when separate military confrontations acquired a common strategic character.

Contemporary governments face a similar analytical problem without the benefit of hindsight. They cannot know which incidents will prove decisive or whether escalation will be contained. The experience of the 1930s does not establish that today's crises will produce the same outcome. Decisions taken by governments mattered then, as they do now.

The more useful question concerns the mechanisms through which separate conflicts might converge. Are major powers moving closer to direct combat? Are regional campaigns becoming operationally connected? Are military alliances shifting from material assistance toward active belligerency? Evidence of these developments deserves more attention than speculation about whether a world war has formally begun.

Several warning indicators follow. Sustained direct combat between major powers, the entry of major alliances into hostilities, synchronized military operations across regions and substantial redeployments of forces between theatres would be especially significant. So would coordinated attacks on strategic infrastructure and the mobilization of national economies for prolonged multi-front warfare. These developments would signal a shift toward strategically integrated conflict, rather than simply an increase in violence.

The implications for crisis management are considerable. Military communication channels between adversaries are especially important during periods of heightened tension. Alliance members need to understand how existing commitments could generate unintended escalation. Governments also have an

interest in reducing the vulnerability of civilian systems on which military operations increasingly depend. This requires practical measures to maintain deconfliction channels, improve the attribution of major cyber incidents and establish clearer safeguards around systems that support nuclear command and control. Renewed nuclear arms-control arrangements and military transparency measures would also help reduce uncertainty during crises.

The Pentagon's infrastructure preparations and NATO's resilience requirements reflect concern that attacks on civilian services could undermine military effectiveness and encourage wider retaliation (Hadley, 2026; NATO, 2026). Public preparedness campaigns can also reduce the consequences of major disruptions. Their effectiveness, however, depends on avoiding the impression that war is inevitable or that every emergency warning signals an imminent military threat.

The difficulty of de-escalation is particularly acute once conflicts become strategically connected. Retaliation in one theatre may influence decisions elsewhere. Military commitments generate expectations among allies, while the movement of forces can be interpreted as either defensive preparation or preparation for attack. Even governments seeking restraint may struggle to communicate their intentions.

Declaring that World War III has already begun carries risks of its own. It can encourage fatalism and make extraordinary emergency measures appear unavoidable. It can also obscure the choices that might still prevent separate confrontations from converging. Dismissing the possibility altogether would be equally mistaken.

The world is experiencing a dangerous accumulation of armed conflicts, several of which are becoming more internationalized. Some already have severe consequences for countries far removed from the fighting. The decisive risk lies in their potential to reinforce one another and eventually merge into a confrontation that transforms the international order. The next world war may begin before anyone agrees to call it one. Recognizing the mechanisms through which separate conflicts could converge, while governments still have the means to prevent that outcome, is what matters.

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