

US think tank report weighs up “grim future” of nuclear war

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A paper published in mid-April by the Washington-based think tank, Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), is a chilling indication of the discussions underway and the preparations being made within the US defence establishment for nuclear war.

CSIS strategic analyst Anthony Cordesman is dismissive of nuclear arms control treaties and negotiations, declaring that developing arms races in Asia and the Middle East “demand a strategy that looks beyond arms control and considers a much grimmer future.”

Cordesman leaves no doubt as to what that future might be. The title of his paper, “Red Lines, Deadlines, and Thinking the Unthinkable: India, Pakistan, Iran, North Korea and China”, is a direct reference to the Cold War strategist Herman Kahn who coldly calculated a strategy for fighting and “winning” a nuclear war.

As Cordesman notes: “Early in the thermonuclear age, Herman Kahn warned the world that it had to ‘think about the unthinkable’: The consequences of an actual nuclear war, and consider which side—if any—might ‘win’.” He continued: “The end of the Cold War seemed to put an end to the need for such thinking, but recent developments in North Korea and Iran make it all too clear that there is still a need for such horrifying yet ‘realist’ analysis.”

In his book “On Thermonuclear War” written in 1960, Kahn argued that life would go on after a devastating nuclear exchange, whether hundreds of millions died or only a few major cities were destroyed. It was necessary, he claimed, for Americans to accept the consequences, no matter how horrifying, because without the willingness to push the button, nuclear war preparations were just an elaborate bluff.

The CSIS paper has a particular significance. Cordesman is well-connected within American defence, intelligence and foreign policy circles, having served at senior levels in the State Department, the Defence Department and acted as consultant on a range of military issues including as part of the Strategic Assessment Group in 2009 that helped devise Obama’s strategy for the AfPak war.

The CSIS has been closely associated with Obama’s “pivot to Asia” that is aimed at containing China. A report last July commissioned by the US Defence Department, entitled “US

Force Posture Strategy in the Asia Pacific Region”, identified “China’s rising power, influence and expectations of regional pre-eminence” as “the most significant problem for the United States in Asia today.” It assessed the US military repositioning and build-up already underway in Asia in preparation for any war with China and outlined further steps that could be made.

Cordesman devotes the bulk of his paper to the prospects of a nuclear war involving India/Pakistan, Iran and North Korea, leaving China to last. In each case the paper provides a detailed assessment of the nuclear capabilities of the rival states and assesses the strategic consequences of a nuclear conflict in brutally “realist” terms.

On South Asia, the paper warns that the arms build-up could lead to nuclear war, as both India and Pakistan have “a history of overreaction, nationalism, and failure to demonstrate stability and restraint in arms control.” It expresses concern that neither “has really thought out the consequences of a nuclear exchange beyond the ‘Duke Nukem’ school of planning: who can kill more of the enemy.”

But Cordesman’s ghoulish conclusion is that a South Asian nuclear war—a conflict that would bring death and suffering to tens if not hundreds of millions—would not affect the US and its allies. “The good news, from a ruthlessly ‘realist’ viewpoint,” he states, “is that such a human tragedy does not necessarily have serious grand strategic consequences for other states, and might well have benefits... Some fallout perhaps, but not that much in terms of serious radiation exposure measured in rads. The loss of India and Pakistan might create some short term economic issues for importers of goods and services. However, the net effect would shift benefits to other suppliers without any clear problems in substitutions or costs.”

On Iran, Cordesman is preoccupied with the consequences of a US-led “preventative strikes” against the country’s nuclear facilities and military. He acknowledges that Iran has no nuclear weapons but regurgitates the unsubstantiated claims that it intends to build them. The paper notes that such attacks could well drive Tehran into constructing a nuclear bomb, triggering a regional arms race and the need for a US nuclear build-up in the Middle East. All of this heightens the risk of a nuclear war, especially involving Israel, which already has a significant nuclear arsenal. Having surveyed the dangers,

Cordesman is pessimistic that the current sanctions can force Iran to dismantle its nuclear facilities and concludes that “some redlines are deadlines and make it time to act.” In other words, the US should launch “preventative strikes” on Iran in the near future.

On North Korea, the paper acknowledges the very rudimentary and limited character of Pyongyang’s nuclear arsenal and delivery systems. Its concerns about North Korea focus primarily on China and how to exploit the tinderbox on the Korean Peninsula to the advantage of US imperialism. While making no reference to Obama’s pivot, Cordesman is clearly making his calculations in the context of Washington’s aggressive drive to strengthen alliances throughout Asia and to “rebalance” its military forces in preparation for a potential war with China.

Cordesman makes clear that North Korea is a convenient pretext to put pressure on China, not only to bring Pyongyang under control, but to press for other concessions, including limits on its military and nuclear capacity. Admitting that “North Korea is only part of the problem,” he suggests that the US could “tacitly encourage” its allies, South Korea and Japan, to create “at least precision-guided conventional missile forces and possibly nuclear forces as a local regional counterbalance to the Chinese nuclear effort.” In other words, while “scarcely a desirable option”, the US should consider deliberately fuelling a nuclear arms race in North East Asia as part of US war preparations against China.

Cordesman’s analysis of North Korea makes clear that his central preoccupation is China—not conflicts between India/Pakistan, or Israel/Iran, which would not have “grand strategic consequences” for US imperialism. His two-page section on China is as disturbing for what it omits as for what it contains. Unlike the preceding sections, the paper avoids making any analysis of the devastating consequences of a nuclear war between the US and China, which would inevitably draw in all nuclear powers and condemn what remained of humanity to barbarism.

The omission is by no means accidental. Cordesman is well aware that what he is advocating—the preparations for nuclear war with China—has horrific implications for the American people, and humanity as a whole, and will provoke resistance and opposition. Nevertheless, he is emphatic in opposing Obama’s talk of a “zero option”—that is, the elimination of the US nuclear arsenal through arms reduction talks with Russia. “Quite frankly,” he states, “it is both incompetent and intellectually dishonest to decouple China’s expanding nuclear and missile forces from the US and Russian strategic and theatre nuclear balance.”

The US should not “fail to assess Chinese nuclear weapons developments as openly and transparently as it assesses its other military options, or somehow talk about zero options as if the nuclear arms race in Asia was not now more important in terms of deterrence and warfighting risks than the nuclear

balance with Russia and Europe,” the paper concludes.

The Obama administration has never had the slightest intention of eliminating the US stockpile of nuclear bombs or the imposing array of intercontinental ballistic missiles, nuclear submarines and strategic bombers that can deliver them anywhere in the world. The arms talks have been the means for disguising the maintenance and ongoing modernisation of the American nuclear strike capacity, which far exceeds those of its rivals. According to estimates cited by Cordesman, the US has approximately 5,113 nuclear warheads, compared to China’s total of about 240.

The CSIS paper is clearly part of discussions taking place in the top levels of the American state apparatus. It points to a broader shift in policy—to make preparations for fighting “an actual nuclear war” and “winning.” Significantly, the chief target is China, which is also the central focus of the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia.”

Far from diminishing the dangers of nuclear war, the end of the Cold War has heightened it. The rivalries that were regulated within the framework of detente have been let loose and are now intensifying dramatically under the impact of the global economic crisis. US imperialism is determined to offset its historic decline by using its military might to maintain world dominance. It regards China as a dangerous potential rival that has to be dealt with sooner, rather than later.

The preparations for conventional and nuclear war are taking place behind the backs of workers and youth in the US and around the world. The willingness of US strategists like Cordesman to devise “realist” plans that involve the annihilation of hundreds of millions of people raises the necessity of the working class also acting sooner, rather than later. The only realistic means for preventing a global nuclear catastrophe is a socialist solution—the abolition of the bankrupt social order of capitalism that is the source of war.



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