War: The great unmentionable in the 2016 US elections

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The most striking feature of the 2016 US election campaign is the virtual absence of discussion of what is by far the most serious issue facing the people of the United States and the world, looming over everything else: the escalating military conflict that threatens to plunge the entire planet into a new world war.

While it is not a topic of significant debate among the various candidates contending for the presidential nomination of the Democratic and Republican parties, hardly a day goes by without a new provocation that raises the prospect of a military confrontation involving the US, China, Russia and the European powers.

Yesterday was no exception. US Deputy Defense Secretary Robert Work announced that the Obama administration would not recognize any air defense identification zone (ADIZ) that China might proclaim in the South China Sea in response to an upcoming international court ruling on territorial disputes in the region.

Earlier this month, *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius, referring to a future conflict over an ADIZ, wrote that "the US is heading toward a dangerous showdown in China." Ignatius quoted Kurt Campbell, former assistant secretary of state for Asia, who said: "This isn't Pearl Harbor, but if people on all sides aren't careful, it could be 'The Guns of August.'" Campbell was referring to the book by Barbara Tuchman on the events that led up to World War I, which led to the deaths of 17 million people.

Also on Wednesday, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the Pentagon has "drawn up plans to position American troops, tanks and other armored vehicles full time along NATO's eastern borders… in what would be the first such deployment since the end of the Cold War."

Work, who last month declared that a test of intercontinental ballistic missiles was designed to show "that we are prepared to use nuclear weapons in defense of our country," told the *Journal* that with the additional forces "there will be a division's worth of stuff to fight [Russia] if something happens."

As far as the media and the candidates of the Democratic and Republican parties are concerned, all of this falls under the category of the "great unmentionable." Indeed, the Obama administration is attempting to temporarily postpone a full conflict with Russia or China, following a well-established pattern in which major military operations are launched after presidential elections. The aim is to prevent the question of war and the war plans of the ruling class from becoming a topic of political discussion among broader sections of the population.

Particularly since the launching of the "war on terror," and then following the mass protests in 2003 against the impending invasion of Iraq, the American ruling class has worked systematically to exclude any expression of anti-war sentiment from the political process. In 2002, the Democrats kept the issue of the looming invasion of Iraq out of the mid-term elections, after Democrats in Congress agreed to give Bush a blank check to use military force.

In 2004, opposition to war was so intense that it threatened to overwhelm the election cycle. That was the year that Howard Dean, the governor of Vermont, won widespread support due largely to his stated opposition to the Iraq war, and appeared to be on the path to winning the Democratic nomination. His campaign was then derailed through a carefully coordinated operation by the Democratic Party leadership and the media, which proclaimed him "unelectable." Senator John Kerry, who had voted for the Iraq war, was brought forward, the "antiwar" Democrats mobilized behind him, and the issue of war was removed from an election that culminated in the victory of George W. Bush for a second term.

Two years later, despite the efforts of the Democratic Party to keep the mid-term elections from becoming a referendum on war, opposition to the Iraq invasion led to a massive defeat for the Republicans and gave control of both houses of Congress to the Democrats for the first time since 1994. The Democrats responded by rejecting any move to force a change of course, let alone bring charges against Bush administration officials. They funded all of the Bush administration's military appropriation bills, including for

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the 2007 Iraq "surge."

The channeling of anti-war sentiment behind the Democratic Party was carried out with the critical assistance of the organizations of the middle class that had led the anti-war protests in 2003. This culminated in the campaign of Illinois Senator Barack Obama in 2008. Obama was presented as the "transformational candidate" who would reverse the eight years of war and social reaction under Bush. During the primaries, Obama's political trump card was the fact that he had opposed the invasion of Iraq while his principal opponent, Hillary Clinton, had voted for it in the Senate.

In fact, the Obama administration became the vehicle for the middle class organizations surrounding the Democratic Party to fully and openly embrace imperialism. After more than seven years of Obama as "commander-in-chief," the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan continue. The Obama administration has led a war to overthrow the government in Libya, stoked a civil war in Syria through the promotion of Islamic fundamentalist militias, launched drone strikes on Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen, supported the Israeli assault on Gaza, backed a brutal Saudi bombardment of Yemen, and overseen the militarization of the South China Sea and Eastern Europe.

All indications are that within a year, if not earlier, the extent of US military operations will be far greater. Despite the looming danger of a global conflict involving nuclear-armed powers, the media and the various candidates are keeping the ongoing military operations off the agenda. When war is discussed, it is from the standpoint of general agreement among Republicans and Democrats on the need to "destroy ISIS" and confront Chinese and Russian "aggression."

In the Democratic Party campaign, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has emerged as the preferred candidate of the military and intelligence apparatus. She is personally responsible for launching the war in Libya and the CIA-backed destabilization operation in Syria. On her campaign web page, Clinton boasts of having "called out China's aggressive actions" in Asia. The Clinton campaign web site adds, "Hillary will confine, contain, and deter Russian aggressions in Europe and beyond, and increase the costs to Putin for his actions."

As for Bernie Sanders, he has said virtually nothing about war or foreign policy, aside from criticizing Clinton for supporting the 2003 invasion of Iraq. On his campaign web site, "war and peace" is relegated to the 25th of 28 issues in the election. He calls the 2003 invasion "the worst foreign policy blunder in modern US history." The invasion of Iraq was, according to Sanders, not a crime, but a strategic mistake from the standpoint of the interests of the American ruling class.

He proclaims that "as President and Commander-in-Chief, I will defend this nation, its people, and America's vital strategic interests, but I will do it responsibly." He boasts of having voted for war in the Balkans in 1999 and in Afghanistan in 2001. He has supported the Obama administration's drone strikes, denounced Russia, and insisted that the US maintain the largest military in the world.

For all his rhetorical criticisms of the "billionaire class" and its influence over American politics, Sanders never suggests that foreign policy is dictated by this same "billionaire class." Nor does he propose any cuts to the gargantuan military budget. Sanders too would defend "America's vital strategic interests"—code words for the drive by the American corporate and financial elite to control the world and its key sources of raw materials, cheap labor and trade routes. Nothing could more fully expose the fraud of Sanders' "socialism."

There remains deep and broad-based anti-war sentiment among American workers and youth. Large sections of the voting population have lived their politically conscious lives under conditions of permanent war. There is no mass support for war against China or Russia, or for the measures including a further destruction of democratic rights at home and the introduction of the military draft—that would inevitably accompany such a war.

There remains, however, a huge danger. As a consequence of the conspiracy of silence by the media and the political establishment, the population as a whole is largely unaware of what is currently taking place and what is being planned in the aftermath of the elections. It is a life-and-death question that the attention of the working class be focused on the war plans of the ruling class and that the political foundations be laid for a new mass anti-war movement.

The fight against imperialist war requires the building of an independent political movement of the working class, based on an internationalist and socialist program. Workers must not allow themselves to remain trapped within the pro-imperialist confines of bourgeois politics and the Democratic Party. The working class must intervene with its own program and perspective, connecting the fight against war with the fight against inequality, dictatorship and the capitalist system.

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