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A Slow-Motion World War III?



Image by UX Gun.

I’ve been describing this world of ours, such as it is, for almost 23 years at *TomDispatch*. I’ve written my way through three-and-a-half presidencies — god save us, it could be four in November! I’ve viewed from a grave (and I mean that word!) distance America’s endlessly disastrous wars of this century. I’ve watched the latest military budget hit almost \$900 billion, undoubtedly on its way toward a cool trillion in the years to come, while years ago the whole “national security” budget (though “insecurity” would be a better word) soared to well over the trillion-dollar mark.

I’ve lived my whole life in an imperial power. Once, in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, it was even “the lone superpower,” the last great power on planet Earth, or so

its leaders believed. I then watched how, in a world without great-power dangers, it continued to invest ever more of our tax dollars in our military. A “peace dividend”? Who needed that? And yet, in the decades that followed, by far the most expensive military on planet Earth couldn’t manage to win a single war, no less its Global War on Terror. In fact, in this century, while fighting vain or losing conflicts across significant parts of the planet, it slowly but all too obviously began to go down the tubes, or perhaps I mean (if you don’t mind a few mixed metaphors) come apart at the seams?

And it never seems to end, does it? Imagine that 32 years after the U.S. became the last superpower on Planet Earth, in a devastating kind of political chaos, this country might indeed reelect a man who imagines himself running a future American “dictatorship” — his very word for it! — even if, publicly at least, just for a single day.

And yes, in 2024, as chaos blooms on the American political scene, the world itself continues to be remarkably at war — think of “war,” in fact, as humanity’s middle name — in both Ukraine and Gaza (with offshoots in Lebanon and Yemen). Meanwhile, this country’s now 22-year-old war on terror straggles on in its own devastating fashion, with threats of worse to come in plain sight.

After all, 88 years after two atomic bombs were dropped on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to end World War II, nukes seem to be making a comeback (not that they were ever truly gone, of course). Thank you, Kim and Vlad! I’m thinking of how North Korean leader Kim Jong-un implicitly threatened to nuke his nonnuclear southern neighbor recently. But also, far more significantly how, in his own version of a State of the Union address to his people, Russian President Vladimir Putin very publicly threatened to employ nukes from his country’s vast arsenal (assumedly “tactical” ones, some of which are more powerful than the atomic bombs that ended World War II), should any European countries — think France — send their troops into Ukraine.

And don’t forget that, amid all of this, my own country’s military, eternally hiking its “defense” budget, continues to prepare in a big-time fashion for a future war with — yes — China! Of course, that country is, in turn, rushing to upgrade its own nuclear arsenal and the rest of its military machine as well. Only recently, for instance, the U.S. and Japan held joint military maneuvers that, as they openly indicated for the first time, were aimed at preparing for just such a future conflict with China and you can’t get much more obvious than that.

Another World War?

Oh, and when it comes to war, I haven’t even mentioned, for instance, the devastating civil war in Sudan that has nothing to do with any of the major powers. Yes, we humans just can’t

seem to stop making war while, to the tune of untold trillions of dollars globally, preparing for ever more of it. And the truly strange thing is this: it seems to matter not at all that the very world on which humanity has done so forever and a day is now itself being unsettled in a devastating way that no military of any sort, armed in any fashion, will ever be able to deal with.

Let's admit it: we humans have always had a deep urge to make war. Of course, logically speaking, we shouldn't continue to do so, and not just for all the obvious reasons but because we're on a planet that can't take it anymore. (Yes, making war or simply preparing for it means putting staggering amounts of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere and so, quite literally, making war on the planet itself.) But — as both history and the present moment seem to indicate all too decisively — we just can't stop ourselves.

In the process, while hardly noticing, it seems as if we've become ever more intent on conducting a global war on this planet itself. Our weapons in that war — and in their own long-term fashion, they're likely to prove no less devastating than nuclear arms — have been fossil fuels. I'm thinking, of course, of coal, oil, and natural gas and the greenhouse gases that drilling for them and the use of them emit in staggering quantities even in what passes for peacetime.

In the previous century, of course, there were two devastating “world” wars, World War I and World War II. They were global events that, in total, killed more than a hundred million of us and devastated parts of the planet. But here's the truly strange thing: while local and regional wars continue in this century in a striking fashion, few consider the way we're loading the atmosphere with carbon dioxide and methane while, in the process, heating this planet disastrously as a new kind of world war. Think of climate change, in fact, as a kind of slow-motion World War III. After all, it couldn't be more global or, in the end, more destructive than a world war of the worst sort.

And unlike the present wars in Gaza and Ukraine, which, even thousands of miles away, continue to be headline-making events, the war on this planet normally gets surprisingly little attention in much of the media. In fact, in 2023, a year that set striking global heat records month by month from June to December and was also the hottest year ever recorded, the major TV news programs of ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox actually cut their coverage of global warming significantly, according to Media Matters for America.

“If I Don't Get Elected, It's Going to Be a Blood Bath”

I live in New York City which, like much of the rest of the planet, set a heat record for 2023. In addition, the winter we just passed through was a record one for warmth. And I began

writing this piece on a set of days in early March when the temperature in my city also hit records in the mid-60s, and when, on March 14th (not April 14th, May 14th, or even June 14th), it clocked 70-plus degrees. I was walking outside that afternoon with my shirtsleeves rolled up, my sweater in my backpack, and my spring jacket tied around my waist, feeling uncomfortably hot in my blue jeans even on the shadier side of the street.

And yes, if, as my wife and I did recently, you were to walk down to the park near where we live, you'd see that the daffodils are already blooming wildly as are other flowers, while the first trees are budding, including a fantastic all-purple one that's burst out fully, all of this in a fashion that might once have seemed normal sometime in April. And yes, some of what I'm describing is certainly quite beautiful in the short run, but under it lies an increasingly grim reality when it comes to extreme (and extremely hot) weather.

While I was working on this piece, the largest Texas fires ever (yes, ever!), continued to burn, evidently barely contained, with far more than a million acres of that state's panhandle already fried to a crisp. Oh, and those record-setting Canadian forest fires that scorched tens of millions of acres of that country, while turning distant U.S. cities like New York into smoke hells last June have, it turns out, festered underground all winter as "zombie fires." And they may burst out again in an even more devastating fashion this spring or summer. In fact, in 2023, from Hawaii to Chile to Europe, there were record wildfires of all sorts on our increasingly over-heated planet. And far worse is yet to come, something you could undoubtedly say as well about more intense flooding, more violent storms, and so on.

We are, in other words, increasingly on a different planet, though you would hardly know it amid the madness of our moment. I mean, imagine this: Russia, whose leader, Vladimir Putin, clearly doesn't consider climate change a significant issue, is on pace to achieve an oil-drilling record for the second year in a row. China, despite installing far more green power than any other country, has also been using more coal than all other nations combined, and set global records for building new coal-fired power plants.

Meanwhile, the third "great" power on this planet, despite having a president dedicated to doing something about climate change, is still the largest exporter of natural gas around and continues to produce oil at a distinctly record pace.

And don't forget the five giant fossil-fuel companies, BP, Shell, Chevron, ExxonMobil, and TotalEnergies, which in 2023 produced oil, made profits, and rewarded shareholders at — yes, you guessed it! — a record pace, while the major petrostates of our world are still, according to the Guardian, "planning expansions that would blow the planet's carbon budget twice over."

In sum, then, this world of ours only grows more dangerous by the year. And I haven't even mentioned artificial intelligence, have I? As Michael Klare has written in an [analysis](#) for the Arms Control Association, the dangers of AI and other emerging military technologies are likely to “expand into the nuclear realm by running up the escalation ladder or by blurring the distinction between a conventional and nuclear attack.”

In other words, human war-making could become both more inhuman and worse at the same time. Now, add just one more factor into the global equation. America's European and Asian allies see U.S. leadership, dominant since 1945, experiencing a potentially epoch-ending, terminal failure, as the global *Pax Americana* (that had all too little to do with “peace”) is crumbling — or do I mean overheating?

What they see, in fact, is two elderly men locked in an ever more destructive, inward-looking electoral knife fight, with one of them [warning ominously](#) that “if I don't get elected, it's going to be a blood bath... for the country.” And if he isn't victorious, here's his further prediction: “[I don't think](#) you're going to have another election, or certainly not an election that's meaningful.” Of course, were he to be victorious the same could be true, especially since he's promised from his first day in office to “[drill, drill, drill](#),” which, at this point in our history, is, by definition, to declare war on this planet!

Unfortunately, Donald Trump isn't alone. All too sadly, we humans clearly have trouble focusing on the world we actually inhabit. We'd prefer to fight wars instead. Consider that the definition not just of imperial decline, but of decline period in the age of climate change.

And yet, it's barely news.

This piece first appeared at [TomDispatch](#).

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