The Wars of Our Time

Dmitry V. Trenin

Dmitry V. Trenin, PhD in History
Russian International Affairs Council
President;
National Research University–Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia
Institute for World Military Economy and Strategy
Academic Supervisor;
The Primakov Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO), Moscow, Russia
Center for International Security
Sector for Non-Proliferation and Arms Limitation
Lead Researcher

SPIN-RSCI: 5055-1619
ORCID: 0000-0002-9343-956X
Scopus AuthorID: 25625763500

E-mail: dtrenin@hse.ru
Tel: +7 (495) 916-88-69 #23317
Address: Office 117, 17 Malaya Ordynka Str., Moscow 11901, Russia

DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2026-24-3-10-27

Abstract
Modern war is largely determined by the technological revolution and the ongoing transformation of the world order. Modern technologies—drones, robots, space-based platforms for communication and surveillance, the integration of diverse systems on the battlefield—are significantly changing the tactics, strategy, and nature of war. The U.S.'s global hegemony-clinging counteroffensive, and the resistance to it from Russia, China, Iran, and others, are analogous to a world war, waged over the terms of the new world order. As mutual deterrence still discourages the great powers from the mass use of nuclear weapons against each other, the world has entered an era of long wars that can go on intermittently for years. These wars will be decided less by battlefield success, and more by the belligerents' political, economic, financial, and social resilience.

Keywords: local conflict, deterrence, nuclear war, digital war, war of attrition, era of long wars.

It is said that generals always prepare for the previous war. This does not mean that the military is incapable of preparing for the future; while inertia is indeed as common among soldiers as it is among civilians, the price is much higher. Rather, it means that war's technological and political character changes constantly—and cardinally, with every world war—even as it remains fundamentally the armed imposition of one's will on the enemy.

Today we are witnessing a transition from mainly mechanized to increasingly digital warfare. The military is usually first to employ scientific and technological advances. Various digital technologies, artificial intelligence (AI) and its databases, robotics, cyberwarfare, and space weapons will increasingly define war, radically modifying tactics and strategy.

This new character of war signifies the end of 500-year-long Western dominance and 40-year-long U.S. hegemony. A new world order, often called multipolar, is nearing. It will feature powers of various sizes and civilizations, with various understandings of world order. But before considering how to harmonize these different understandings, we should remember that the transition to it will involve fierce struggle. In the 20th century, the emergence of a new world order triggered two world wars. A third one was avoided because the two main belligerents recognized mutually assured nuclear destruction.

In the mid-2010s, the world entered a new stage of transition, functionally analogous to a world war. To avoid confusing analogies and numbering, this can be termed a new world war with 21st-century features. This war is already underway, consisting of multiple lengthy and intermittent wars, which will produce intermediate results and eventually a final balance. These wars are being fought openly in Eastern Europe and in the adjacent seas, in the Middle East, and (as special operations) in Latin America. But the biggest conflict is brewing in East Asia and the Western Pacific. The stakes in the new world war are so high that it will likely be lengthy, and be fought brutally and resolutely, affecting the entire world. We have entered an *era of long wars*.

DIGITAL WAR

In the age of information systems, crucial battlefield importance is logically held by the real-time integration of reconnaissance, detection, targeting, and fire. This is most strikingly exemplified in the 'drone revolution' that has upended warfare. This phenomenon has been thoroughly analyzed by General of the Army Yuri Baluyevsky and Director of the Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies Ruslan Pukhov (Baluyevsky and Pukhov, 2026).

Essentially, a wide belt of total destruction, extending 20-30 km from the front line—where any platform and even individual soldier will be certainly destroyed by FPV drones—has eliminated the crucial principle of force concentration to break through the enemy lines. On the contrary, dispersing forces has become the rule. War of maneuver with tank breakthroughs has given way to infiltration of the enemy's position by two or three soldiers. The 'front' is actually a gray zone, where the opponents often hold points behind each other's lines, jutting into one another. The siege of a small fortress city may last months.

Modern warfare now encompasses everything from hand-to-hand trench combat to piloting systems far from the battlefield. Swarms of drones with a range of 100-300 km turn the enemy's operational rear into an area of constant danger. The almost complete transparency of the entire theater of war, obscured only by the weather, makes it almost impossible to use another important principle—surprise. The 'fog of war' has almost dissipated, except for the real fog that sometimes hides troops' movement from the all-seeing eye of the reconnaissance drones.

Moreover, drones with hundred- and even thousand-kilometer ranges can hit targets deep behind enemy lines that once could be reached only by long-range missiles. Ukrainian UAVs from the Baltic Sea reach the Ural Mountains, and Iranian UAVs reach British bases in Cyprus. The possibility of accurately hitting critical targets deep in the rear has blurred the old boundaries between tactics, operations, and strategy.

The drone revolution has largely devalued traditional combat platforms. Tanks designed to break through the front line and conduct direct fire are now useful mainly as self-propelled artillery systems, and

have themselves become targets for long-range attacks. Artillery guns, especially those using precision-guided munitions, remain in service, but are less cost-effective. Instead of aerial dogfights, air defense systems face off against ballistic and cruise missiles. Warships are struck by sea drones. Air defense systems, designed to shoot down enemy planes, are forced to use expensive interceptors against relatively cheap drones. The importance of electronic warfare, space communications, and surveillance has increased tremendously.

REGIONALIZATION OF LOCAL CONFLICTS

Technological advances have made the theater of war practically boundless. Today, one should speak not of a conflict in Ukraine, but of a conflict in Eastern Europe. Kiev is an instrument of NATO countries' common policy. Russia conducts strikes across all of Ukrainian territory, and Kiev against dozens of Russian regions, using Baltic and Finnish territory. The Kiev regime carries out acts of sabotage and terrorism deep inside Russia, with the help, support, and control of Britain and other NATO countries. Ships carrying Russian oil and LNG face piracy in the Black, Baltic, and Mediterranean Seas. In Operation Cobweb, Ukrainian drones attacked Siberian airfields. Similarly, Israel attacked Iranian targets during the Twelve-Day War. The "quiet" cyberwar goes on non-stop. This creates the obvious and real risk of pushing the Ukraine conflict towards a regional war between NATO and Russia.

In the Middle East, conflict has expanded from the local level—Israel and its neighbors (Lebanon, Syria, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and earlier Egypt)—to the regional level—Iran, Yemen, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and even Turkiye and Cyprus. The Persian Gulf, and the Red and Arabian Seas, have become warzones. An American submarine sank an Iranian frigate 2,000 miles away from Iran, off the coast of Sri Lanka.

In response to the U.S.-Israeli aggression, Iran blocked the Strait of Hormuz for the first time ever, and its allies in Yemen may close the Bab el-Mandeb. Tehran launched missiles at the American military base on Diego Garcia 4,000 km away. Despite Israel's dense air defenses,

almost all of its territory—more or less effectively protected during previous wars—has been struck by missiles and UAVs. 2026 essentially saw much of the Middle East being drawn into a regional war between Israel and the U.S. against Iran and its allies.

Thus, the technological revolution has changed war dramatically. Improved intelligence capabilities and military technology have increased the accuracy of strikes enormously, with distance from the front line no longer playing a decisive role; the theater of war has expanded significantly, covering not only the territory of the belligerents (other than the U.S.), but also targets outside them. Moreover, there is an increasingly clear connection between certain conflicts, particularly in Ukraine and Iran.

The latest novelty is that some decisions (e.g., choice of targets) and their execution can now be delegated to AI and autonomous systems. According to media reports, the operation to capture Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and his wife was prepared with the help of AI (Wall Street Journal, 2026). AI was also reportedly used to select targets in Iran (Gustafson and Kosslyn, 2026).

However, many elements of traditional war remain relevant. Wars have not become bloodless computer games: hundreds of thousands of people are fighting on both sides of the front line, including in close combat in the trenches with the use of cold steel, with losses in the tens or hundreds of thousands. The difference between the front and rear has blurred significantly, but has not disappeared: war and peace have learned to exist side by side. And not all modern military conflicts are as fast-moving as the U.S.'s Operations Desert Storm (1991) and Shock and Awe (2002) in Iraq, NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia (1999), or Russia's five-day war to impose peace on Georgia (2008). The Ukraine conflict is of particular importance in this regard.

A WAR OF ATTRITION

After a brief period of maneuver, the war in Ukraine turned into a war of attrition. There are no large-scale offensives or frontline breakthroughs into operational depth. The main method of warfare, along with the grueling offensive on the ground (grinding down

the enemy), is constant pressure to exhaust the enemy's front line and, increasingly, rear. The Russian army's main task is not so much seizing territory (although Russian troops have held the initiative and gradually pushed forward since 2024) as bringing the enemy to collapse by eliminating his manpower and materiel and by destroying or crippling his military-industrial infrastructure, energy systems, logistics routes, control centers, etc. The goal is to drain the Kiev regime's resources, disorganize its rear, and convince its Western sponsors that the Ukrainian 'asset' is worthless.

The enemy also opted for a strategy of exhaustion, trying to "inflict a strategic defeat on Russia"—first by undermining its economy and finances, and then by preventing Russia from winning the war. Since 2014, the collective West has imposed an unprecedented 30,000 sanctions on Russia and seized the half of its foreign exchange reserves that were kept in Western jurisdictions. Sanctions are an economic war of attrition, especially in a globalized economy.

Priority in the war of attrition is given to the energy sector. As part of the 'infrastructure war,' in the first months of the Special Military Operation, the enemy blew up the Nord Stream gas pipeline in the Baltic Sea. Later, the Ukrainians blew up onshore gas and oil pipelines (including Druzhba) connecting Russia with European countries. According to Russian intelligence, Kiev also plans to destroy the Black Sea's Blue Stream and Turkish Stream gas pipelines.

Nuclear power facilities have no immunity against strikes, either. The Zaporozhye NPP, controlled by Russian troops, is constantly shelled by Ukraine. Other Russian nuclear power plants, especially in Kursk and Smolensk, have also been struck by Ukrainian forces. In turn, Russian forces have attacked electrical substations transmitting electricity from Ukrainian nuclear power plants to consumers—harming the Ukrainian rear, but not creating any risk of radioactive contamination.

In 2025, the U.S. and Israel attacked Iran to destroy its nuclear program, damaging several sites' infrastructure but leaving the Bushehr nuclear power plant untouched. Yet its grounds were struck in 2026, to which Tehran responded with an attack on the Israeli Nuclear Research Center near Dimona.

While Western countries set price ceilings on Russian oil and piratically seized tankers, Ukrainian aerial and sea drones attacked Russian oil refineries, marine export terminals, oil tankers, and LNG carriers. The goal was stated openly: to reduce Russia's energy exports and thus its budget revenue.

The situation is similar in the Middle East conflict. With the same aim in mind, Western countries imposed price ceilings on Iranian oil, sanctions against its buyers and against ships carrying Iranian oil and petroleum products, and illegally stopped and arrested such vessels. In response to the U.S.-Israeli aggression in 2026, Iran attacked oil refineries, LNG plants, and other energy infrastructure in the Gulf states with U.S. military bases, and also took control of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz. In the Red Sea, the Iran-allied Houthis have threatened to attack Israel- and U.S.-linked ships, endangering transit through the Bab el-Mandeb and Suez Canal. The infrastructure war in the Middle East has also spread to digital facilities, such as data centers in Bahrain and other Gulf countries.

In the asymmetric war between the U.S./Israel and Iran, Tehran leaned heavily on economic weapons. By closing the Strait of Hormuz and attacking the energy facilities of Gulf states hosting U.S. military bases, Tehran sought to impose economic pressure on the U.S. and its allies, making them back down.

Another version of the war of attrition is unfolding in Latin America. The U.S. imposed a blockade on Cuba after the Cuban Revolution in the early 1960s, expanding it in 2026 to oil imports from third countries, basically leaving the country without fuel and electricity. The U.S. President announced that these actions seek to replace Cuba's government and political course with pro-American ones. Similarly, the U.S. blocked Venezuelan oil exports to force a change in policy.

A war of attrition thus becomes primarily a test of the resilience of the belligerents' political systems and societies. Russia and Iran have so far passed this test; Venezuela has at present given up; Cuba is holding out for now; and China is drawing lessons.

THE WAR OF ANNIHILATION—MASSIVE AND INDIVIDUALIZED

Not all modern wars are wars of attrition. Israel's response to Hamas's massive terrorist attack on civilians was intended to completely eliminate the threat from this Palestinian group. Israeli strikes killed more than 70,000 Palestinians in Gaza in 2023-2025, condemned by many throughout the world as genocide. More than 3,500 Iranian civilians were killed during the 40-day U.S.-Israeli aggression against Iran in the spring of 2026.

However, mass killing of the enemy's civilian population is certainly not new. World War II involved numerous cases of deliberate extermination of civilians not only by the Nazis, their allies, and the Japanese, but also by U.S. and British carpet bombings of German and Japanese cities, and by the U.S. atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Israel is also known for assassinations. Since 2023, the Israeli intelligence agencies have killed many senior figures of Hezbollah and Hamas in Lebanon, Gaza, and beyond, including Tehran. Even before Israel's first attack on Iran in 2025, a number of high-ranking Iranian military advisers were slain by Israel in Syria.

At the beginning of the Twelve-Day War against Iran in June 2025, Israeli agents liquidated dozens of high-ranking Iranian civil and military officials, as well as nuclear physicists. The incumbent Iranian President was also among the targets.

At the outbreak of the new aggression in 2026, Israeli missile strikes killed 49 Iranian top officials, including Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei—not an already-deposed leader like Saddam Hussein or Muammar Gaddafi, or a terrorist like bin Laden, but the recognized chief executive of a UN member state. And it came less than two months after the Americans forcibly seized the legitimate head of another state—Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro.

The action against Venezuela repeated—on a new technological level—the 1990 operation against Panamanian President Manuel Noriega, who was also captured and sent to an American prison. U.S. intelligence agencies have developed targeted killing, particularly during the post-9/11 War on Terror. President Barack Obama personally gave many orders to eliminate—usually with drones—

individuals designated by the U.S. as terrorists. In 2020, President Donald Trump ordered the assassination of the commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Qasem Soleimani.

The Ukrainian security services also use terrorist methods in the ongoing war. In 2024-2026, they attacked four senior Russian generals in Moscow and executed or attempted the assassination of several prominent Russian public figures, journalists, philosophers, and writers. At the end of 2025, Ukrainian UAVs carried out a massive attack on the Russian President's residence in Valdai, in which NATO intelligence services were apparently involved per evidence cited by Russian officials (RG, 2025).

Israel, the U.S., and NATO-supported Ukraine have broken with the understanding, which dates to well before the Cold War, that political and military leaders generally enjoy unspoken immunity during hostilities. Notably, according to Naftali Bennett, Israel's Prime Minister at the time, President Putin guaranteed Vladimir Zelensky's safety in April 2022 (RBC, 2023). Yet eliminating an enemy commander on the battlefield has often been a desirable goal, and killing the opposing political leader was considered one of the shortest ways to win the war or at least avoid defeat.

Deliberate attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure have been practiced not only by Israel and the U.S., but also by Ukraine since the outbreak of the crisis in 2014. Both the targeted destruction of the enemy's leaders and the massive killing of its population underline war's nature in the 21st century.

21st-century wars are multifaceted and multidimensional. Even in the past, the physical battlefield—the theater of operations—was never the only dimension of military conflict, but now the other dimensions have grown so much as to cardinally change things. Economy and finance; technology and resources; information and psychology; cyberspace and outer space—the list of battlefields is far from complete.

THE NATURE OF WAR

Statesmen and their advisers sometimes also prepare for the previous war, which often makes for a shocking exposure to the new reality,

especially for those who were convinced of peace's inevitability and deterrence's absolute reliability. But wars have permeated all of human history, and an era of new—qualitatively different—major wars has now begun after eighty years of peace between the great powers.

The Cold War proceeded, under the nuclear sword of Damocles, through local wars on the periphery of the superpowers' global confrontation. The end of the bipolar confrontation was immediately followed by an approximately 10-year period of interethnic conflicts in disintegrating or failed states. Those conflicts were accompanied by external interference and peacekeeping operations, as well as by military interventions (in the Balkans and Middle East) to establish a new unipolar (U.S.-centric) world order. Terrorist attacks in New York and Washington in 2001 ushered in a period of counter-terrorist operations and the invasions of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, with the aim of reconstructing them along Western lines. But by the middle of the 2010s, contradictions between the great powers had resurfaced again. The 'unipolar moment' had ended.

Modern wars reflect the crisis of the post-Cold-War U.S.-centric world order and of the West's lengthy global dominance. By provoking wars (in Ukraine) and initiating them (in the Middle East), the U.S. has launched a counteroffensive against its opponents (Russia, Iran) and competitors (China, BRICS, the EU, and the Arab Gulf states). The Trump administration's goal is to force a new (illiberal) model of global hegemony upon the world. But unlike the previous (globalist) hegemony, this one does not rest on ideological dominance, political leadership, or norms. Rather, it implies the supremacy of U.S. power beyond the framework of a political order.

In their current wars, the Americans are exploiting their allies more than cooperating with them, activating them on the geopolitical 'front line' in Europe (Kiev and NATO), in the Middle East (the Gulf states), and in Asia (Taiwan, the Philippines, Japan, South Korea). The U.S.'s long-term 'protection' of these countries is now driving them into collision with their larger neighbors, threatening their devastation or even destruction.

Notably, unlike in the Cold War, the other side—Russia, Belarus, China, Iran, and the DPRK—is not yet inclined to create a military alliance to concertedly respond to the U.S.; Moscow, Beijing, and Tehran are ready to fight only for their own interests. The only military alliances are Russia–Belarus and Russia–DPRK. India has taken a decidedly neutral position, developing strategic partnerships with the U.S., Russia, France, and other EU countries, as well as with Britain, and Japan. The Collective Security Treaty Organization's members, other than Belarus, also remain neutral.

Since 1945, wars have not been declared. Even diplomatic relations are often maintained (embassies are simply evacuated), and martial law is eschewed (to preserve peacetime conditions for civilians as much as possible). It is especially ominous that diplomatic negotiations are not just conducted in parallel with undiminished military operations, but have been used by Washington and Tel Aviv as cover for new attacks. During the Cold War, attacks were feared under the guise of military exercises, but in 2025 and 2026 they began under the guise of peace talks.

War and peace coexist in the same place and at the same time. The parties simultaneously fight and trade with each other. Gas and oil pipelines, running from Russia to the EU through Ukraine, kept operating long after February 2022. The U.S. President almost simultaneously announced his intention to bomb Iran "back to the stone ages" and to lift sanctions on Iranian oil exports (to mitigate the war's damage to world energy markets).

In general, the space of peace is shrinking, while that of war is expanding.

NUCLEAR WEAPONS

This growing relativity of peace signals the approach of a direct conflict between the leading powers. Nuclear deterrence has been critically weakened at the strategic level. States now pursue objectives that would have been unthinkable during the Cold War: in the case of the West's proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, the objective is the strategic defeat of a nuclear superpower (Russia) in its most sensitive strategic region.

In the case of Iran, the objective is not only the complete elimination of its nuclear program, but also its missile-disarmament, subversion, and dismemberment.

Deterrence is weakening mostly because of the disappearance of the salutary fear that kept the Cold War cold and warded off a nuclear apocalypse. The leaders of European states—from large (Germany) to small (Estonia)—now make dangerous provocations, as if they did not care about the consequences for their own countries and people, should Moscow respond to such provocations.[1] This indicates European politicians' mental derangement and, even more so, their 'post-national syndrome:' the elites have no homeland.[2]

The paradoxical reaction of people in European countries is also quite interesting. Influenced by their government and media propaganda, they simultaneously hallucinate non-existent threats (a Russian invasion of NATO countries) and remain blind to the very real possibility of their leaders' actions pushing Moscow to use force against NATO.

As a result, strategic stability—in its broad geostrategic meaning, rather than in the narrow and obsolete sense of disincentive for nuclear attack—has been seriously undermined. In 2025 alone, the nuclear-armed U.S., UK, and France waged a protracted proxy war against nuclear-armed Russia in Ukraine;[3] nuclear-armed India and Pakistan briefly clashed directly; and nuclear-armed Israel and the U.S. attacked a 'near-nuclear' Iran. The DPRK did not enter into conflict with the U.S., but sent its troops to help Russia liberate the part of Kursk Oblast

[1] For example, discussions in Germany about supplying Taurus missiles to Kiev or speculations in Estonia and Finland about blocking the Gulf of Finland.

[2] This applies not only to liberal globalists and Europe. Trump was encouraged to attack Iran not only by the Israeli lobby, but also by Christian Zionist groups guided by eschatological ideological considerations rather than U.S. national interests.

[3] During the Cold War, the USSR and the U.S. fought each other indirectly more than once, but this always happened in peripheral regions of the world—Korea, Vietnam, and Afghanistan—while the central front of their confrontation remained 'cold.' A war over Hungary or Czechoslovakia was unthinkable because it threatened total nuclear annihilation. Moscow and Washington came closest to the abyss of a nuclear apocalypse in 1962 during the Cuban Missile Crisis, which the U.S. considered a direct threat to its existence. Obviously, the war in Ukraine is much closer to the Cuban case than to the Korean or even Hungarian one. And yet, self-preservation is virtually absent, especially among European elites.

that had been occupied by Ukraine with the West's support. Only one nuclear power out of nine—China—remained in a state of relative peace, a more 'regular' confrontation with the U.S.

All of these wars were/are fought under the threat of nuclear weapons. Their use—as the previous fear diminishes—becomes more likely. But the view in the 1960s-1980s that any nuclear use would inevitably lead to mankind's destruction[4] is being supplanted by the view that a *general* nuclear war is impossible (as no one would initiate it), yet the consequences of a *limited* nuclear war would not be disastrous.

This has boosted the popularity of nuclear weapons as a means of preventing an attack. Possession of nuclear weapons is considered the only real safeguard against external aggression, as clearly evidenced by the U.S.'s diverging policies towards nuclear-armed North Korea, non-nuclear Iran, and Iraq and Libya, which voluntarily abandoned their nuclear programs. In 2026, following the U.S.-Israeli attack, Iran's parliament raised the issue of withdrawal from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).

Renewed interest in nuclear weapons has also been bolstered by the Trump administration's de facto refusal to provide nuclear guarantees to U.S. allies. Europe is discussing 'extended deterrence' based on France's nuclear forces or, as they say in Germany, some kind of 'European nuclear capabilities.' Poland, Greece and Estonia have declared their readiness to deploy allied nuclear weapons on their soil; Sweden is holding consultations with the UK on a nuclear umbrella that supposedly can protect it.

But it cannot. Britain needs U.S. permission to use nuclear weapons. France's arsenal is under its own control, but is unlikely to be used except in defense of its own vital interests. In the 21st century, there is probably no country that would sacrifice itself for an ally. The only instance of truly reliable extended nuclear deterrence is Russia's guarantee to Minsk. But Russia and Belarus are a Union State, not only a military alliance.

[4] U.S. theories of limited nuclear war were strongly rejected by Soviet military science, which assumed that a nuclear conflict would inevitably escalate into an all-out war. Moscow's firm political position inevitably reduced the viability of plans for limited use of nuclear weapons.

In Asia, the situation is also changing, though not so noticeably. Japan has not made any statements yet, but according to some experts, the country could create a nuclear weapon very quickly (Report, 2023). In South Korea, which also has a venerable civilian nuclear program and missile capabilities, some top officials have in the past stressed the necessity to develop nuclear weapons, but so far Seoul has settled for an agreement with the U.S. on a nuclear consultative mechanism. Among U.S. clients, the idea of obtaining nuclear weapons is popular in Taiwan and Ukraine, but China and Russia strongly oppose it and are ready to prevent it.

In the Islamic world, Saudi Arabia, a large and wealthy regional power, and Pakistan, the only Muslim state with nuclear weapons, seem to be forming an alliance. The Middle East may see further nuclear proliferation. Israel became a nuclear power at the turn of the 1970s. Iran, which under Khamenei sought only the capability to ***produce*** nuclear weapons, is now contemplating secession from the NPT given U.S.-Israeli aggression. Other possible candidates for the nuclear club include Saudi Arabia and Turkiye.

So, nuclear non-proliferation, one of the final remaining pillars of the former bipolar world order, is collapsing along with nuclear arms control, which formally ended with the expiration of the extended Russian-American START-3 Treaty in February 2026. The multipolar world is becoming an increasingly multipolar ***nuclear*** world, in which nuclear war is no longer unthinkable.

COALITIONS

During the Cold War, World War III was envisioned as a clash between the two opposing blocs. But when the Soviet-American confrontation ended, there remained only one permanent military alliance: NATO, led by the U.S. Since then, the alliance has doubled its members and fought in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Libya. However, the 2003 campaign in Iraq involved the 'Coalition of the Willing.' The Ukraine conflict, too, initially spurred the creation of an informal coalition of about 50 states, whose representatives regularly met at Rammstein Air Force Base in Germany to plan and coordinate military support for Kiev.

In contrast, not only did Russia's bloc (the Warsaw Treaty Organization) collapse, but all of its members—along with several former Soviet republics—joined NATO or at least cooperate with it closely. Ukraine has become a belligerent Anti-Russia. Even the members of Russia's Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) have largely assumed neutrality regarding the Ukraine conflict.

A new and positive factor for Russia, compared to the Cold War period, is the development of partnerships with major countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Moscow's leading partners in BRICS and the SCO—primarily China and India—cooperate with Russia, but are careful to ensure that this does not harm their extensive and close relationships with the U.S. and Europe. Belarus and North Korea have become Russia's only real allies in its showdown with the West.

However, Donald Trump's return to the White House has deprived NATO countries of the illusion of guaranteed U.S. military assistance in the event of a conflict. To avoid a direct military clash with Russia, the U.S. is shifting responsibility for Europe's security onto European countries. The U.S. is acting similarly in its construction of an anti-Chinese coalition out of its Asian allies.

Some of the ongoing wars are asymmetric (two-level), with temporary and loose coalitions replacing permanent and rigid alliances. While Russia is directly fighting against Ukraine, this is actually a broader war with the Western coalition, even as Russia strengthens its military integration with Belarus within the Union State and receives real military support from the DPRK. In the Middle East, Israel is trying alone to destroy Hamas in Gaza, pro-Iranian Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Houthis in Yemen, but has managed to harness the power of its U.S. ally against Iran. Military tensions between China and Taiwan are growing in East Asia; but, again, this is only the first level of the broader conflict: China versus the U.S. and its Asian allies (Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines).

WHAT KIND OF WARS SHOULD RUSSIA PREPARE FOR?

Modern wars reflect a crisis of world order. The rise or revival of new regional or global centers of power has inevitably prompted the

former hegemons to contain their growth and strengthen their own position.

The military threats to Russia are diverse, but their general nature is obvious for the foreseeable future: to weaken and, if possible, destroy Russia. The most serious risk is a military clash with NATO in Eastern Europe, the Baltic, or the Arctic. For the first time since World War II, Europe is becoming the main threat to Russia. If Ukraine survives as a separate state, it may provoke a European war and take an active part in it. The threat of Transnistria unfreezing appears quite real. Germany, Poland, the UK, the Baltic and Scandinavian countries, Finland, and possibly Romania may also actively oppose Russia. The U.S. will keep to the rear, but will extensively support the Europeans. The risk of direct war with a European coalition, unthinkable until just recently, should be neither ignored nor downplayed.

Russia's opponents will also seek to open new fronts against it, exploiting disagreements with its southern neighbors, but Western attempts to draw Georgia into war against Russia were stymied by Tbilisi's firm focus on its national interests. Nevertheless, Georgia's relapse into Saakashvili-like gambles could be possible under a different government. Armenia is 'peacefully' drifting away from Russia towards the West, but bilateral tensions are noticeably growing and may eventually lead to provocations against Russia's base in Gyumri. European countries, especially Britain, will also spin intrigues against Russia in Central Asia.

Objectively, Russian and Turkish interests run up against one another in the Caucasus, Black Sea, and Central Asia, but the two countries' relations are fairly stable. A military conflict is avoidable, and pragmatic cooperation is possible. Russia will need special attention, tact, and understanding of Turkish motives.

In Asia, Russia risks being drawn into a confrontation between China and the U.S. (and its allies). Politically, Moscow will naturally side with Beijing and provide it with economic and military-technical support if the West imposes a blockade. Yet Moscow need not directly involve itself in the conflict—China is a strong military power with an increasing nuclear capability.

Beijing's position on the conflict in Ukraine can serve as a guideline for Russia. Russia will have to provide direct military assistance to North Korea in the event of a conflict on the Korean Peninsula, but the likelihood of an attack by the U.S. and its allies on the nuclear-armed DPRK is extremely low. Even less likely, though not impossible, is a direct military clash between Russia and Japan. The greatest danger to Russia and the whole world would come from a military conflict in East Asia among the U.S., China, Japan, and the two Koreas. This could easily draw Russia in, too, but many will seek to avoid such an apocalyptic scenario.

The struggle for a new world order is likely to be long. We must be prepared for an intense and technologically complex confrontation. The foreign policy doctrine of Russia, as a civilization-state, logically implies not only protecting the country and its interests, but also ensuring the rights and interests of Russians living abroad. Russia is also the guardian and guarantor of the geopolitical balance in Northern and Central Eurasia. Russia's military might thus guarantees its own existence and forms the cornerstone of stability throughout much of the planet's largest continent. As the struggle for the new world order intensifies, our country's position and strategy will be crucial for determining it.

References

Baluyevsky, Yu.N. and Pukhov, R.N., 2026. The Digital War Is the New Reality. *Russia in Global Affairs*, 24(1), pp. 74-80. DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2026-24-1-74-80

Gustafson, M. and Kosslyn, J., 2026. Iran Is Ending the Dream of Remote-Controlled War. *New York Times*, 5 April. www.nytimes.com/2026/04/05/opinion/iran-ai-war-geography.html

Orlov, V.A. and Semyonov, S.D. (eds), 2023. *Новая ядерная девятка? Оценка угроз распространения ядерного оружия в мире* [A New Nuclear G9? Assessing the Threat of Nuclear Proliferation]. Moscow: PIR-Press, pp. 34-53.

RBC, 2023. Экс-премьер Израиля рассказал об обещании Путина не убивать Зеленского [Israeli Ex-Prime Minister Told about Putin's Promise Not to Assassinate Zelensky]. *RBC*, 5 February. rbc.ru/politics/05/02/2023

RBC, 2026. В Генштабе России назвали потери ВСУ в 2025 году [The Russian General Staff Disclosed the Ukrainian Casualties]. *RBC*, 20 February. https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/6997a5819a79477e7d003827

RG, 2025. Александр Бортников заявил о причастности британских спецслужб к терактам и диверсиям в России [Alexander Bortnikov Claims that British Intelligence Service Is Involved in Terrorist Acts and Sabotage in Russia's Territory]. *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 16 October. https://rg.ru/video/2025/10/16/aleksandr-bortnikov-zaiavil-o-prichastnosti-britanskih-specsluzhb-k-teraktam-i-diversiiam-v-rossii.html

Wall Street Journal, 2026. Pentagon Used Anthropic's Claude in Maduro Venezuela Raid. *The Wall Street Journal*, 15 February. https://www.wsj.com/politics/national-security/pentagon-used-anthropics-claude-in-maduro-venezuela-raid-583aff17