“In a nuclear war between the US and Russia, everybody in the world would die”

Nuclear experts speak on the dangers of war between the US and Russia

By Bryan Dyne and Barry Grey
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Since the April 6 cruise missile strike by the Trump administration against a Syrian airbase, tensions between the United States and the European powers and Russia are at their highest level since the cold war. The rhetoric from the US and its allies has centered on defending the unprovoked attack while Russia has responded by increasing its military support for the regime of Bashar al-Assad.

The most recent escalation of these tensions is the dropping of a GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast Bomb (MOAB) by the US military in Afghanistan. A MOAB is a 21,600 pound bomb, the most powerful non-nuclear weapon in the US military’s arsenal. It has never before been used in combat.

While the official target was an ISIS cave and tunnel complex in Nangarhar Province, the real aim was to demonstrate to Iran, Russia, Syria, North Korea, China and any other nation that gets in the way of American imperialism’s global interests that there are no limits to the violence the US military is prepared to unleash on those it considers its enemies.

What is striking about the media coverage of the increasingly acute geopolitical crisis is the lack of discussion--whether it be the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, Fox News, MSNBC or CNN--of the consequences of a nuclear exchange. The next step up from a MOAB is a low-yield tactical thermonuclear warhead, a weapon that is at least an order of magnitude more destructive. Yet no one in the corporate media has asked: What would happen if such weapons were used in Syria, Iran or North Korea, let alone Russia or China?

This raises two further questions: How close is the current situation to one in which there is a clash and military escalation between the US and Russia that leads to nuclear war? How many people would die in such a conflict?

To shed light on these question, the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke separately with two experts on the dangers of nuclear war, Steven Starr and Greg Mello.

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Steven Starr is a senior scientist at Physicians for Social Responsibility and an associate with the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation. His articles on the environmental dangers of nuclear war have appeared in the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists and the publication of the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology Center for Arms Control, Energy and Environmental Studies.

World Socialist Web Site: In your opinion, how real is the danger of a military conflict between the US and Russia over Syria or with China over North Korea?

Steven Starr: I think there is a very significant danger of that happening. The Russians are allied with [Syran President Bashar al-]Assad and have been beating ISIS. They’ve won back Aleppo and it’s made the US media and political establishment hysterical, because that’s not how they wanted the war to end. Trump campaigned for a detente with Russia, for a non-interventionist policy. When [Secretary of State Rex] Tillerson was in Turkey, he said that Assad could stay. But five days after that, the US launched cruise missiles at Syria.

As a result of the attack of 59 cruise missiles by the US on a Syrian airbase, we’ve basically destroyed relations with Russia. We’ve crossed the Rubicon. Russia has suspended the 2015 aviation safety memorandum that had provided 24/7 communication channels aimed at preventing dangerous encounters between US and Russian aircraft. This will give the Russians in Syria the right to decide whether to shoot or not to shoot at US planes. The Russians already own the Syrian airspace and they have stated that they are going to increase Syrian air defense capacity. What happens when US planes start getting shot down by the Russians?

WSWS: One thing worth contrasting is the completely dishonest and false reporting by the corporate media and the scale of the consequences of the policies being pursued. As bad as it is to pump out propaganda on behalf of the American political establishment, when you are pursuing a policy that will result in the destruction of the planet, it assumes a new dimension.

SS: From my perspective, the international “news” published by the papers of record has mostly become propaganda, especially after the events in Ukraine and Crimea in 2014. While you always expect bias in each country’s news reporting, Western media no longer seems constrained by the need to provide hard evidence to support their arguments and allegations. There has been no investigation about the chemical attack in Syria--Trump launched the missile strike before any investigation could be carried out.

The CIA is deeply involved in this process. There are only six megacorporations that control 90 percent of US and Western media, and they do not publish stories that are contrary to Washington’s official party line. Censorship by omission with no dissent permitted is the defining characteristic of what we hear today. The use of “official sources” without supporting factual evidence creates a false narrative that is used to support US military actions.

As a result, there has been a deafening silence in the media about what the consequences of what a war with Russia might mean. When have you heard mainstream media have any discussion about the consequences of a nuclear war with Russia?

WSWS: What would happen if there was another US attack on Syria, perhaps following another manufactured chemical weapons attack?

SS: The situation could escalate very quickly, especially since relations between the US and Moscow have deteriorated to their worst state in history. One report I've read is that there are plans to deploy 150,000 US troops to Syria. Given that there are Russian and Iranian troops in Syria (at the request of the Syrian government), it would be an incredibly stupid decision for the US to send large military forces to Syria. It would be very hard to avoid WWIII.

If the US and Russia get into a direct military conflict, eventually one side or the other will start to lose. They either then admit defeat or they escalate. And when that happens, the possibility of using nuclear weapons becomes higher. Once nukes start going off, escalation to full-scale nuclear war could happen very quickly.

WSWS: How catastrophic would that be?

SS: The US and Russia each have about 1,000 strategic nuclear weapons of at least 100 kilotons, all ready to launch within two to 15 minutes. Since it takes about nine minutes for a missile from a US submarine to hit Moscow, this means that the Russian government could retaliate. And these are only the missiles that are on a hair trigger alert.

The US and Russia have 3,500 deployed and operational strategic nuclear weapons (each with a minimum explosive power of 100,000 tons of TNT) that they can detonate within an hour. They have another 4,600 nuclear weapons in reserve, ready for use. There are about 300 cities in the US and about 200 cities in Russia with populations greater than 100,000 people. Given how many nuclear weapons there are, it's a large chance that most large cities would be hit.

Probably 30 percent of US and Russian populations would be killed in the first hour. A few weeks after the attack, radioactive fallout would kill another 50 percent or more.

Nuclear winter, one of the long-term environmental consequences of nuclear war, would probably cause most people on the planet to die of starvation within a couple years of a large US-Russian nuclear war. The global stratospheric smoke layer produced by nuclear firestorms would block most sunlight from reaching the surface of earth, producing Ice Age weather conditions that would last for at least 10 years.

Another rarely discussed consequence of nuclear war is high altitude electromagnetic pulse, or EMP. A large nuclear weapon detonated at high altitude (100-200 miles high) will produce an enormous pulse of electrical energy, which will destroy electronic circuits in an area of tens of thousands of square miles below the blast. A single detonation over the US East Coast would destroy the grid and cause every nuclear power plant affected by EMP to melt down. Imagine 60 Fukushimas happening at the same time in the US.

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Greg Mello is the secretary and executive director of the Los Alamos Study Group, an organization that has researched the dangers of nuclear war and advocated for disarmament since 1989. His research and analysis have been published in the New York Times, Washington Post, *the* Bulletin of Atomic Scientists *and* Issues in Science and Technology.

WSWS: What role have the Democrats played in the increased tensions between the US and Russia over Syria?

Gregg Mello: Even as recently as 2013, when there was a fake chemical weapon attack in Syria, I don't think the Democrats were as "on board" with war as they are today. But now, as a result of the candidacy of Hillary Clinton, the Russia-baiting and the neo-McCarthyite hyperbole has really ratcheted up, marginalizing even those within the party who express any amount of skepticism about the official story, such as Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard. And this is someone who went to Syria to find out what was really going on. She found that the majority of people in Syria want the US to stop funding the rebels and are happy with the Assad government's efforts to oust Al Qaeda and ISIS. But she's being silenced.

WSWS: Could you speak on some of the corporate interests involved in this?

GM: Fifty-nine cruise missiles cost a lot of money. Each missile used costs, I guess, between $1 and $1.6 million, so the strike as a whole cost between $60 to $100 million. That doesn't include the cost of the deployment of the ships and the other elements that make up a strike. It's probably twice as much, if you include those elements. In terms of the missiles, if they are replaced, that's income for whatever company replaces them.

Companies also get free advertising from such a strike. I saw the clip from MSNBC's Brian Williams, who praised the missiles using the Leonard Cohen line, "I'm guided by the beauty of our weapons." That's a priceless advertising clip, especially when the same images and videos of the missiles are on primetime news and across the Internet. I'm sure their stock values, literally and figuratively, went up.

But even this is peanuts compared to the really high dollar amounts that come from continued tensions with Russia and the US government's need to dominate the world. We're talking not about millions of dollars, but billions--really, trillions. To maintain the idea that we should be in every part of the world, the US spends on all components of national defense about $1 trillion a year. So it really adds up quickly.

And the US military just got an increase to its base budget that is comparable to Russia's entire defense budget. In the US, we spend way more money on the military than all of our potential adversaries combined. That's where the real money is.

We get NATO to buy the latest versions of military equipment, compatible with ours. All of those arms sales plus our own national purchases are worth trillions. That's what this strike upholds. A military spending pattern on a colossal scale.

This goes along with the geopolitical questions you mentioned.

WSWS: Could elaborate on the geopolitical questions?

GM: Well, Trump has said that we won't go into Syria, but there's no consistent policy on this. Let's assume there is another strike, will it involve Russia? Will it kill Russians? What will Putin or any other Russian leader feel he needs to do then?

Stephen Cohen, professor emeritus of Russian studies at Princeton and New York University, noted that Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev called American and Russian relations "ruined." And Medvedev is not a hardliner against the West. For him to say that, you can only imagine what the generals and other hardliners are whispering in Putin's other ear.

If we make another strike, either with a US airplane or a "coalition" airplane, it could easily be shot down by the high end anti-aircraft weapons that Syria and Russia have deployed. This would lead to an outcry from the US political establishment to do more, to double down on our mistake. All in all, it's difficult to see how an air campaign could have a decisive effect on the war in Syria without creating an extreme risk of escalation between the US and Russia.

Geopolitically, the situation in Syria has gone so far towards Assad remaining in power and the terrorists being pushed out that a serious US attack on Syria would either fail, or else it would really damage Russian interests, humiliate Russia and kill her soldiers along with Assad's, and therefore tilt the balance toward WWIII.

The idea that the poisonings in Khan Sheikhoun occurred because of chemical weapons or precursors released by a conventional munitions attack on an Al Qaeda weapons warehouse or workshop, which is the report of the Russian government, makes the most sense given everything we know. The notion that Assad or some rogue element in his army dropped chemical weapons on his own people, just when he is winning militarily and politically, is ridiculous.

Now we see that the US does not want the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons involved in an investigation of the attack. Really?

The OPCW is the world's policeman for chemical weapons, something the US helped create. They got the Nobel Peace Prize in 2013 for verifying that all of Syria's chemical weapons had been destroyed. They destroyed them on a US ship. In this case and in every case, the OPCW would carefully study evidence gathered with chain of custody procedures at an accredited laboratory, all of which are essential when matters of war and peace are at stake. It's the same way you'd collect evidence in a high-profile murder case.

This hasn't happened for the most recent chemical weapon attack--and the US doesn't want it to happen. Instead, the US has recently issued a statement of the "facts," a piece of paper claiming to be from all 17 intelligence agencies, but without letterheads or signatures, which uses weasel words like "we have confidence." There is no indication what agencies have signed off on this or what actual evidence has been collected. Moreover, an attack like this takes a few weeks to investigate, not a few days.

This all is happening because Syria is one of the more important crossroads between the hydrocarbons of the Middle East and European customers. If you're going to get oil and natural gas from Qatar to Europe without going through Iran, you have to have pipelines that go through Syria. This is especially important if you don't want Europe to be dependent on natural gas from Russia, if you want to prevent Germany and Russia and the rest of Asia from further integration economically. The US government does not want Europe dependent on hydrocarbons supplied by Russia or Iran.

So, really, Syria is a proxy war between the US and other regional powers--Iran, allied with Russia--for control over Europe's gas and oil. In addition, Israel wants control of the Golan Heights in order to drill in that region.

It's also worth considering that China's oil production seems to have peaked. The world's net exports of oil--that is, the oil that can be bought on the international market--are starting to very slowly decline.

Since a barrel of oil will produce more value in countries such as China and India because the workers are paid so much less, China can always outbid the US and Europe for oil. Given a free market, they will. Alongside this problem, the oil-producing countries are using more oil internally as their populations and economies grow, which will inevitably produce a crisis in the availability and affordability of oil. That crisis will be upon us in the 2020s and it implies the potential for great power conflicts over these resources.

You didn't have this during the Cold War because the US and Russia each had enough resources, as did our allies. But now, the cheap oil is running out and there are no cheap replacements. The potential for conflict, including between nuclear-armed powers, is rising.

WSWS: How many people would die during the first day of such a war?

GM: To a first approximation, in a nuclear war between the US and Russia, everybody in the world would die. Some people in the southern hemisphere might survive, but probably not even them.

Even a couple of nuclear weapons could end the United States as a government and an economy. It wouldn't take a great deal to destroy the "just in time" supply chains, the financial markets and the Internet. The whole system is very fragile, especially with respect to nuclear weapons. Even in a somewhat limited nuclear war, say a war where only ICBM silos and airfields were targeted, there would be so much fallout from the ICBM fields alone that much of the Midwest would be wiped out, including places like Chicago.

Then there is the problem of the nuclear power plants, which have stored within them and their spent fuel pools and storage areas truly vast amounts of radioactivity. If their electricity supply is interrupted, these plants are quite susceptible to fires and meltdowns, as we saw at Fukushima.

Keep in mind that nuclear war is not one or two Hiroshima-sized bombs. The imagination cannot encompass nuclear war. Nuclear war means nuclear winter. It means the collapse of very fragile electronic, financial, governmental, administrative systems that keep everyone alive. We'd be lucky to reboot in the early 19th century. And if enough weapons are detonated, the collapse of the Earth's ozone layer would mean that every form of life that has eyes could be blinded. The combined effects of a US-Russian nuclear war would mean that pretty much every terrestrial mammal, and many plants, would become extinct. There would be a dramatic biological thinning.

I think many parts of the US military just don't get it. I've talked to people on the National Security Council and they have the idea that Russia will back down. I begged them, about 18 months ago, to bring in some Cold War era veteran diplomats from the realist school, people like former ambassador to Russia Jack Matlock, who was appointed by Ronald Reagan, to try and convince them that Russia won't just do what we want, that they have their own legitimate interests that we would do well to understand and take into consideration.

WSWS: What are your thoughts on how to deal with the problem of nuclear war?

I would say that the effort to decrease inequality in the world is at the core of dealing with the threat of nuclear war. We have to get the military-industrial-financial complex off people's backs. If you have so much power concentrated in so few hands, and have such high levels of inequality, the people in power are blinded by their position. They are insulated from society's problems. So gross inequality--economic and especially political--leads to sort of political stupidity. It could lead to annihilation. The ignorant masses are not the problem. It's the ignorance and hubris at the top. It always is.