

# Are we moving towards World War III?

BY DERWIN PEREIRA



**W**orld wars are not announced in advance. They begin bilaterally, spread regionally, and then go global in an expanding cataclysm of uncontrollable conflict.

Today, the question on many minds is: Are we moving towards World War III?

We could be. The Australian soldier-diplomat David Kilcullen argues that a world war usually emerges from overlapping conflicts spread across countries. “When you get multiple campaigns, usually in different continents — Europe, Africa, the Middle East, Asia — and you have all the same combatants fighting in multiple campaigns at the same time in different continents, that’s definitely a world war,” he was quoted as saying in the Australian media.

He is right in the geographical sense that America, acting with Israel, is involved in the war with Iran. Iran is an ally of Russia, which is caught in a war with Ukraine supported by Nato, whose backbone is the US. Iran has hit America’s valued security partners in the Arab world. Israel, fresh from its crushing offensive in Gaza, is in no mood to let its existential enemy Iran off the American hook. China, which is an adversary of the US and a friend of Russia, is adamant that America and its allies should not win in Europe and the Middle East because such victories would embolden the US to use Taiwan as a pawn in a war with China.

The American-Iranian peace talks in Pakistan have ended without an agreement. The discussions were hobbled from the start. The absence of Israel and Lebanon was problematic. American security in the Middle East is incomplete without the acquiescence of Israel, as is Lebanon’s security without Iran’s. Lebanon is hardly in any position to go against Iranian peace initiatives and concessions, but Israel certainly has the power to derail any peace accord that it considers to be inimical to its interests. Matters did not even come to that. Disagreement over international access to the Strait of Hormuz, the fate of Iran’s uranium stockpile, and frozen Iranian funds abroad killed the talks. The Americans have begun a counter-blockade of Hormuz.

Diplomacy never ends. Let us hope that the peace process will continue. However, even an interregnum in the war might prove to be a temporary interruption in the logic of a wider process, which is Israel’s desire to eradicate the existential threat to its existence in the form of Iran. Should peace prevail, the region’s Arab states would have to fit into an unsteady equilibrium managed by Israel; should war resume, they would have to bear the brunt of Iran’s hostility.

The losing side in a war displays its final arsenal when defeat is certain. The winning side has to absorb that attack. Iran cannot hit America with its missiles and drones because that seat of world power lies too far away, but it certainly can make life extremely difficult in Iran’s immediate region. Israel and Arab nations will pay for any offshore American victory. Israel will accept the bill because this is really its war. The oil-rich states of the Middle East will foot the bill for the Israeli-American



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war that is only half theirs. And tensions will continue in the Middle East.

There is at the moment no real prospect of ending another seemingly forever war. That could be the reason that World War III is not impossible. But it is improbable. The key question is whether there is a direct causal link between World War II and today, just as there was a fundamental link between World War II and World War I.

## World Wars I and II

The world wars which began in 1914 and 1939 were related closely, not only in time but causally. Each war had multiple reasons, but the two were connected by a single determining factor: Germany.

The assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand by a Serb nationalist on June 28, 1914 would not have sparked off a global crisis without Austria blaming Serbia, which looked to Russia for support. Germany’s promise of unconditional support enabled Austria to initiate a local war that escalated rapidly. Germany declared war on Russia and on France, which was in alliance with Russia. The Schlieffen Plan, the bedrock of German military strategy, required a swift, and indeed pre-emptive, attack on France through neutral Belgium before turning to Russia. That plan expanded the war. Britain declared war on Germany in support of Belgium and France, and on Turkey, a German ally. Behind these moves lay Germany’s desire to secure a greater share of global power, which led to its naval rivalry with Britain and friction with France. Germany’s alliance with Austria-Hungary drew it into a localised conflict because there was support for a pre-emptive war in any case within Germany, where some leaders believed that conflict was inevitable and therefore that fighting in 1914 was safer than fighting later, when the military capabilities of Russia and France would only increase.

World War I ended in 1919 on humiliating terms for defeated Germany. The Treaty of Versailles blamed it for the war and imposed punitive conditions that included ruinous financial reparations, military limitations, and territorial losses. Consequent German economic hardship bred national resentment and created a general desire for revenge. Adolf Hitler, who rose to power on the wings of the German refusal to be driven to the margins of world history, had three main foreign policy aims. One was to abrogate the Versailles treaty. Another aim was to unite all German-speaking peoples by achieving Lebensraum, or more living space for Germans based on the racist Nazi belief that Aryans were superior to Eastern Europeans. The third was to reverse economic desperation among Germans following the Great Depression of the 1930s. The German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939 launched World War II.

Germany was the principal actor in the two world wars. The country was divided in the Cold War that followed. The outcome inspired French writer François Mauriac to joke: “I love Germany so much that I am glad there are two of them.” Former Italian prime minister Giulio Andreotti repeated that quip, transforming literature into politics, but the humour went out of fashion following German reunification in 1990 following the crumbling of the Berlin Wall in 1989 after more than four decades of Cold War division.

Today, Germany is a sated country, that is, it is a nation not so dissatisfied with the global order as to challenge it again — at least in the foreseeable future.

World War III is most unlikely to be caused by unified Germany. Germany is enmeshed firmly in the EU, which is a status-quo and not a revisionist power.

## Russia and China

By contrast, Russia in Europe and China in Asia are the most likely contestants for that role — apart from America itself. It is understandable that Russia and China are revisionist powers because they are dissatisfied with their subordinate positions in the America-led global system. Ironically, America, too, is dissatisfied with its position because it has ceased to earn the economic and strategic dividends that were once produced by its global hegemony. That is why the Trump Administration has embarked on a transactionalist reordering of international relations.

The 2025 US National Security Strategy (NSS) is instructive in this regard. A report produced by the Congressional Research Service notes that the NSS focuses on defending the US homeland by reasserting and enforcing the Monroe Doctrine to restore American pre-eminence in the Western Hemisphere; and competing with China economically and militarily in the Indo-Pacific region; but it places less emphasis on competition with Russia and potential Russian threats to European security compared to previous American declarations.

The “Donroe Doctrine” makes it clear that the Western Hemisphere is exclusively American strategic territory; and that Asia is not being handed over to China, at least not yet; but also that Europe must assume primary responsibility for its own security, including managing tensions with Russia. If the NSS is taken at face value, China will be disappointed by the American refusal to acknowledge it as a peer power in Asia; and Russia will feel emboldened by the idea of Europe taking over Nato’s conventional defence by 2027 and of reducing European dependence on American power.

That gives the Chinese a reason to push back against American hegemony in Asia, and the Russians a reason to push that hegemony farther away from a Europe enjoying the

fruits of its strategic autonomy. As for the Middle East, the 2025 NSS says: “America will always have core interests in ensuring that Gulf energy supplies do not fall into the hands of an outright enemy, that the Strait of Hormuz remain open, that the Red Sea remain navigable, that the region not be an incubator or exporter of terror against American interests or the American homeland, and that Israel remain secure.”

This is fairly uncontroversial. Russia and China have no pressing need to overturn these American goals because all countries depend on freedom of navigation through and access to oil supplies from the Middle East. Only if America’s sworn support for Israel overturns those general objectives would Russia and China have a reason for intervening.

It is not that they are anti-Israel: It is that neither of them views the region through Israel’s strategic eyes, as does the US, which is a Western inheritor of the colonial European making of the modern Middle East — including the creation of Israel — with which Russia and China were not historically involved. Of course, in the laughingly unlikely event that nuclear Israel were to go down in a barrage of non-nuclear Iranian missiles and drones, with the nuclear US looking on inexplicably, Russia and China would respond. They would do so as well were Iran to be eradicated from the world’s civilisational map by the Israelis and the Americans.

All that does not fall within the calculus of current events in the Middle East, dreadful enough though they are. Hence, I do not see the Iran crisis, as it stands, leading to World War III.

## Never say never

But, as I said at the beginning of this article, world wars never begin worldwide: They begin as bilateral skirmishes that become regional and then spread across the world. Russia and China, the only two powers capable of taking on America credibly, will act on the basis of how the Iran conflict affects their global interests. For Russia, the nucleus of its global interests is the Slavic sphere in Europe; for China, it is the Sinic sphere in Asia. Should American initiatives in the Middle East (or anywhere else) impinge on those spheres and, worse, should that occur at the same time, Russia and China will step up to a world plate for the taking. Iran by itself might be expendable, but the nexus of Slavic and Sinic power that runs through the Middle East is not because neither the Slavic nor the Sinic sphere can survive and prosper without access to the world’s energy lifeline — any less than America’s Western Hemispheric sphere can.

So, enjoy your morning coffee in peace, for World War III has not broken out. But remember to stock up on supplies because morning does not show the day. Dusk does — in retrospect. If you are a fan of Arabica coffee beans, for example, do remember that they had to travel to you from Latin America or East Africa. They might still arrive, but how about the energy sources you need to turn granules into a drink? The answer, at least for now, lies in what is happening in the Strait of Hormuz.

Everyone needs to take the Middle East seriously. ■

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