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World War III: It's here and energy is largely Behind it

by Kurt Cobb

2014-10-12



I've been advancing a thesis for several months with friends that World War III is now underway. It's just that it's not the war we thought it would be, that is, a confrontation between major powers with the possibility of a nuclear exchange. Instead, we are getting a set of low-intensity, on-again, off-again conflicts involving non-state actors (ISIS, Ukrainian rebels, Libyan

insurgents) with confusing and in some cases nonexistent battle lines and rapidly shifting alliances such as the shift from fighting the Syrian regime to helping it indirectly by fighting ISIS, the regime's new foe.

There is at least one prominent person who seems to agree with me, the Pope. During a visit to a World War I memorial in Italy last month Pope Francis said: "Even today, after the second failure of another world war, perhaps one can speak of a third war, one fought piecemeal, with crimes, massacres, destruction."

In citing many well-known causes for war, he failed to specify the one that seems obvious in this case: the fight over energy resources. It can be no accident that the raging fights in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and the Ukraine all coincide with areas rich in energy resources or for which imported energy resources are at risk. There are other conflicts. But these are the ones that are transfixing the eyes of the world, and these are the ones in which major powers are taking sides and mounting major responses.

In Syria, Iraq and Libya, of course, it is oil and also natural gas that underlies the conflict. The ISIS forces in Syria and Iraq have seized oil refineries to power their advance. They and every fighting force in the world understands that oil is "liquid hegemony."

In the Ukraine natural gas supplies lurk in the background as rebels (supposedly with Russian help) fight to separate parts of eastern Ukraine from the country. The Russians who hold one of the largest reserves of natural gas in the world have threatened to cut off Ukraine, a large importer, this winter and to curtail supplies to Europe which depends on Russia for about 30 percent of its gas. The threat against Europe is in response to trade sanctions levied on Russia for its alleged role in helping Ukrainian insurgents.

Since summer, a friend and I have been periodically reviewing the World War III game board to assess whether the war is heating up or cooling down. The temperature changes as we have gauged them would look like a sine wave on a graph revealing no definitive trajectory. And, that is just the kind of war that I believe World War III will be--years of indecisive battles, diplomatic ploys, half-hearted engagement by major powers, and new, unexpected conflicts arising in unexpected places.

There are, of course, many other reasons for the conflicts I cite. But I wonder if the major powers would be much engaged in these conflicts if energy supplies were not at stake. So, the resource wars that are developing, especially those relating to energy, are not about direct conquest so much as concern about access to energy resources, or to put it more clearly, concern about possible interruptions to the flow of energy resources.

The low-intensity confrontation in the South China Sea between China and its neighbors, Vietnam and the Philippines, is the most prominent dispute over actual ownership of energy resources rather than the mere flow of those resources. But in the article cited, the Indians, while laying no claim to resources in that area, have said publicly that they are worried that shipping through the South China Sea could be affected if the conflict heats up. Again, we are back to concern about the flow of resources by countries not directly a party--yet.

Traditional diplomacy among great powers does not seem to have been effective at resolving these conflicts. And, traditional military operations seem less than effective as well. Kurds in Syria report that U.S. airstrikes against ISIS are not working. This conflict and others like it which are characterized by poorly defined boundaries, shifting participants and unclear goals are confounding major powers and wreaking havoc on countries where these conflicts rage.

One of the most obvious strategies for responding to these conflicts--deep, rapid and permanent reductions in fossil fuel energy consumption through efficiency measures, conservation, and expansion of renewable energy--does not seem to be a prominent part of the policy mix. Such a reduction would not necessarily cause these conflicts to disappear; but they might become far less dangerous since the major powers would be less interested in them and thus less likely to make a miscalculation that would lead to a larger global conflict.

That is the danger that lies in my version of World War III--that it could morph into the kind of global conflict that risks nuclear confrontation between major powers--not because those powers would seek such an obviously insane outcome, but because they might miscalculate and by mistake push the conflict in this terrible direction.

It is not clear how this danger can be avoided given the current trajectory of world energy use. And, it is not clear how to get the world's leaders to focus on the obvious need to reduce not only fossil fuel energy use, but use of all the world's nonrenewable resources in order to forestall conflict.* That humans can have good lives without perpetual growth in the consumption of resources is simply not a possibility in the minds of most world leaders. And that means we should prepare for a very long World War III.