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## A NEW WORLD WAR CAN BEGIN OR HAS ALREADY BEGUN?

The article examines the problem of clarifying the essence of world wars, which is relevant in the current conditions of international relations. For a long time, the World War I (1914-1918) and World War II (1939-1945) were considered such wars. The consequences and impact of Russia's war against Ukraine, which began in 2014 and became widespread in 2022, on the renewal of disputes about the essence of world wars are investigated, since other countries began to participate indirectly in it on the side of both one side and the other. Attention is focused on two points of view within the discussion regarding the spread of the Russian-Ukrainian war to international relations. The essence and content of both points of view are revealed, which directly relate to the issue of the Third World War and the role of the Russian-Ukrainian war in its beginning. The first point of view is that Russian aggression against Ukraine threatens to start World War III. The second point is a new world war has begun, as the Russian-Ukrainian military confrontation causes not only military support from other states, but also an escalation of conflicts in other parts of the world. In the Middle East, the confrontation has already taken on the character of a war, involving Israel, Iran and its proxies, as well as Turkey's proxies. Military action is unfolding in Africa, where autocratic regimes supported by Russia are fighting opposition movements. Tensions are rising in the Far East, thanks to North Korea's aggressive stance and communist China's claims to Taiwan. The author of this paper, analyzing the current state of international relations, believes that a new world war has already begun. The theoretical and methodological basis for such a conclusion is his division of world wars into classical and post-classical. He considers the World War I and World War II to be classic, and he defines the Cold War and the growing war between democracies and autocracies in the modern world as post-classic. The main differences between classical and post-classical world wars are analyzed. The main reason for the transition of world wars from the classical stage to the post-classical stage was the appearance of atomic weapons.

**Keywords:** *international relations, world war, World War I, World War II, Cold War, Russian-Ukrainian war, classical and post-classical world wars.*

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The time that has passed since the beginning of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine has shown that more and more countries are being drawn into its orbit, both on the side of the victim of aggression and on the side of the aggressor. Although the participation of other states in the Russian-Ukrainian war is still more indirect (granting its territory to an aggressor

for conducting military operations, overt or covert supply of weapons to one of the belligerent states from the outside, imposing economic sanctions on the aggressor and countering it, economic support of the victim of aggression by some countries and the aggressor by others), but it shows that the situation on the international arena is becoming acutely bipolar.

In such a situation, the problem of a new world war is increasingly being discussed in the media and scientific publications. The discussion articulated two points of view: the first – the escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian

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war threatens the beginning of the Third World War, the second – a new world war has already begun. Proponents of the second point of view reflect it as the World War IV, because in their opinion the War III was the Cold War (Podhoretz\_2004).

Having joined the discussion, I set the following **tasks** here: to find out the main characteristics that distinguish world wars from other wars and military conflicts, and on this basis to give an answer to the question posed in the title of this publication.

**What is a world war?** The definition of «world war» acquired a conceptual character as a result of the two great wars of the 20th century, which, unlike the previous ones, involved all the principal states of contemporary world. They acquired a global character due to their geographical extent and unlimited use of resources (people, weapons, etc.), and their consequence was a radical reorganization of international relations (Schubert & Klein 2020). These wars received the names of the World Wars I and World Wars II. The generalization of their specific features led to the emergence of the classic model of the world war, the main elements of which are:

1. *Global coverage.* Military actions take place on the territory of most continents of the globe. The most powerful states of the world at that time, as well as their allies, are participating in the war. 23 out of 59 (40%) states and their colonies were directly or indirectly involved in the World War I (Participants in World War I). It covered most of the territory of Europe, hostilities were also carried out in the Middle East (Eastern Turkey and Mesopotamia), in Africa (Togoland, Cameroon, South-West Africa and the South African Union), in Far-East Asia (Qingdao), in Oceania (Samoa, New Guinea, Carolingian, Mariana, Marshall Islands and Solomon Islands) in the waters of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, as well as in the Persian Gulf of the Indian Ocean. 61 countries (80%) took part in the Second World War. The main theaters of military operations were almost the entire European continent and the Indo-Pacific region. Important battles took place in North Africa. Military operations were also conducted in the Middle East, East Africa (Ethiopia, Madagascar, Somalia) and West Africa (Senegal, Gabon).

2. *Bipolar structure.* The war is fought between two military-political coalitions. During the World War I, these were the Entente and the Quadruple Alliance. World War II was fought between the Axis Powers and a coalition

that proclaimed itself the United Nations in 1942.

3. *Not a very long duration in terms.* World War I lasted 4 years, 3 months and 17 days, World War II – 6 years and 1 day.

4. *A clear definition of the beginning and end of the war.* The beginning of the World War I is considered to be the declaration of war on Serbia by Austria-Hungary on July 28, 1914, and its end - the Compiègne armistice of the Entente countries with Germany on November 11, 1918, as a result of which the German troops surrendered. The beginning of the World War II was the attack of Nazi Germany on Poland on September 1, 1939, and its end – the signing of the Act of Surrender by Japan on September 2, 1945.

5. *Declaration of war.* During the World War I, 23 states declared war on 40 states (Duffy 2009). During the Second World War, declarations of war by one country against another occurred more than 100 times (Doody 2016), although the aggressor countries usually did not declare war or did so after their military attack.

6. *Continuity of hostilities.* Combat operations between the troops of the warring coalitions continued throughout the war, although they could sometimes acquire a positional character.

7. *Enormity of victims.* World wars brought unprecedented losses to mankind. The total human losses of the First World War amounted to about 20 million people (9.7 million military personnel and about 10 million civilians) killed and 21 million wounded (Haythornthwaite 1996 : 382–383). 40-50 million people were killed during World War II (Hughes & Royde-Smith 2024).

8. *Change in the world order as a result of the war.* The main international consequences of the World War I were the death of the German, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires, the creation by the victorious states of the Versailles-Washington system of world order and the League of Nations - the first worldwide intergovernmental organization whose mission was to maintain world peace on the principles contained in Covenant on its formation. During the 26 years of the existence of the League of Nations, its members included a total of 63 states from all continents of the world. This system was destroyed by the World War II, after which the victorious states created the Yalta-Potsdam system of international relations and the United Nations as the second world intergovernmental organization, which formed the basis of the new world order.

However, this did not save the world from a new global confrontation, despite the principles laid down in the UN Charter. This confrontation was called the Cold War.

**Can the Cold War be considered World War III?** To answer this question, we need to compare the classic model of the world war, which was outlined above, with the corresponding parameters of the Cold War.

1. *Global coverage.* Like the World War I and World War II, the Cold War to one degree or another covered all the continents of the globe.

2. *Bipolar structure.* The Cold War was fought between two coalitions led by the most powerful powers in the world at that time – the USA and the USSR, which were institutionalized into military-political blocs, as well as bilateral agreements between the leading powers of these coalitions and other states. The leading bloc of the Western coalition was the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), established in 1949. It originally included 12 states – 2 North American (USA and Canada) and 10 Western European (Belgium, Great Britain, Denmark, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal and France). During the Cold War, the number of NATO members increased to 16, as Greece and Turkey (in 1952), West Germany (in 1955), and Spain (in 1982) joined. In the wake of the Western strategy were many anti-communist states of the Middle and Far East, which together with the Western states created military-political blocs: ANZUS in 1951 (Australia, New Zealand and the USA); SEATO in 1954 (Australia, Great Britain, New Zealand, Pakistan, the USA, Thailand, the Philippines, France); CENTO in 1955 (Great Britain, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan and Turkey). The United States had bilateral agreements in the military-political sphere with Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, South Vietnam, and a number of other states. The Western coalition was opposed by a coalition of communist states led by the USSR. Under the leadership of the Soviet Union, a military-political bloc of European communist states – the Warsaw Pact was created in 1955 (Albania, Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, USSR, East Germany, Hungary, Czechoslovakia). The Soviet Union had military-political agreements with non-European communist states: People's Republic of China (until 1979), Vietnam, Cuba, Mongolia, and South Korea.

3. *Duration by time.* Unlike classical world wars, which lasted 4-6 years, the Cold War lasted four and a half decades.

4. *Definition of the beginning and end of the war.* Some scholars consider the beginning of the Cold War to be Winston Churchill's speech in Fulton on March 5, 1946 (Churchill, 1946). Others consider it to be the proclamation of the doctrine of containment of communism by US President Harry Truman on March 12, 1947. A Gallup poll in December 1950 found that more than half of Americans considered World War III to have already started (Reed 2004, p. 41). There is also no established understanding of what constitutes the end of the Cold War (Service 2015). Some consider its final end to be the collapse of the communist regime in the USSR and its disintegration in December 1991. Others associate this with the liquidation of the military structure of the Warsaw Pact (February 25, 1991), and then with its final dissolution (July 1, 1991). Still others refer to Gorbachev's proclamation of the doctrine of «new political thinking», which he represented in his speech at the 43rd session of the UN General Assembly on December 7, 1988 (Holloway 1989).

5. *Continuity of hostilities.* The Cold War was not a continuous military campaign, but a series of local wars and conflicts, in which the main opposing powers – the USA and the USSR – were indirectly involved. These wars were not connected to each other either territorially or in time. The largest military conflicts between the Western and communist worlds were the Korean War (1950-1953) and the Vietnam War (1959-1975). US military forces took full part in both wars (in the Korean one under the mandate of the UN Security Council). On the other hand, over a million Chinese «volunteers» and secretly about 30,000 Soviet soldiers participated in the Korean War. In Vietnam War – 320 thousand Chinese (Qiang, Zhui, 2000, p. 135) and 15 thousand Soviet military personnel. The most acute situation of the Cold War was the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962, which arose from the placement of Soviet missiles with nuclear warheads in Cuba and almost led to the outbreak of thermonuclear war between the USA and the USSR (Dobbs 2008). The confrontation between the Western and communist worlds encompassed the Middle East, where in the Arab-Israeli wars the United States supported Israel, and the USSR supported the Arab countries (starting with the Suez Crisis of 1956), South Asia (the Afghan War of 1979-1989, where a Soviet military contingent of 100,000 soldiers participated on the side of the communist government, and the Afghan popular resistance movement was

supported by the United States with weapons and advisers), Africa (the civil war in Angola, where the USSR supported the MPLA, and the United States supported UNITA, in Mozambique, where the USSR supported FRELIMO, and the United States supported RENAMO), Latin America (the civil war in Nicaragua, where the USSR supported the Sandinista government of Daniel Ortega, and the United States supported the Contras).

6. *Declaration of war.* Local wars between states were not declared during the Cold War.

7. *The enormity of the victims.* It is not known for certain how many people died as a result of the Cold War. According to «rough» estimates by Xyke Leiyon from the University of Tartu, the number of people killed in the Cold War ranges from 10.8 to 25 million (Leiyon, 2018). Tom Billings from Portland State University, who considers the Cold War to be World War III, puts the figure at «45 million direct combat deaths», but unlike Leiyon, he does not provide his own calculations (Billings 2024). It will probably never be possible to calculate the more or less accurate number of victims of the Cold War, since, firstly, it is impossible to attribute all the military conflicts that took place in the period 1946-1991 to the confrontation between the Western and communist worlds; secondly, the question arises: can victims of political repression in communist and pro-Western countries be considered victims of the Cold War? However, even by rough estimates, the number of victims of the Cold War correlates with the number of victims of previous world wars.

8. *Changing world order.* There was no radical change in the world order after the Cold War. The principles of the United Nations Charter (which, however, were constantly violated during the Cold War) and the institution that was supposed to ensure them were preserved.

Thus, of all the elements of the classical model of world wars, the Cold War only fits three or four. Despite such significant differences, many researchers insist that the Cold War should be considered the Third World War. Why? Because a factor has emerged that creates a real threat that a new world war in its classic form will lead to the destruction of all humanity. This factor is atomic weapons, which were first and, fortunately, last used at the end of World War II against Japan in the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The atomic bomb explosion in Hiroshima instantly killed 70,000 residents, and another 90-140,000 died within a year. During the bombing of Nagasaki, more

than 73,000 people were killed or missing, and another 35,000 died later from radiation exposure and injuries. After the USSR created its atomic bomb (with the help of Soviet intelligence) in 1949, a nuclear race began, which included Great Britain (1952), France (1960), and communist China (1964). At the beginning of 1966, these states had 37,741 nuclear warheads (USA – 31,149, USSR – 6,129, Great Britain – 436, France – 32, China – 5 (Norris & Kristensen 2010). Therefore, all the states of the then «nuclear club» refused to be the first to use it. As a result, the fierce confrontation between the Western and communist worlds did not escalate into a hot world war, although it continued until the avalanche of the communist world and the collapse of the USSR.

Thus, although the confrontation between the Western and communist worlds did not lead to a hot new world war, due to its global nature, the severity of armed conflicts, and the number of victims, it should be considered a Third World War, but of a special, post-classical type. A characteristic feature of this type is that the military sphere is not a priority and is characterized by the predominance of unconventional methods of warfare over conventional ones. No less important than the military sphere is the information sphere, where special psychological operations are actively conducted, as well as the socio-economic one, where opponents try to weaken each other's economic potential and provoke social crises. It was the understanding of these features that led to the development of the hybrid warfare concept (Mattis & Hoffman 2005; Hoffman 2007 and 2009).

**Can we state today that the World War IV has begun?** The current situation suggests the beginning of a new cold war, the main initiator of which is Russia. The collapse of the Soviet Union gave rise to the «Weimar syndrome» among a significant portion of Russians, as a result, political revenge began to gain momentum in post-Soviet Russia. (Gati 1995). Back during the presidency of Boris Yeltsin, Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov put forward the doctrine of restoring a bipolar world, where Western (pro-American) democracies would be opposed by an axis of states led by Russia: communist China, India, Iran, Iraq, etc. (DeLong 2020). After the transfer of presidential power in Russia from Yeltsin to Vladimir Putin, two interrelated processes began to develop there: the retotalitarianization of the political regime and foreign policy acquired a clearly expressed revanchist and



imperialist content (Romanyuk 2022). Having overcome the Chechen people's desire for independence as a result of the Second Chechen War, Putin launched external aggressions against Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, after which significant territories of these states came under Russian control.

The full-scale war against Ukraine that Russia launched in 2022 caused the final split of the world into two military-political coalitions. On the one hand, a coalition of Western democracies and many other states emerged, which took shape in April 2022 at the American air base in Ramstein (Germany), where a contact group was created in support of Ukraine. 48 states officially participated in its work, and 8 ones more also provided military (lethal and non-lethal) assistance to Ukraine without publicly joining it. On the other hand, an «Axis of evil» was formed, which included, in addition to Russia, autocratic states that began to provide it with military support. This coalition is not institutionalized, but is based on bilateral formal and informal agreements between its participants.

The main countries of the «Axis of evil» today include Russia, Belarus, North Korea, and Iran. Belarus provided its territory for the invasion of Russian regular troops into Ukraine in February 2022. Although, despite Putin's pressure, Belarusian troops did not participate in the Russian aggression, Belarus supplies its military equipment and ammunition to Russia. After the start of a full-scale war, North Korea recognized the independence of the DPR and LPR and began supplying Russia with artillery shells and ballistic missiles, and after signing the «Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the Russian Federation and the DPRK» on June 19, 2024, its military began to take direct part in the war against Ukraine. Russia's active military cooperation with Iran began with the war in Syria, where both countries provided military support to the Shiite government of Assad (Abdo, 2011). During the war in Ukraine, Iran began supplying Russia with kamikaze drones and ballistic missiles. For its part, Russia provides these countries with political, economic, and military support. Several dozen Russian nuclear munitions were deployed in Belarus at the beginning of 2023. North Korea receives food, fuel, and technology to produce spy satellites and improve nuclear weapons from Russia. As for Iran, Russia is illegally facilitating its nuclear program and assisting its proxies.

Although the main battlefield between the civilized world and the «Axis of evil» is the

Russian-Ukrainian front, in October 2023, the Iranian proxies Hamas and Hezbollah, by attacking Israel, opened the second hot front of a new world war in the Middle East. Unexpectedly, Jordan actually sided with Israel, taking part in shooting down missiles that Iran and its proxies were directed against that country. The war in the Middle East gained new strength at the end of 2004, when military formations of opposition forces, with the help of Turkey, overthrew the pro-Iranian and pro-Russian Assad regime in Syria, which had previously also been considered a member of the «Axis of evil».

However, the modern world war covers not only the territories of Eastern Europe and the Middle East, but also Africa, where civil wars are ongoing in Burkina Faso, Libya, Mali, Niger, Sudan, and the Central African Republic between government forces, which rely on the military support of Russia (its «private» military companies), and the opposition ones. It could extend to Latin America, where Russia's ally Venezuela is openly declaring its intention to annex the Essequibo region of neighboring Guyana, which occupies about two-thirds of its territory. In East Asia, tensions are growing between North Korea and South Korea, and between communist China and Taiwan.

The fact that the current confrontation can be considered a new world war is evidenced by the huge human casualties. Although it is not yet possible to count the number of its victims, the count has already reached millions. According to the Wall Street Journal, the number of victims in the Russian-Ukrainian war alone has already reached one million people (Pancevski 2024). 620,000 combatants and civilians have been killed in hostilities since March 2011 in Syria (Baker 2024). In the new war in the Middle East, more than 40,000 people died in the Gaza Strip alone in a year (Reported impact snapshot: Gaza Strip, 2024). Over 330,000 people have died in fighting in the last three years in Africa (New data shows record number of armed conflicts 2024). And this is far from a complete list.

The destruction of the world order indirectly indicates the beginning of a new world war. The countries of the «Axis of Evil» blatantly ignore the principles of the United Nations Charter, and the UN has turned into a decorative organization that is unable to adopt any effective decision to stop their aggressive intentions and actions.

**Conclusions.** 1) taking into account modern realities, it is advisable to typify world wars into classical and post-classical;

2) the transition from classical to post-classical wars was caused by the emergence of atomic weapons, the use of which threatened the existence of human civilization;

3) the main difference between classical and postclassical wars is that the confrontation does not occur between the main actors of the international conflict directly, but between their satellites and proxies;

4) post-classical world wars last a longer time than classical ones;

5) the prerequisite for world wars (both classical and post-classical) is the destruction or at least the malicious non-observance of the previous world order;

6) the situation in the modern world by many signs indicates the beginning of a new world war, but whether it will remain post-classical or acquire a classical character depends on many factors that it is impossible to predict today.

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## НОВА СВІТОВА ВІЙНА МОЖЕ ПОЧАТИСЯ ЧИ ВЖЕ ПОЧАЛАСЯ?

Розглядається актуальна в сучасних умовах міжнародних відносин проблема з'ясування сутності світових війн. Тривалий час такими війнами вважалися Перша (1914–1918) та Друга (1939–1945) світові війни. Пізніше деякі дослідники стали відносити до світових війн і Холодну війну (1946–1991), хоча це викликало заперечення з боку прибічників традиційного розуміння цього феномена. Досліджуються наслідки та вплив війни Росії проти України, що почалася в 2014 році та набула широкомасштабного характеру в 2022-му на відновлення суперечок щодо сутності світових війн, оскільки в ній опосередковано стали брати участь на боці як однієї сторони, так і другої і інші країни. Увагу зосереджено на двох точках зору в межах дискусії, щодо поширення російсько-української війни на міжнародні відносини. Розкривається сутність і зміст обох точок зору, що безпосередньо стосуються питання Третьої світової війни та ролі в її початку російсько-української війни. Перша точка зору полягає в тому, що російська агресія проти України загрожує початку Третьої світової війни. Друга полягає в тому, що нова світова війна вже почалася, оскільки російсько-українське воєнне протистояння спричиняє не тільки військову підтримку з боку інших держав, але й загострення конфліктів в інших частинах світу. На Близькому Сході конфронтація вже набула характеру війни Ірану та його арабських проксі проти Ізраїлю – ключовому союзникові США у цьому регіоні. Стрімко поширюється зона військових конфліктів в Африці та на Далекому Сході. Аналізуючи сучасний стан міжнародних відносин, стверджується, що нова світова війна вже почалася. Теоретико-методологічною підставою для такого висновку є поділення світових війн на класичні та посткласичні. Аналізуються основні відмінності між класичними та посткласичними світовими війнами. Головною причиною переходу світових війн з класичної стадії до посткласичної автор називає появу атомної зброї.

**Ключові слова:** міжнародні відносини, світова війна, Перша світова війна, Друга світова війна, Холодна війна, Російсько-українська війна, класичні та посткласичні світові війни.

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