



**PREVENTING WORLD WAR III BY
PREPARING FOR IT**

BY PETER OLESON

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There are a lot of factors that point to today as being the early stages of World War III. Multiple countries are involved in open conflict. Many more are openly or surreptitiously supporting one or more of the combatants.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 is supported by Iranian drones and missiles; North Korean troops, missiles, and ammunition; Chinese *sub rosa* supply of advanced electronics needed for Russian weapon production; and funding from others, including African countries which have enabled Russian "private military companies" (which are, in fact, controlled by Russian military intelligence—the GRU) to exploit natural resources, especially gold, which is sold on the black market.

Twenty-five of the 26 NATO nations are supporting Ukraine with funds and weaponry. The exception is Hungary under Victor Orbán, an autocrat like Vladimir Putin. Others providing aid to Ukraine include Japan, South Korea, and Australia.

In the Middle East, Iran and its surrogates (Hamas in the Gaza Strip; Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria; and the Houthis in Yemen) have been in open conflict with Israel since October 2023. Iran receives some support from Russia. The fall of the Assad regime in Syria is a setback for Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia.

Israel has been supported by many Western nations, especially the US, which have supplied weaponry and especially air defense systems. Neighboring nations over which ballistic missiles and drones fly (Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait) have tried to remain neutral. Jordan reportedly has shot down intruding Iranian drones aimed at Israel.

Islamist groups continue to attack their enemies in the Middle East and South Asia. Pakistan and Afghanistan have attacked "enemies" in each other's territories. The Islamic State remains active in Syria, Iran, and in other nations where it has inspired lone wolf attacks, including the US.

There are other "hot spots" that are ripe for conflict eruption. China's threats against Taiwan and hostile actions against the Philippines in the South China Sea could easily erupt into warfare. North Korea's actions against South Korea are increasingly hostile in appearance and Kim openly threatens the Indo-Pacific with his missile and nuclear programs.

When did this outbreak of wars start? Historians can point to Putin's 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference when Putin, who thought the collapse of the Soviet Union was a tragedy for Russia, expressed his opposition to the world order that he blamed on the US. His policies since have been distinctly anti-Western. He has sought to reassemble the Russian empire of old. The Arab-Israeli hostility started long before, some historians dating it to 1938 with British policies toward Palestine. Since then Israel and its neighbors have fought seven wars. Iran's hostility toward Israel since the 1979 revolution that brought Ayatollah Khomeini and the mullahs to power exacerbated the situation. The China-Taiwan hostile standoff dates from 1949 when the Chinese Communist Party seized power on the mainland, but the Kuomintang fled and seized the island of Formosa (Taiwan).

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 did not proceed as planned. Now in its third year it has had unexpected consequences for Moscow. NATO has expanded further with the addition of Finland and Sweden. Western weapons have allowed Ukraine to

bring the war to Russian soil. Partly in response Russia has turned to hybrid warfare against the West. Using intelligence agents, third parties, and recruited criminals for sabotage in NATO countries, Russia has tried to undermine Western support for Ukraine.

The Nov. 25 crash of air freight DHL's 737, which left Leipzig, Germany for Vilnius, Lithuania is likely tied to Russian sabotage. DHL appears to be a special target of Russian operatives. In July a DHL warehouse fire in Leipzig has been linked to Russian agents. Also, there was a DHL warehouse fire in Birmingham, UK on July 22. Lithuanian authorities have arrested four people accused of sending incendiary devices from a DHL store in Vilnius. One Western European intelligence official opined that the attacks on DHL are practice runs for future sabotage of transatlantic flights to the US and Canada.

Other recent hybrid warfare incidents include: An assassination plot against Armin Papperger, the CEO of Germany's Rheinmetall, which supplies Ukraine with ammunition; arson attacks in Lithuania and Latvia; break-ins at water treatment plants in Finland, Sweden, and Germany; widespread cyberattacks; and disinformation about Ukrainian elements attacking a NATO facility in Romania. Multiple undersea cable breaks in the Baltic appear to be tied to Moscow's hybrid warfare. Western European officials indicate that the number of such incidents has increased dramatically in 2024 and been described by Western intelligence chiefs as increasingly reckless.

Reuters reported "On July 10, an individual identifying themselves as a 26-year-old Russian-speaking Estonian named Valeri Ivanov messaged a Telegram account promoted on several pro-Kremlin social media feeds that was looking for European nationals to conduct sabotage within their countries." Estonia, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Britain have each arrested suspected Russian-sponsored actors for sabotage and other offences. Poland has arrested four people in connection with fires charging them with conducting sabotage on behalf of a foreign intelligence agency.

In October the heads of CIA and Britain's MI6 stated that Russia was waging a "reckless campaign of

sabotage" across the continent. US officials have issued warnings to American defense companies to increase their security precautions, blaming Russia for the increase in sabotage in Europe.

Russia's hybrid attacks thus far have been careful not to cross a threshold that might trigger Article 5 of the NATO Treaty whereby an attack against one member is considered an attack on all. But things can go wrong. Today's regional wars are linked. A Russian success in Ukraine worries many political scientists who fear that a defeat for the West, or a diminution of its support for embattled nations, will encourage other autocrats to turn to outright military action to achieve their goals.

The West needs to remember the historical lessons of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's appeasement of Sept. 30, 1938 and Hitler's subsequent takeover in March 1939 of the remainder of Czechoslovakia and invasion of Poland in September.

The US remains the world's leading nation, but given the state of the world it is no time to turn inward. Being a leader implies having responsibilities. For the US, which believes in individual freedoms, democracy, and justice, it is imperative to support those nations threatened by aggressive autocrats seeking to expand their powers. In Europe this includes Ukraine and neighboring Moldova which is facing Kremlin-supported subversion. It also involves the Baltic states and the Baltic Sea. Russian "shadow fleet" ships used to evade sanctions need to be stopped and searched when sailing through NATO nation waters and allowed to continue only if legitimately engaged in commerce. Expanded sanctions ought to include aggressive expulsion of Russian "diplomats," and others identified as associated with its security services, and restricted visa approvals.

In the Indo-Pacific region the US and its Quad partners need to continue their enhanced support for Pacific island nations. Economic aid to provide future employment opportunities is a long-term need. Expansion of nations' domestic capabilities to enforce laws at sea, especially focused on illegal fishing in exclusive economic zones, is especially important as fish populations decline significantly. US presence is

fundamental to countering aggressive Chinese initiatives, including usurious loans and the presence of Chinese police and “security” forces. The volatile situations involving the Philippines and Taiwan, given that Beijing consistently rejects established international law and diplomacy, as well as North Korea’s nuclear saber rattling, require significant enhancements to US military power in the Western Pacific.

The next few years will be difficult. Many autocrats see opportunities believing that the US’ world position is diminishing. America needs to strengthen its alliances worldwide. This will require much diplomacy, investment, and attention to limit current and future conflicts and avoid a third world war.

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