

Sixty years since the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings

Part three: American militarism and the nuclear threat today

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The following is the third and final part in a series marking 60 years since the dropping of atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Part one, describing the destructive effects of the bomb on the population of the two cities, was published on August 6. Part two, analyzing the motivations behind the decision to drop the bomb, was published on August 8.

The decision by the administration of President Harry Truman to use atomic weapons against Japan was motivated by political and strategic considerations. Above all, the use of the bomb was meant to establish the undisputed hegemonic position of the United States in the post-war period.

These motivations were also the basic driving force behind the American intervention in the war itself. The Second World War has long been presented to the American people as a “Good War,” a war for democracy against fascism and tyranny. While it was no doubt true that millions of Americans saw the war in terms of a fight against Hitlerite fascism and Japanese militarism, the aims of those who led them to war were altogether different. The American ruling class entered the Second World War in order to secure its global interests. While the political character of the bourgeois democratic regime in the United States was vastly different than that of its fascist adversaries, the nature of the war aims of the United States were no less imperialistic. In the final analysis, the utter ruthlessness with which the United States sought to secure its objectives—including the use of the atomic bomb—flowed from this essential fact.

The American government hoped that by using the bomb it would shift the balance of forces in its growing conflict with the Soviet Union. However, the American monopoly of the bomb was short-lived. The Soviet Union responded to the bombing of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945 by rapidly increasing the amount of resources devoted to its own atomic bomb project. In 1949, the Soviet Union carried out its first atomic weapon test.

Sections of the US ruling elite and military establishment still hoped that they might be able to use the bomb in actual military situations. In 1950, Truman threatened to use nuclear weapons against the Chinese during the Korean War, and General Douglas MacArthur urged the government to authorize the military to drop a number of bombs along the Korean border with Manchuria. These proposals were eventually rejected for fear that the use of the bomb might provoke a nuclear exchange with the Soviet Union.

With the development of the much more powerful hydrogen bomb, first tested in late 1952, the US hoped to renew its nuclear advantage. The Republican Eisenhower administration came into office in 1953 pledging a more aggressive policy against the Soviet Union, including the “rollback” of Soviet control over Eastern Europe. In January 1954, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles gave a speech in which he stated that the US would “deter aggression” by depending “primarily upon a great capacity to retaliate, instantly, by means and at places of our own choosing.” This pledge of “massive retaliation” was generally interpreted as a threat to use nuclear weapons in response to a local war such as the Korean War or the war that later developed in Vietnam.

However, this nuclear advantage was again eliminated in August 1953, when the USSR tested its first hydrogen bomb. The two countries rapidly developed a capacity that created conditions of “mutually assured destruction” in the event of a nuclear war.

Throughout this period and the following decades, a battle raged within the political establishment over policy in relation to the Soviet Union and the atom bomb. Even with the threat of nuclear war, there continued to exist a substantial section of the American ruling class that was unwilling to tolerate any constraints on American military power.

The option of engaging in nuclear war was never off the table for any post-Hiroshima/Nagasaki administration, Democratic or Republican. What Truman’s Secretary of War Henry Stimson called the “master card” was always there in the background ready to be pulled out if need be. In 1962, the Kennedy administration nearly initiated a nuclear war with the Soviet Union over the Cuban missile crisis.

As the economic situation deteriorated in the 1970s, those who advocated a more aggressive orientation toward the Soviet Union began to gain in prominence. This started under the Democratic Party administration of Jimmy Carter and received a boost during the Reagan administration in the 1980s. Reagan oversaw a renewed arms buildup and also sought to gain an offensive nuclear superiority by developing a defensive missile shield (the so-called “Star Wars” program), something that the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty of 1972 had been designed to prevent. A successful defensive shield would allow the US to strike with nuclear weapons first, since it could shoot down any retaliatory action.

Since the self-destruction of the Soviet Union in 1991, the

American ruling class has reached a new consensus based upon preemptive war and the unilateral assertion of American interests through military force.

Fewer treaties, more bombs

The post-Soviet eruption of American militarism has assumed an especially malignant form during the presidency of George W. Bush. Since coming into power, the Bush administration has developed a two-pronged strategy to expand American military capacity. On the one hand, it has rejected or undermined any international agreement or treaty that places boundaries on what the United States can or cannot do militarily. On the other hand, it has taken steps to develop its military technology, including its nuclear technology, to prepare the way for the use of this technology in future wars.

In 1999, the Republican-dominated US Senate went out of its way to reject the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), which had previously been signed by the Clinton administration. In 2001, Bush announced that he would not seek Senate approval again, and instead would look for a way to “bury” the treaty. The treaty would ban the testing of new nuclear weapons, which the Bush administration opposes because it is planning on developing new nuclear weapons that it will need to test.

In December 2001, Bush announced that the US would unilaterally withdraw from the ABM Treaty in order to allow it to renew the “Star Wars” project, now called National Missile Defense. The development of a NMD system is still a priority of the administration, and is part of its drive to achieve military domination of space. Like the Reagan administration program, a missile defense system would open up the way for offensive nuclear strikes against countries such as China or Russia.

During an international review of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) earlier this year, the Bush administration announced a position that was aimed at undermining the foundation of the agreement. In exchange for a promise not to acquire nuclear weapons, the treaty guarantees non-nuclear powers the right to develop non-military nuclear technology. The treaty also includes a pledge from the nuclear powers to gradually eliminate their nuclear stockpiles. The new Bush administration position, however, is to deny states that the US determines to be “rogue states,” such as Iran, the right to develop nuclear energy programs. At the same time, far from eliminating its own nuclear stockpiles, the US has taken steps to modernize its existing weapons and develop new weapons for offensive use. Indeed, in the run-up to the conference, which ended without an agreement, the Bush administration explicitly insisted on its right to use nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear power.

Over the past decade, the US government has developed a policy of offensive nuclear weapon use, rejecting the Cold War conception that nuclear weapons would be intended primarily as a deterrent. A Nuclear Posture Review in 1997 during the Clinton administration reportedly took the first steps toward targeting countries such as North Korea, China and Iran.

This policy was made explicit in another review, leaked to the press in 2002, in which the Pentagon announced that “the old process [of nuclear arms control] is incompatible with the flexibility US planning and forces now require.” It explicitly

threatened a host of countries by targeting them for potential nuclear attack. It also provided very general guidelines for the future use of nuclear weapons, declaring that these weapons may be used “against targets able to withstand nonnuclear attack” or “in the event of surprising military developments.”

Last summer, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld issued an “Interim Global Strike Order” that reportedly includes a first strike nuclear option against a country such as Iran or North Korea. There were also nuclear weapons options in the planning guidelines for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Bush administration has taken steps toward the development of new “bunker-busting” nuclear weapons specifically designed for use in combat situations. Existing stockpiles have been modernized, and according to a *New York Times* article from February 7, 2005, “American scientists have begun designing a new generation of nuclear arms meant to be sturdier and more reliable and to have longer lives” than the old weapon stockpiles.

The US repeatedly issues threats against countries over their alleged development of nuclear weapons and other “weapons of mass destruction.” The most recent target has been Iran, which the US has threatened with military attack if it does not abandon its nuclear energy program. All these threats are meant to justify future US invasions, in which the use of nuclear weapons by the United States is by no means excluded.

Through the policy of preemptive war, the US has arrogated for itself the right to attack any country that it deems to be a threat, or declares might be a threat sometime in the future. There is no part of the world in which the United States does not have an interest. It has sought to progressively expand its influence in Central Asia and the former Soviet Union through the war in Afghanistan and political intervention in countries such as Ukraine. It is seeking to dominate the Middle East through the war in Iraq and the threat of war in Iran. It is expanding its activities in Africa and has made repeated threats against North Korea and China as part of its efforts to secure its influence in East Asia.

Under these conditions, there are innumerable potential scenarios in which a war will erupt leading to the use of nuclear weapons. This includes not only invasions of countries such as Iran; an American war against a smaller power could easily spark a broader conflict—with China, Russia or even the powers of Europe, all of which have nuclear weapons themselves.

The catastrophe that befell Hiroshima and Nagasaki will never be forgotten. Their fate will stand forever as testimony to the bestiality of imperialism. Against the backdrop of the renewed eruption of American militarism, the events of August 1945 remind us of the alternatives that confront mankind—world revolution or world war, socialism or barbarism.



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