

5 places World War III could start in 2023

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A Ukrainian soldier checks a wrecked Russian tank outside a village east of Kharkiv in April 2022. SERGEY BOBOK/AFP via Getty Images

- In February 2022, Russia attacked Ukraine, starting the largest clash in Europe since World War II.
- The war has caused global ripples, raising the stakes of disputes that have smoldered for decades.
- These five simmering disputes pose the greatest risk of erupting into "World War III" in 2023.

A 19FortyFive tradition – we look at where World War III could start as we prepare for 2023.

In 2022, the world came closer to Great Power War than at any point since the end of the Cold War.

Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, an attack that almost immediately resulted in a combination of sanctions and direct military support for Kyiv.

By early spring, the United States and its allies were pursuing policies that would result in the death of Russian soldiers, the destruction of Russian military equipment, and the long-term degradation of the Russian economy. The war has had a ripple effect on the world stage, dramatically increasing the stakes of disputes that have quietly smoldered for decades.

These five areas pose the greatest risk for the eruption of what we might be tempted to call "World War III."

Ukraine



Ukrainian artillery fires in the Zaporizhzhia Region in December 2022. Dmytro Smoliyenko / Ukrinform/Future Publishing via Getty Images

Concern that Russia might use nuclear weapons to restore its flagging fortunes in Ukraine seems to have declined since summer, as the war has settled into a destructive stalemate.

However, escalation remains a concern. Russia's inability to make progress may threaten the stability of the Putin government, inclining Moscow to contemplate dangerous escalation. Concerns over the ability of Ukraine to continue the war in the long-term might force Kyiv to take risky steps of its own to break the stalemate.

An expansion of the war to NATO remains unlikely but possible; the Russian use of nuclear weapons remains unthinkable but not at all impossible.

The Biden administration and its allies in Europe have taken extraordinary care with the risks of escalation, but Washington does not hold all of the cards and either Kyiv or Moscow might become willing to accept the risk of a wider conflict, a conflict that could develop into World War III.

Taiwan



Taiwanese troops during an exercise simulating an attempted amphibious landing by Chinese forces in May 2019. *Kyodo News Stills via Getty Images*

Worry about the immediacy of war between Taiwan and China has waned a bit in the past months, in large part because of China's catastrophic covid experience.

However, there is little doubt that cross-strait tensions remain significant. The willingness of the Biden administration to take risky rhetorical positions on the defense of Taiwan indicates that Washington has real concern over the prospects of a Chinese attack. At the same time, these statements (and unwise stunts such as Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taipei) run the risk of triggering Chinese escalation.

Fortunately, there is good reason to believe that we will have some warning of war; as was the case along the Ukrainian border, Chinese preparation for conflict would be glaringly visible to everyone concerned. Almost any imaginable conflict, however, would end up including the United States and very likely Japan, and would thus constitute a great power war.

Greece-Turkey



A Greek tank in a military parade for Greece's Independence Day on March 25, 2018. Kostas Pikoulas/Pacific Press/LightRocket via Getty Images

Lost in all of the discussion of the revitalization of NATO in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been a simmering crisis on the alliance's southern flank.

Over the past year tensions between Greece and Turkey have increased substantially, driven in large part by Turkey's assertive foreign policy turn and by the domestic vulnerability of the Erdogan regime. Disputes between Athens and Ankara over energy exploration in the Aegean have driven the current tension, although the territorial disagreement underlying the argument have existed for decades.

While it seems unlikely that a NATO ally would openly attack another NATO ally, past conflicts have brought the two countries up to the brink of war (and sometimes slightly beyond) notwithstanding their alliance commitments.

Any fight between Turkey and Greece would immediately involve NATO, and would almost certainly result in some degree of opportunistic intervention by Russia.

Korean Peninsula



A North Korean missile is launched in October 2022. KCNA via REUTERS

Over the past several months tensions between Seoul and Pyongyang have grown steadily, with North Korean provocations (often themselves driven by the Kim regime's idiosyncratic and cryptic assessments of the international environment) incurring aggressive rhetorical responses from the South.

The dynamic between the two states seems driven by impatience; an impatience in the North that the world still refuses to take it seriously despite its magnificent nuclear weapons, and an impatience in the South that a nation of great significance remains burdened by its inept and retrograde sibling.

These tensions aren't new, but historically they have been constrained by the Cold War and by the post-Cold War liberal international order. The first is gone and the second is fraying, to the extent that Pyongyang may feel like it has a moment and Seoul may struggle to find the patience to tolerate the antics of its neighbor.

If war does break out it could rapidly become more destructive than the Russia-Ukraine War, with conventional and nuclear weapons exacting a horrific toll on both sides.

China-India



A still image from Chinese footage shows Indian and Chinese troops clashing on the Line of Actual Control in the Galwan Valley in June 2020. CCTV/AFP via Getty Images

Sporadic fighting between China and India continues on the Roof of the World.

Although the real stakes of control over small slivers of territory in nearly uninhabitable mountain terrain remain elusive, neither China nor India have backed away from the conflict. While fighting has thus far remained quite limited, the desire to defend national prestige can rapidly become poisonous for even the wisest and most sensible leaders.

Whether Modi and Xi fit such a description is a question for another day, but the governments that they lead have not managed to find a way to resolve the conflict.

At some point either the Indians or the Chinese might be tempted to solve the problem through escalation, a step that could work as intended, or that could open the door to a much larger and more destructive conflict.

Pray World War III never happens



Destroyed apartments in Lyman after the Ukrainian city was recaptured from Russia forces in November 2022. Metin Aktas/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

It remains unlikely that any of these disputes will develop into a global conflict, although the Ukraine War already has some aspects of great power war.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has, if nothing else, demonstrated that major wars can still happen despite the best efforts of the international community. Maintaining peace requires careful statesmanship; managing escalation during war requires extraordinary skill.

We can hope that the leaders of the world's great powers will take care over the coming year with the vast stockpiles of weapons that they control.

19FortyFive's defense and national security contributing editor, Dr. Robert Farley has taught security and diplomacy courses at the Patterson School since 2005. He received his bachelor's from the University of Oregon in 1997, and his Ph.D. from the University

of Washington in 2004. Dr. Farley is the author of "Grounded: The Case for Abolishing the United States Air Force" (University Press of Kentucky, 2014), "the Battleship Book" (Wildside, 2016), "Patents for Power: Intellectual Property Law and the Diffusion of Military Technology" (University of Chicago, 2020), and most recently "Waging War with Gold: National Security and the Finance Domain Across the Ages" (Lynne Rienner, 2023). He has contributed extensively to a number of journals and magazines, including the National Interest, the Diplomat: APAC, World Politics Review, and the American Prospect. Dr. Farley is also a founder and senior editor of Lawyers, Guns and Money.

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