

# How many people would die in a war between the US and Russia?

21 February 2017

The American ruling class is locked in a ferocious internal conflict centered on issues of foreign policy and war. The Democratic Party, along with a section of Republicans and most of the media, is conducting a hysterical campaign against Donald Trump for his supposed conciliatory attitude toward Russia and its president, Vladimir Putin. These forces are fronting for the intelligence establishment, which is determined to prevent any retreat from the policy of aggressive confrontation with Moscow carried out by the Obama administration.

Trump, for his part, speaks for elements in the ruling elite and the state who view Iran and China to be the more immediate targets for US provocation and preparations for war, and would like to tamp down the conflict with Russia for now so as to peel it away from Tehran and Beijing.

There is not an ounce of democratic content on either side of this struggle between reactionary and war-mongering factions of US imperialism. The Democrats, however, are seeking to use unsubstantiated allegations of Russian interference in the 2016 election to hijack popular opposition to the Trump administration and corral it behind the drive to war with Russia.

For months, the front pages of leading newspapers have featured “news” stories, based on the alleged statements of unnamed officials, about supposed meddling by Russia in the political affairs of the US and other countries. Nationally syndicated columnists have denounced Putin as a dictator, tyrant and murderer bent on dominating Europe and subverting American democracy.

Members of congress have declared Russia’s alleged intervention in the US election an “act of war” (in the words of John McCain) and vowed to “kick Russia’s ass” (Lindsey Graham).

This campaign takes place in the context of a major buildup of US and NATO military forces—troops, tanks, heavy weapons—on Russia’s western border, and an imminent military escalation in Syria, where US-backed “rebel” militias are fighting Syrian government forces supported by Iranian troops and Russian war planes and military advisors.

Whether in the Baltics or the Middle East, conditions are present for a clash between US and Russian forces, even if unintentional, to spark a full-scale war between the world’s two biggest nuclear-armed powers.

Yet neither the media nor the politicians agitating for a more aggressive posture toward Moscow discuss where their policy is leading, much less the likely consequences of a war between the US and Russia.

How many people would die in such a war? What are the odds that it would involve the use of nuclear weapons? On these life-and-death questions, the commentators and politicians, who drone on endlessly about Trump’s supposed softness toward Putin, are silent.

Behind the scenes, however, the intelligence agencies and Pentagon, along with their allied geo-strategic think tanks, are engaged in intense discussions and detailed planning premised on the possibility, indeed inevitability, of a major war with Russia. Plans are being laid and preparations made to wage and “win” such a war, including through the use of nuclear weapons.

One does not have to look far to find the people who are heading up the war planning. Yesterday, President Trump appointed Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster, an army strategist, as his new national security advisor.

The selection of McMaster is broadly seen as a concession to Trump’s anti-Russia critics in the political and intelligence establishment. He is the leading figure in an Army project called the Russia New Generation Warfare study, whose participants have made repeated trips to the battlefields of eastern Ukraine to study Russia’s military capabilities and devise strategies and weapons systems to defeat them. McMaster has called on the US to prepare for high-intensity conventional war with Russia, involving not only long-range missile systems and stealth aircraft, but also “close” combat.

Beyond conventional warfare, US think tank strategists are discussing what it would take to “win” a nuclear war. The Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA) recently put out a 140-page report, “Preserving the Balance: A US Eurasia Defense Strategy,” which discusses this issue

in detail. The CSBA is headed by Andrew Krepinevich, the report's author, and includes on its Board of Directors figures such as former Under Secretary of the Army Nelson Ford, former CIA Director James Woolsey and retired general Jack Keane.

"There is a need to rethink the problem of limited nuclear war in which the United States is a direct participant, or between other parties where the United States has a major security interest," Krepinevich writes. "As opposed to the global apocalypse envisioned in the wake of a superpower nuclear exchange during the Cold War, there will very likely be a functioning world after a war between minor nuclear powers, or even between the United States and a nuclear-armed Iran or North Korea. US forces must, therefore, be prepared to respond to a range of strategic warfare contingencies along the Eurasian periphery."

In an earlier report entitled "Rethinking Armageddon," Krepinevich argued that the use of a "small number" of battlefield nuclear weapons should be included among the appropriate responses by a US president to conventional threats from Russia.

During the Cold War, the "limited" use of nuclear weapons was seen as an invitation for a full-scale nuclear exchange and the destruction of the planet. Now such discussions are considered "respectable" and prudent.

These plans are being realized in the US military arsenal. The US is currently in the midst of a \$1 trillion nuclear weapons modernization program commissioned under Obama. The program centers on the procurement of lower-yield, maneuverable nuclear weapons that are more likely to be used in combat. However, the Defense Science Board, a committee appointed to advise the Pentagon, recently called on the Trump administration to do more to develop weapons suitable for a "tailored nuclear option for limited use."

What would be the human toll from such an exchange? Numerous Pentagon war games conducted during the Cold War concluded that the "limited" use of nuclear weapons would not only cause millions of civilian casualties, but quickly escalate into a full-scale nuclear exchange that would destroy major cities.

A 1955 war game titled *Carte Blanche*, which was responding to a Russian invasion of German territory with the use of a "small" number of battlefield nuclear weapons, resulted in the immediate deaths of 1.7 million Germans, the wounding of 3.5 million more, and millions more dead as a result of fallout radiation.

In one 1983 war game code-named *Proud Prophet*, NATO initiated a limited nuclear first strike on Soviet military targets. But rather than backing down, the USSR initiated a full-scale nuclear retaliation, prompting the US to reply in

kind. When the proverbial dust had settled, half a billion people were dead and European civilization destroyed.

More contemporary studies have shown similarly disastrous outcomes. A 2007 report by the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War suggested that a "limited" nuclear exchange could lead to the deaths of over a billion people, mostly as a result of widespread climate disruption. The US National Academy of Sciences concluded that a "large-scale nuclear war" would lead directly to the deaths of up to four billion people.

The eruption of such a war at the hands of the nuclear arsonists who preside over crisis-ridden American capitalism is a real and present danger. In fact, as the McCarthyite-style anti-Russia agitation indicates, absent the independent and revolutionary intervention of the working class in the US and around the world, it is an inevitability.

Such is the criminality and recklessness of the American ruling elite and its political representatives on both sides of the aisle. Escalating war is a conspiracy of the elites, into which the masses of people are to be dragged and sacrificed.

Anyone who doubts that the American ruling class is capable of such acts should look to the historical record. The United States dropped nuclear bombs, which today would be considered "low-yield" and even "tactical," on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, just to warn off the Soviet Union. Truman and company killed over 100,000 people on the day the bombs were dropped, and another 100,000 died from radioactive poisoning over the ensuing four months.

Today, when the United States faces economic and geopolitical challenges far greater than those of an earlier period, it will operate all the more ruthlessly and recklessly.

The growing movement in opposition to the Trump administration must be inured against any and all efforts of the Democratic Party to infect it with the virus of imperialist war-mongering. The ongoing protests against Trump's billionaire cabinet and his attacks on immigrants and democratic rights are only the heralds of a movement of the working class. It is necessary to politically arm this emerging movement with the program of socialist internationalism and the understanding that the fight against war and dictatorship is the fight against capitalism.

Andre Damon

To contact the WSWWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>