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The danger of nuclear war between the US and China

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Last week's G7 summit in Japan was dominated by two interconnected issues: the deepening crisis of global capitalism and the drive to war, in particular the growing danger of a clash between China and the United States in the South China Sea. The inability of the major powers to offer the slightest resolution of the economic breakdown is fuelling national antagonisms and the slide toward conflict.

The US and Japan pressed hard at the G7 gathering for a strong communiqué critical of China that would justify the ramping up of provocative American military incursions within the 12-nautical-mile territorial limit around Chinese-claimed islets. Earlier this month, the US navy conducted a third so-called "freedom of navigation" operation near Fiery Cross Reef in the South China Sea, producing an angry reaction from Beijing and declarations that it would beef up its defences in the area.

In the campaigns currently underway for the US presidency and the Australian federal election, a conspiracy of silence reigns over the preparations for war, aimed at deadening the consciousness of the population to the rising danger of nuclear conflict. Two nuclear-armed powers are facing off not only in the South China Sea, but other dangerous flashpoints such as North Korea and Taiwan, each of which has been greatly exacerbated by Washington's "pivot to Asia" and aggressive military build-up throughout the region.

An arms race is underway that finds its most acute expression in the arena of nuclear weaponry, delivery systems and associated technologies. Determined to maintain its supremacy in Asia and globally, the US is planning to spend \$1 trillion over the next three decades to develop a broader range of sophisticated nuclear weapons and means for delivering them to their targets. The unstated aim of the Pentagon is to secure nuclear primacy—that is, the means for obliterating China’s nuclear arsenal and thus its ability to mount a counter attack. The Chinese response, which is just as reactionary, is to ensure it retains the ability to strike back in a manner that would kill tens of millions in the United States.

The reality of these dangers was underscored last week by the release of a report by the US-based Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS). It chillingly warned:

“Twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year, the governments of the United States and the People’s Republic of China are a few poor decisions away from starting a war that could escalate rapidly and end in a nuclear exchange. Mismatched perceptions increase both the possibility of war and the likelihood it will result in the use of nuclear weapons. Miscommunication or misunderstanding could spark a conflict that both governments may find difficult to stop.”

While appealing for the two sides to acknowledge the risks and heighten diplomatic efforts to prevent conflict, the UCS analysis offered not the slightest hope that such steps would be taken. The report bleakly declared:

“Lack of mutual trust and a growing sense that their differences may be irreconcilable incline both governments to continue looking for military solutions—for new means of coercion that help them feel more secure. Establishing the trust needed to have confidence in diplomatic resolutions to the disagreements, animosities, and suspicions that have troubled leaders of the United States and the PRC [China] for almost 70 years is extremely difficult when both governments take every effort to up the technological ante as an act of bad faith.”

The intensifying military competition is an unequal one, which only heightens tensions and the danger of war. In the field of nuclear armaments, China is outgunned and outnumbered. While desperately seeking to catch up, the Chinese military is generations behind in the capability of its weaponry and fields an estimated 260 warheads, compared to about 7,000 for the US. Its prime objective is to ensure a credible nuclear deterrent would survive a US first strike. Unlike Beijing, Washington has never ruled out the first use of nuclear weapons.

The *Guardian* reported last week that China is poised to send submarines armed with nuclear weapons on patrol in the Pacific for the first time. Such a move signals a break with the current policy, under which warheads and missiles were stored separately under the strict control of the top leadership. Armed missiles will now be loaded onto nuclear submarines to enable their immediate launch against continental America in the event of war.

The Chinese leadership has been driven to such measures by the US military build-up in North East Asia, especially the deployment of anti-ballistic missile systems aimed at neutralising China’s ability to strike back. China’s nuclear submarines, however, are comparatively noisy, making them vulnerable to detection and destruction by US attack subs. A new scenario is

unfolding in which a jittery Chinese commander could misunderstand an order and, fearing imminent attack, unleash the submarine's missiles against pre-determined targets.

Nuclear war will not be averted through the diplomacy of major powers, worthless posturing about international nuclear disarmament or the vain hope that nuclear war is so terrible as to be unthinkable. Nuclear strategists have been "thinking the unthinkable" for more than half a century. The last world war ended with the atom bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing some 200,000 people. President Barack Obama's refusal last week in Hiroshima to offer an apology for those monstrous crimes of US imperialism is a sure sign that new ones are being prepared.

The relentless drive toward a new world war between nuclear-armed combatants stems from the crisis of capitalism and its irresolvable contradictions. Only the working class can end the danger of war by putting an end to the profit system and its outmoded nation state system. That is the significance of the struggle being waged by the International Committee of the Fourth International and all its sections to build a unified anti-war movement of the international working class based on the perspective of socialist internationalism.