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The Threat of World War III: The Great Unmentionable in the 2016 Campaign

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The most important issue in the US presidential election is the one neither of the two main capitalist candidates, Democrat Hillary Clinton and Republican Donald Trump, is talking about: the increasing likelihood that the next US president will order direct military action against Russia, China or North Korea, all countries that possess nuclear weapons.

The mounting danger of such a war was underscored by the US bombing of a Syrian government military post on Saturday, killing dozens of Syrian army soldiers. The US claim that this was done accidentally—against a major, well-known Syrian military installation, the Deir ez-Zor Air Base—has no credibility. A similar US "mistake" could easily lead to the death of Russian soldiers and escalate into a full-scale military confrontation between the two powers that control 93 percent of the world's nuclear weapons.

The corporate-controlled American media is complicit in maintaining a blackout on the mounting danger of war. While US forces conduct almost daily dress rehearsals on the Russian border with Eastern Europe, in the coastal waters adjacent to China, and on the Korean peninsula, the media diverts public attention to such comparatively trivial questions as Clinton's bout with pneumonia, Trump's brazen lying about his role in the anti-Obama "birther" campaign, and endless speculation on which candidate is gaining an edge in their mutual mudslinging.

One of the few exceptions to the silence on the question of war was an op-ed column by former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates—who held the position under both George W. Bush and Barack Obama—published in the weekend edition of the *Wall Street Journal*, under the headline, "Sizing Up the Next Commander-in-Chief."


OPINION | COMMENTARY
Sizing Up the Next Commander-in-Chief
Neither candidate has seriously addressed how he or she thinks about the military or the use of force.

Gates criticizes Clinton for (purely verbal) concessions she has made to popular anti-war sentiment, mainly her statement during a September 7 forum in New York City ruling out putting US ground forces into Syria and Iraq, which he calls "a politically driven categorical declaration of a sort no president (or candidate) should make…" He warns Clinton to "speak beyond generalities about how she would deal with China, Russia, North Korea, Iran, the Middle East" in order to earn his support.

He is far harsher, however, towards Trump, flatly declaring him “beyond repair. He is stubbornly uninformed about the world and how to lead our country and government and temperamentally unsuited to lead our men and women in uniform. He is unqualified and unfit to be commander-in-chief.”

In this assessment, Gates reflects the consensus within the military-intelligence apparatus, which views Trump as unreliable on Russia, given his flattering references to President Vladimir Putin, and regards Trump’s militaristic bluster against ISIS as more bark than bite. Clinton, on the other hand, has been tested over a protracted period of time and gave her backing to a whole series of military actions, including US wars in Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq and Libya, as well as the ongoing intervention in Syria.

But the most important element of the Gates column is his basic premise that the United States is heading inexorably towards war. He writes: “You wouldn’t know it from the presidential campaigns, but the first serious crisis to face our new president most likely will be international. The list of possibilities is long—longer than it was eight years ago.” He then ticks off a list of potential military crises: with China in the East and South China Sea, with Russia in Ukraine, the Baltic states or Syria, with North Korea and Iran, and with “a Middle East in flames,” including Syria, Iraq and Libya.

“Each of these challenges may require the use of the American military, the most powerful the world has ever seen,” the former Pentagon chief writes. In other words, Gates envisions the next president ordering US military action against either Russia or China, the nuclear powers with the world’s second- and fourth-largest arsenals. Beyond that, there is potential for US military action against North Korea, which possesses nuclear weapons, and against Iran, a country of 70 million people, more than the size of Iraq and Syria combined.

Here Gates gives a glimpse of the discussions that are taking place throughout the US military and foreign policy establishment. It is largely taken for granted in these circles that US forces will soon be engaged in large-scale military operations, not guerrilla warfare or counterterrorism, involving some combination of land, sea, air, cyberwarfare and even nuclear forces.

These discussions are taking an increasingly reckless form, expressed in another commentary published this weekend, on the web site of *Newsweek*magazine, under the attention-grabbing headline, “Should we nuke Kim Jung Un before he nukes us?”


OPINION

SHOULD WE NUKE KIM JUNG UN BEFORE HE NUKES US?

BY MICHAEL O'HANLON ON 9/16/16 AT 11:20 PM

The author, Michael O’Hanlon, is a longtime foreign policy operative at the Brookings Institution, a major think tank for the Democratic Party. O’Hanlon supported the Iraq war and now backs Hillary Clinton. He notes that when the Obama White House briefly considered announcing a no-first-use policy on nuclear weapons, it was opposed by those at Brookings “who argue that Northeast Asia might be a special case, given North Korean nuclear weapons.”

While O'Hanlon himself professes to oppose a US first-strike with nuclear weapons against North Korea—purely on the grounds of expediency, because of the superiority of US and South Korean forces in conventional armaments—the very fact that such a debate is taking place within the US national security establishment is significant.

Not one in a thousand Americans is aware that those who direct US foreign policy, in both the Democratic and Republican parties, are actively discussing nuclear war, not hypothetically, but as a practical question, arising out of escalating confrontations with Russia and China. This is the inexorable result of the development of American imperialism over the past quarter century, when it has been engaged in nearly continuous warfare.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has continually explained, the war danger arises out of the very nature of capitalism as a world system. US imperialism is the most dangerous force on the planet, as it seeks to offset its declining position in the world economy by using its military superiority. The only force which can avert a catastrophe for humanity is the international working class, fighting on the basis of a socialist program.

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It is to advance the struggle for such a program that the Socialist Equality Party is running our candidates in the 2016 US elections, Jerry White for President and Niles Niemuth for Vice President. The SEP has called an emergency conference November 5 in Detroit, under the heading "Socialism vs. Capitalism and War." We urge all our readers to support and donate to the SEP campaign, attend election meetings being held throughout the country, and make plans to attend the conference in Detroit.
