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IN DEPTH

How close are we to World War Three?

Global defence expert puts the risk of global conflict at 30-35% in the coming decade

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China, Russia, North Korea and the Middle East are all potential flashpoints

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The chance of a global conflict breaking out over the next decade is “30-35%”, an international defence expert has warned.

Peter Apps, author of “The Next World War: The New Age of Global Conflict and the Fight to Stop it”, wrote in The Express that “from Whitehall to Washington, from Estonia to Taiwan, military powers large and small are escalating their preparations for a global confrontation”.

Others may disagree about the precise likelihood of a world war erupting in the near future, “what is clear, though, is that the risk is considerably higher now than many believed it would be at the beginning of the decade”, said Apps.

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“From Taiwan to Estonia and Latvia, the prospect of a Third World War feels closer than ever”, said The Telegraph – unless you’re one of those people who thinks it’s already

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Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has warned that any American attack would spark a “regional war”, as the US continues to amass forces in the region. Donald Trump has threatened American military intervention, this time over Iran’s nuclear ambitions, after the country was rocked by weeks of protests that left thousands dead and the regime reeling.

Israel’s military is on “high alert in the event of a US strike”, said The Telegraph. The Israel Defense Forces “could support US air strikes as an opportunity to destroy its own list of targets”. Yet “even if Israel chose not to take offensive action alongside the US, Iran would still be likely to fire missiles at the Jewish state”.

Tensions between Iran, the US and Israel are already at their worst levels since the 12-day war last June but right now “escalation begins to feel less like an accident and more like a direction”, said Counter Currents.

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For a few days in the summer, it looked as though fighting between Israel and Iran would

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While both sides backed down following a frantic 24 hours in which the US launched air strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities, the threat from Tehran's nascent nuclear programme remains "heightened", said Paul Ingram, research affiliate for the Centre of Existential Risk at the University of Cambridge, in the [The i Paper](#).

Claims by Trump to have eliminated the regime's nuclear capabilities for the foreseeable future were quickly debunked by the [Pentagon](#). And with Iran still holding 440kg of highly enriched uranium, "it all adds up to quite a dangerous situation where their capacity has been marginally degraded, but the incentives for Iran to go nuclear have gone through the roof."

The weakening of Hezbollah in [Lebanon](#), the [fall of the Assad regime](#) in Syria and the decommissioning of Hamas mean Iran has lost much of its proxy influence across the region.

With the regime in Tehran seemingly determined to fight on to the end, the question is not only whether escalation between Iran and the US "seems imminent", said Counter Currents, but "whether the world is prepared for the consequences if restraint fails".

Russia

During the Cold War, there was "always potential for accidental conflict", said Wolfgang Munchau on [UnHerd](#), but "things are totally different now. On both sides of the Atlantic, in Russia and across Western Europe," there is a "rhetorical readiness for armed conflict on a never before seen scale".

Mark Rutte, the [Nato](#) secretary general, recently said that the West "must be prepared for the scale of war our grandparents and great-grandparents endured", while the UK's Air Chief Marshal Richard Knighton said the situation was more dangerous than at any time during his career: "Sons and daughters. Colleagues. Veterans... will all have a role to play, to build, to serve, and if necessary, to fight". **TRUSTED. BALANCED.**



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Baltic, the North Atlantic and through the Balkans”, said The Independent.

In anticipation of this, Moscow has already begun testing Nato defences and resolve with a series of airspace incursions into Estonia, Romania and Poland.

Last week, Russian balloons entered Lithuanian and Polish airspace from Belarus, which is closely allied to the Kremlin. The Institute for the Study of War think tank said Moscow is “intensifying its covert and overt attacks against Europe” in preparation “for a possible Nato-Russia war in the future”. The latest moves are “very likely part of Russia’s broader Phase Zero effort”.

In a sign of the growing fear that an attack could be imminent, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, as well as Poland and Finland, have announced they are withdrawing from a landmark landmine treaty as they seek to shore up their border defences with Russia. There have also been renewed efforts to revive a Baltic “bog belt” along Nato’s eastern flank to protect Europe from Russia.

While the Baltic states are the most likely target for a Russian invasion, Moscow has also begun ramping up production of hypersonic missiles. The intermediate-range weapons “are capable of striking targets up to 3,415 miles away, which puts locations across Europe and even the western US within their potential reach”, said The Economic Times.

The successful test of the Burevestnik nuclear-powered cruise missile in October – nicknamed the “Flying Chernobyl” because it emits radioactive exhaust from its unshielded reactor – marked yet another escalation. Tests of the missile show it can fly for 15 hours non-stop and cover a distance of 14,000km (8,700 miles) but its true range could be “unlimited”, Putin said. The Russian president’s claim to now have the “highest level” nuclear arsenal in the world is a “chilling World War Three warning”, said The Mirror.

Putin’s latest threat to expand the war into Europe “fit into a decades-long history of Russian and Soviet bluster towards the West”, said The i Paper. “But they also raise

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The fear in Europe is that the Trump administration's soft approach towards Moscow will "only embolden Russia's military efforts in the region" and "encourage" Putin to "attack Nato next", said [Politico](#). European officials "do not think Putin's ambitions end with Ukraine" and making territorial concessions would set a "concerning precedent" that other authoritarian regimes will follow.

If Russia takes military action against any Nato member state, it would force the military alliance into an all-out conflict. In that scenario, Russia could call on its allies to join in a global war. "Serious analysts express concern that Russia may escalate and the world, as it has done so many times in the era of mass warfare, may sleepwalk its way into an engulfing conflict", said [The New Statesman](#).

China

It has long been assumed that the greatest threat to geopolitical stability is rising tension between [China and the US](#), with Taiwan expected to be at the centre of any future military confrontation.

Beijing sees the island nation as an [integral part of a unified Chinese territory](#). It has, in recent years, adopted an increasingly aggressive stance towards the island. It has denounced Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party, which won an unprecedented third term last year, as dangerous separatists. At the same time, the US has ramped up its support – financially, militarily and rhetorically – for Taiwan's continued independence.

Last year, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) conducted live-fire military exercises in the Taiwan Strait, drills seen as a "dress rehearsal for a possible real blockade in an attempt to overthrow the government in Taipei in the future", said the [BBC](#).

China has also "held live-fire drills on the doorsteps of Australia, Taiwan and Vietnam", tested new landing barges on ships that "could facilitate an amphibious assault on

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Many observers anticipate that China will look to invade Taiwan by 2021, which is seen as a “magical” year because it marks the centenary of what was to become the PLA, said Robert Fox in The Standard. The idea that this anniversary could coincide with a serious military operation by Beijing has become a “fixation” in Washington, said Defense News.

If there’s one ally almost every Republican in Washington wants to defend, it’s Taiwan against China, said Time. Beijing knows a full-scale invasion of Taiwan would “risk direct war with the US”.

But with Donald Trump’s focus on regime change in Latin America and possible military intervention in Iran, as well as his attempts to secure peace in Ukraine and maintain the ceasefire in Gaza, Xi Jinping might well calculate the US president is “too distracted” to “react in time, if China were to try a decisive move against Taiwan by overt or covert means”, said The Independent.

A “mistimed and botched” bid for Taiwan could “provoke a huge reaction in all the major regional players, including India and Japan, Australia and America” and “in a worst-case scenario, it risks a truly global confrontation.”

Politicians, military chiefs and industry leaders “can no longer afford to ignore the prospect of a full-scale invasion”, said the Daily Mail. In such a scenario, the US – Taiwan’s most powerful protector – may be forced to respond in its defence. It would “shake the foundations of the world as we know it and could well trigger a third world war”.

North Korea

Last month, North Korea fired several ballistic missiles from its capital Pyongyang towards the sea off its east coast. It came less than a day after its leader Kim Jong Un called on munitions factories to more than double their capacity to produce tactical guided weapons.

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is expected to “set out major policy goals”.

Since the start of 2024, Kim has slowly moved the hermit kingdom away from “the idea of a peaceful unification” with South Korea, said The Associated Press. South Korea has since scrapped a 2018 non-hostility pact aimed at lowering military tensions.

“Kim’s government has repeatedly dismissed calls by Seoul and Washington to restart long-stalled negotiations aimed at winding down his nuclear weapons and missiles programmes, as he continues to prioritise Russia as part of a foreign policy aimed at expanding ties with nations confronting the US,” said The Independent.

North Korea has sent thousands of troops and weapons to fight in Ukraine, a move that “has raised concerns Moscow could provide technology that strengthens Kim’s nuclear-armed military”.

Last spring, North Korea conducted the first test-firing of the weapons system of its new 5,000 tonne “Choe Hyon-class” destroyer, according to state media KCNA. The new warship can apparently launch nuclear-capable ballistic missiles, and that, security and defence analyst Michael Clarke told Sky News, “shows the level of their ambition”.

Around the same time, South Korea said its soldiers had fired warning shots at North Korean troops who had crossed the demarcation line between the two nations – some of whom were armed.

Dr Sean Kenji Starrs, lecturer in international development at King’s College London, told the Daily Mail that “the more likely scenario” than North Korea invading South Korea would be China “encouraging or pressuring” it to do so “in order to expel US troops”. That would “open a new front against the US so that China could more easily take Taiwan”.

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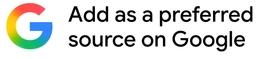
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