

DOI 10.33099/2618-1614-2024-25-2-3-10

UDC 355.4

K. O. Budanov,*Defence Intelligence of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine,***V. V. Zaitsev,***Candidate of Political Sciences, Defence Intelligence of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine,***O. M. Romanov,***Candidate of Technical Sciences, Senior Researcher, Defence Intelligence Research Institute,***V. S. Komarov,***Doctor of Military Sciences, Professor, Defence Intelligence Research Institute*

The impact of the anti-Western geopolitical axis «China – Russia – Iran – North Korea» on potential scenarios for the onset of the World War III

In this article, the authors analyse potential scenarios for the outbreak of World War III involving authoritarian countries aligned within the anti-Western geopolitical axis. The analysis delves into current events that, in some way, impact the likelihood of resolving global and regional interests (contradictions) through military force. Examining the existing contradictions among the world's power centres – the United States and China – along with their relationships with Russia, Iran, and North Korea, the article characterizes and outlines the conditions and possible events that could serve as a catalyst for the eruption of World War III in the short and medium term.

Key words: anti-Western geopolitical axis, «collective West», scenarios of World War III outbreak, actors, collective security, world order.

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Formulating the problem. An analysis of global events in the second half of 2023 reveals that the destabilization of situations in all regions of the planet, including the Middle East, Europe, the Balkans, the Caucasus, Africa, and the Indo-Pacific, is causing longstanding conflicts to escalate into global crises. Regional actors pursuing revisionist policies to achieve their interests through the use of military force and technologies of «controlled chaos» ignore the post-World War II world order.

In the 2022, 137 armed conflicts at regional and national levels were active globally, indicating a steady increase in violence across all regions of the planet [1]. The majority of these conflicts are initiated and supported by the financial and material resources of countries with revisionist plans to alter the existing world order, considering the use of military force as a suitable tool for this purpose. The escalation of aggressive policies by authoritarian countries, notably China, Iran, Russia, North Korea, transnational terrorist groups, and organizations, etc., results in neglecting traditional mechanisms and processes for conflict resolution, fundamental principles of international humanitarian law, as well as the refusal to recognize the right of neighbouring countries to sovereignty and independence.

The new world order is being formed in the context of unresolved contradictions between the leading geopolitical players (world centres of power), which they are trying to resolve, including through the use of military force. The world is balancing on the verge of the World War III, or, as some believe, the war is even underway [2].

The outbreak and progression of the Russian-Ukrainian war, Russia's support for other authoritarian regimes, the planning and execution of the HAMAS terrorist organization's attack on Israel with Iranian support, military-technical cooperation between Russia and Iran, China's stance on Taiwan's forced accession, North Korea's nuclear ambitions, etc., illustrate that authoritarian regimes have sought to establish a geopolitical axis to counteract the so-called «collective West» and limit its influence. This presents a genuine and growing challenge aimed at undermining the liberal democratic world order and the US-centric model of global security.

Consequently, the analysis of the formation of an alliance among authoritarian countries aimed at countering the «collective West» is a highly topical issue of our time, particularly concerning the identification of possible scenarios for the outbreak of World War III.

Analysis of recent studies and publications

An analysis of studies in this field reveals a significant focus on the matter of identifying potential scenarios for the outbreak of World War III in the short

and medium term. The global media, involving leaders of prominent nations, military and political alliances, organizations, analytical agencies, security experts, and military analysts, are deliberating on potential and ongoing events that could serve as catalysts for a global war. It is worth noting that various experts offer opinions defining potential scenarios for the outbreak of war, including their number and the potential composition of participants [3–8]. Opinions on this matter may vary, but a general approach has been agreed upon in high-level international meetings. However, forecasts regarding the timing of the implementation of these scenarios are cautious and restrained.

Therefore, the article's purpose and focus are to analyse potential scenarios for the outbreak of World War III, involving authoritarian countries as members of the anti-Western geopolitical axis.

Coverage of the main material and ideas of the article

The world is, *de facto*, in the early stages of a global war. Currently, there is a discussion about the formation of two antagonistic blocs and the dismantling of the unipolar world order. The United States, having become the hegemon after the collapse of the former Soviet Union, witnesses the intensification of authoritarian, anti-Western regimes attempting to alter the world order and challenge universally recognized borders through force. It is noteworthy that, akin to the twentieth century, the United States, China, and Russia pursue their geopolitical ambitions and address contradictions in the international arena not only directly but also through the mediation of their allies.

Authoritarian countries are forming alliances to counter the «collective West». The consideration of unresolved contradictions and their geopolitical interests in the relations between the United States, China, Russia, Iran, and other actors will contribute to defining possible scenarios for the outbreak of World War III [9–11].

An analysis of the military and political situation at the global level allows us to identify at least four possible scenarios for the outbreak of World War III namely:

- an attack by the Russian Federation on one of the NATO member states in Europe (Poland, the Baltic States, Finland, etc.);
- aggravation of the armed conflict in the Middle East to the level of a regional war with the participation of Israel, Palestine, Iran and the Arab world;
- provocation by North Korea, as a proxy of China, leading to a war with South Korea;
- China's military operation to annex Taiwan by force.

The analysis results indicate that there might be additional scenarios, contingent on the objective conditions of the current security situation, as well as specific actions by the world's centres of power to achieve and/or protect their geopolitical interests.

The first scenario is plausible in the short term, but experts deem it unlikely for several reasons. Firstly, the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war prevents Russia from swiftly amassing the required resources to engage in a new conflict with a more advanced and technological adversary.

And secondly, there is currently no legitimate good reason to start it, although, for example, Finland, as a NATO member, could use the threat to block the Russian fleet's entry to the Baltic Sea [12].

Russia's response was President Putin's statement regarding the necessity to establish a Leningrad military district to counter new threats to NATO, expressing potential «problems» for Finland. We should not dismiss the potential threat of Russia utilizing air strikes on air bases situated in NATO countries if the F-16 multi-role fighters provided to Ukraine as part of military and technical assistance are deployed. The consequences of Russia's possible provocative actions against NATO countries and their possible response should also be considered. For example, on the night of 14 December 2023, during an attack on Ukraine by Russian Shahed-type kamikaze drones, one of them crashed in Romania, which led to an air alert in two northern regions of Romania near the Ukrainian border. After the incident, the Romanian Ministry of Defence stated that it «strongly condemns the attacks of the Russian Federation on some objects and elements of civilian infrastructure in Ukrainian ports on the Danube», but there was no more adequate response to this and previous events with drone crashes in Romania. Another notable incident involves the violation of Polish airspace by a Russian cruise missile launched from our territory during a large-scale Russian missile attack on December 29, 2023. It stayed in Polish airspace for about 3 minutes at a distance of about 40 km inland. Apart from the President of Poland's urgent meeting with representatives of the security forces and the summoning by the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Poland of the Russian Chargé d'Affaires to deliver a note «demanding explanations for the incident involving the violation of the airspace of the Republic of Poland and the immediate cessation of such activities», there was no other reaction from the Polish military and political leadership. Additionally, the presence of tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus, situated on its border with NATO member states, should be taken into consideration.

Through these actions, Russia is testing the determination and political will of NATO member states to safeguard their borders (airspace) and to potentially offer a unified response to provocations. Instances of border violations by the aggressor during Ukraine's extensive air attacks without an adequate response from the Alliance are becoming systematic. This all indicates that NATO's military and political leadership is acutely aware of the tangible threat from Russia and its own incapacity to respond decisively to provocations. Consequently, Russia is growing more confident in its actions with a sense of impunity [13].

The first scenario is plausible due to the unsuccessful course of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the disregard for Russia's geopolitical ambitions, indicating that Russia has lost its agency. The Russian president believes that the foundation for shaping the future lies in the partial occupation of Ukraine and the establishment of a buffer zone of tension («controlled chaos») on the eastern flank of NATO. According to his perspective, this strategy will position Russia as the third pole in the world and disrupt the emerging bipolar model of the US – China world order. In these circumstances, Russia is employing the logic of the Nazi dichotomy from the World War II – either Russia triumphs over the «collective West,» or it faces cessation, loss of sovereignty, and the permanent forfeiture of its former status as one of the centres of power in the global world.

Russia's open-armed aggression against Ukraine is combined with the increase of hybrid influence in various spheres. Since the commencement of the full-scale invasion, Russia has found itself in political isolation, having Belarus as its sole ally. Presently, Russia is mobilizing pro-Russian Western politicians. Its destructive activities in Africa, amidst the food crisis provoked by Russia and aimed at garnering allies in these countries, coupled with the covert implementation of manipulative measures to escalate «frozen» and simmering conflicts worldwide, are noteworthy. The hybrid component of Russia's aggression, according to President Putin, should reduce support for Ukraine, divert attention from the Russian-Ukrainian war and positively influence the restoration of its pre-war status due to the failure of the «special military operation».

In the bipolar model of the US – China world order, Russia would become a vassal of one of the two hegemonies, lacking the right to claim the role of a distinct global centre of power. For this reason, Russia is currently employing all available means to avert the loss of its former status. To this end, there are what are known as quiet «signals» in the Western press about Russia's readiness for pseudo-peacekeeping activities, cessation of hostilities in Ukraine with the retention of occupied

territories during negotiations, «peacekeeping» proposals, and initiatives within the establishment in Europe and the United States [14]. The above-mentioned measures are a screen for the real plans of the Russian president – to get a pause to accumulate the necessary resources, the right amount of military equipment, to conduct covert or open mobilisation, to use the moment of aggravation of the internal political struggle in the United States during the election campaign, the factors of the Israeli-Palestinian war and «fatigue» from the Russian-Ukrainian war to strike at one of the NATO countries. A possible option could involve an attempt to create a «Suwalki corridor» to connect the Kaliningrad region by land, a long-standing aspiration of Russia. It is important to bear in mind that if Trump comes to power in the United States, Russia may have carte blanche to pursue its imperial ambitions in Europe.

The other three possible scenarios are more probable, yet the realization of each depends on numerous factors. There is also a perspective suggesting that the world might be in a state similar to the new Cold War of the twentieth century, balancing on the edge of conflict between liberal democratic and authoritarian blocs. However, there might not be a direct military clash between global geopolitical players such as the US and China, or NATO and Russia. This viewpoint gains support from the fact that after the meeting of the leaders of the United States and China in November 2023 at the Asia-Pacific Economic Summit, an agreement was reached to restore direct communication channels between the heads of the countries' military departments.

If, based on the second scenario, the armed conflict in the Middle East escalates to the level of a regional war, Israel, which has long opposed and sought to dismantle Iran's nuclear program, will be the catalyst for the outbreak of World War III, especially after the HAMAS attack provided a genuine justification for such action. An analysis of the events leading up to the attack on Israel reveals that Iran, with the support of Russia and China, actively participated in organizing and financing it [3]. A compelling factor supporting the assumption of further escalation in the Middle East is the presence of the US Navy, providing strategic deterrence in the region and ensuring Israel's short-term security. However, in this scenario, the United States faces the risk of being drawn into a war at a time when its opportunities for achieving victory are limited. This is due to the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war and the provision of financial and military-technical assistance to Ukraine, coupled with the obligation to fulfil its commitments as an ally of Israel.

In the third scenario, the authoritarian regime of North Korea, acting as a proxy for China, could provoke and/or launch an invasion of South Korea at any time.

A provoked armed conflict between North and South Korea would provide China with a favourable opportunity to intervene as a peacekeeper. The outcome of this conflict would entail the weakening of South Korea and a destructive impact on Japan, both critical factors for the successful military invasion of Taiwan by China. The necessity to contemplate the third scenario is underscored by Kim Jong-un's speech at the Labour Party Congress. In his address, he explicitly stated his intention to intensify efforts in preparing the country for war. He outlined tasks for the People's Army and the military industry, emphasizing the need to increase the production of ammunition and nuclear weapons, and to strengthen all elements of the civil defence system [15].

Amid the potential escalation of the armed conflict by North Korea, South Korea has initiated discussions on the necessity to develop its nuclear weapons, even in the face of possible stringent international sanctions. To counter the potential threat and address relevant international obligations, the United States deployed a nuclear-capable submarine to the Korean Peninsula. Furthermore, South Korea and Japan, in collaboration with the United States, conducted joint military exercises for the first time in history. This signifies the formation of a new security alliance between the United States, Japan, and South Korea in the Indo-Pacific region. In pursuit of this, on August 18, 2023, the Presidents of the United States and South Korea, along with the Prime Minister of Japan, convened at the Camp David residence in the USA. During the meeting, they reached specific agreements to enhance intelligence sharing and conduct joint annual military exercises.

The probability of these scenarios is supported by the fact that, anticipating an escalation in the Indo-Pacific region, the United States withdrew an aircraft carrier group led by the Gerald R. Ford from the Eastern Mediterranean off the coast of Israel in early January 2024, relocating it to its base in Norfolk to prepare for future missions. This occurred during the active phase of Israel's armed confrontation with HAMAS, Houthi attacks from Yemen, North Korea's provocation by shelling the South Korean island of Greater Yeonpyeong in the Yellow Sea, and the unpredictability of further developments.

The implementation of the potential fourth scenario poses a significant threat to strategic stability, not only for the Global South but for the entire world. China's objective extends beyond gaining control over Taiwan; it also seeks to diminish US influence in the region by neutralizing its dominance in the seas surrounding China. Despite recent mutual attempts between the US and China to improve the current state of relations, this process will demand considerable effort and political will from the leaders of both countries.

In his New Year's address, the Chinese leader proclaimed the inevitability of the «reunification» of mainland China with Taiwan [16]. For China, the «reunification» of Taiwan is a matter of principle. Otherwise, there is a question about how China can assert itself as a global power without full control over its territory and while accepting the significant influence of the «collective West» on Taiwan. In addition, the primary advantage China would gain with the successful reunification with Taiwan is the management and control of the world's leading superconductor producer. Its products play a crucial role in the manufacturing of modern weapons, military and special equipment, dual-use goods, etc. In a situational context, China's position aligns with Russia's, particularly when considering the first scenario. Given the regional armed conflict in the Middle East, the ongoing election campaigns of Republicans and Democrats in the United States, and the fatigue of the «collective West» from the Russian-Ukrainian war, favourable conditions exist for the realization of their geopolitical intentions. However, it should be understood that China will not allow the US allies in the Indo-Pacific region – Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines – to remain undisturbed. In addition, there is a certain correlation with the third scenario, which concerns North Korea as a proxy for China. This is evident in the narratives found in the Chinese leader's New Year's greetings, discussing a new stage of «unbreakable» friendships with North Korea [17].

The sequential or parallel implementation of the third and fourth scenarios – China's absorption of Taiwan and North Korea's seizure of South Korea – will significantly bolster the economies of the aggressor countries. This will be achieved through the acquisition and utilization of modern technologies, including the production of weapons and military equipment. Such developments will contribute to the overall strengthening of the geopolitical anti-Western coalition.

Upon analysing the aforementioned potential scenarios for the outbreak of the Third World War, the technologies used and those anticipated in the future by the participants of the geopolitical «axis of evil» become apparent [9]. The events in the second half of 2023 illustrate the attempts of totalitarian regimes, particularly Russia and Iran, to reshape the existing world order established after World War II. To achieve this, they employ «controlled chaos», attempting to undermine the determination of liberal democratic countries and create preconditions for «new» rules of global coexistence. This framework aims to portray their aggression against other countries as something other than crimes against humanity. That is, unresolved conflicts involving external actors and destructive processes within the victim countries are gradually

replacing the existing reality with a new one. The populations and political elites of the targeted countries are consistently kept in a state of tension, their manoeuvrability forcefully restricted by political and economic means. This sets the foundation for decisions favourable to the orchestrators of «controlled chaos.» The ideology of «controlled chaos,» as implemented by Russia, Iran, and other members of the «axis of evil» club, aims to create a perceived necessity for a «strong hand» to employ force and establish a semblance of «order.» This constitutes the key narrative of authoritarian regimes – the establishment of order through the use of force. The war crimes committed by Russians in Ukraine, the actions of Russia (including the carpet bombing of civilian infrastructure), and Iran in Syria and the Middle East (especially Russia's and Iran's support for HAMAS) provide insight into the envisioned «new» world order by participants of the «axis of evil.» However, considering the perceived weakness of individual authoritarian regimes, they are collaborating and providing mutual support.

The myth of the «second army of the world» has been dispelled by the Russian-Ukrainian war, revealing limitations within the Russian military-industrial complex due to international sanctions. It is unable to fully meet the armed forces' needs for a diverse range of modern weapons and military equipment. In response, Russia is actively collaborating with North Korea to supply various ammunitions for rocket and artillery weapons inherited from the former USSR. Additionally, it engages in exchanges with North Korea for tactical missiles like the KN-23 (KN-24), analogous to the Russian Iskander complex, in return for space technologies [18, 19]. Collaborations with Iran involve the provision of kamikaze drones like the Shahed type, including those with a jet engine, and «Fateh-110» and «Zolfaghar» tactical missiles in exchange for Russian-made military aircraft. Furthermore, partnerships with China include the supply of dual-use equipment for fortification construction in occupied territories and critical high-tech components to circumvent international sanctions. These components are essential for producing the final models of weapons and military equipment, and in exchange, Russia provides energy and minerals.

It is crucial to consider China, a significant global power and a formidable rival to the United States, as a key player in shaping the future world order [20]. Since the onset of the Russian-Ukrainian war, China has made assertive statements and demonstrated its willingness to conduct a military operation to capture Taiwan. While its position on the violation of international law and the use of military force in the Russian-Ukrainian war and the Middle East remains unclear, it is increasingly assertive regarding Taiwan and the Philippines.

The world has come to realize that Russia, Iran, North Korea, and China are acting collectively, employing covert and overt means to implement their plans for regional and global domination. Hence, there is an urgent need for an adequate response to their actions, which seek to dismantle the influence of the «collective West» by globalizing the chaos created by Russia and Iran, with the tacit consent of China as their strategic partner.

China and Russia are fortifying their influence and international positions by forming an anti-Western coalition in the geopolitical confrontation with the United States. The BRICS summit serves as a platform for showcasing this position, resulting in the decision (initiated by the Chinese side) to invite Argentina, Ethiopia, Egypt, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia to join the organization as of January 01, 2024. However, Argentina later declined the invitation to join the BRICS.

China's stance on the onset of World War III can be understood starting from the seizure of Taiwan to the potential division of the world between the United States and China through a mutually beneficial agreement. As China gears up for potential conflicts, it is currently assessing the external challenges it might encounter if the conflict with the US intensifies due to an attack on Taiwan. In this context, Russia and Iran, serving as China's strategic partners, are forming a united front, involving the «collective West» in a series of wars to deplete its resources. This suggests that both the invasion of Ukraine and the war in the Middle East are creating favourable conditions and prerequisites for the forceful integration of Taiwan into China in the near future.

At the November 2023 30th summit of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation no consensus was reached on the most pressing issues of US-China relations, so in our opinion, the Russian-Ukrainian war will serve the interests of the US and stimulate the EU to a closer alliance with the US, which is not in the interests of China. China aims to ensure global trade freedom, gradually expanding its economic influence over more countries through its industrial prowess. Additionally, strengthening ties with the EU aligns with China's strategic interest to gradually distance the EU from its primary competitor, the United States.

Taking cues from Russia, China is now intensively analysing the issues of import substitution, resource independence, energy, technological and food security, possible ways to circumvent sanctions or even create a closed financial and economic system so that the Chinese economy can function autonomously after the imposition of sanctions for the attack on Taiwan. This includes a concerted effort to accumulate gold reserves, broaden the utility of the yuan, and reduce reliance

on the US dollar, given its potential restrictions under international sanctions.

China is considering two prospective strategies in response to sanctions [20] – firstly, establishing a quasi-independent economy in collaboration with allied nations within the global economic framework to minimize potential losses from international sanctions. The second approach involves extensive integration of its economy with the EU and US economies. This aims to create conditions where these entities find it more advantageous to forego sanctions, considering the potentially catastrophic economic consequences for China, the US, and the EU. Opting for the integration scenario doesn't necessarily indicate China abandoning plans related to Taiwan; it could resemble a temporary improvement in relations, similar to the situation HAMAS created for Israel before launching an attack.

It's worth noting that the United States is actively working to restrict the supply of cutting-edge technologies to China, a move intended to hinder its short and medium-term economic growth. For instance, in response to the ban on exporting high-tech equipment for microchip production, the Dutch company ASML cancelled the delivery of state-of-the-art deep ultraviolet lithography machines to China at the request of the United States.

Considering that Russia is no longer perceived as a global centre of power, the development of relations between the U.S. and China as global actors will play a crucial role in shaping the new world order and addressing major contradictions arising from their national interests and various regional and global challenges. It's important to recognize that the U.S. and China occupy different political poles, each formulating its own strategy. Consequently, the U.S.'s hopes for China to exert influence on Russia and North Korea, aiding efforts to support Ukraine and advocate for peace, as well as on Iran concerning actions in the Middle East that could incite a regional war, appear rather pessimistic [21].

When considering potential scenarios for the outbreak of World War III, a crucial factor to take into account is the concerted efforts of China and Russia to leverage global instability in forming a military and political alliance against the United States and its allies [22]. The mutual economic and diplomatic support exhibited by Russia and China on the eve and during the full-scale invasion of Ukraine is indicative of their aim to intensify rivalry with the United States, posing a significant threat since the end of the Cold War. Notably, during the Israeli terrorist attack and the operation in the Gaza Strip against HAMAS, Russia and China aligned with the position of Iran, the organizer and sponsor of the attack.

Amidst the Russian-Ukrainian war, China is closely monitoring the reaction and actions of the international community to anticipate its response to the potential forcible annexation of Taiwan.

An eloquent factor in the attempts to form a military and political alliance between Russia and China is their joint naval exercises in the Sea of Japan, the regular sale of military aircraft, modern air defence systems to China, and the potential transfer of submarine production technologies. The latter would offer some parity in potential military conflicts with the United States and its allies in the Indo-Pacific region. In these circumstances, the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war, where Russia is gradually losing its military and economic potential, contributes to the achievement of the US geopolitical goals. Hence, continued US support for Ukraine, even with the transfer of outdated military equipment and weapons, serves a dual purpose. On one hand, it bolsters Ukraine's capacity to inflict significant losses on Russia, while on the other hand, the funds allocated for these measures stay within the US and contribute to upgrading the military capabilities of its own forces. This becomes crucial if the United States is confronted with the looming threat of an escalation in armed conflicts with Russia and China in the near future [23, 24].

Conclusions

Examining the aforementioned potential scenarios for the outbreak of World War III, the existing interconnections among members of the anti-Western «axis of evil,» and their impact on the global security system, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. The root causes of the World War III depend on its ultimate beneficiaries, and the considered possible scenarios for its beginning are strategies for achieving their geopolitical goals.

2. All the considered scenarios are, in a certain sense, interconnected and have appropriate cause-and-effect relationships determining the conditions for their implementation.

3. The authoritarian regimes of Russia, Iran, North Korea, and China have sought to establish a geopolitical axis to confront the so-called «collective West» and curb its influence. This poses a genuine and escalating threat aimed at dismantling the liberal democratic world order and the American-centric model of global security.

4. Preventing the outbreak of World War III by the Alliance, with the US leading the way in confronting the geopolitical axis of «China – Russia – Iran – North Korea», can be more effective by altering approaches to ensuring collective security. Specifically, this involves transitioning from the concept of «deterrence by retaliation» (2010) to the concept of «deterrence by

prevention» (2022). This concept, adopted at the NATO Summit in Madrid in 2022, identifies seven threats, including Russia (together with Belarus) in particular and authoritarian regimes in general, China and instability in the Middle East.

The implementation of the concept of «deterrence by prevention» involves: increasing the capabilities of NATO forces through a significant technological advantage of weapons and military equipment; increased defence spending; increasing the number of troops of the Alliance member states; integration of military plans of the United States and its allies; creation of detailed mobility and logistics plans with stricter requirements for the combat readiness of individual forces and means of the Allies to perform relevant tasks; transformation of areas for the development of specific types of weapons and military equipment.

5. The operation of the US-centric model of global security faces challenges in the current environment. NATO, as a crucial instrument of this model, needs to reconsider its approaches to implementing military security guarantees for a more effective role in preventing the outbreak of World War III. The fundamental principle of consensus embedded in NATO proves ineffective in wartime.

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