

Union of Concerned Scientists warns of US-China nuclear war

Peter Symonds
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The US-based Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) issued a stark warning last week over the mounting danger of nuclear conflict between the United States and China, declaring that the two countries were just “a few poor decisions away from starting a war that could escalate rapidly and end in a nuclear exchange.”

The report included an examination of the nuclear arms race currently underway between the US and China, the failure of diplomatic efforts to mitigate tensions and the dangerous dynamic that is heightening the danger of war. Its bleak assessment offers no hope that the drive to war can be halted other than through enlightened diplomatic efforts—a solution that is negated by its own analysis of their complete lack of success to date.

The UCS paper is notable, given the rising barrage of anti-Chinese propaganda in the US and international press, for the absence of criticisms of Chinese “expansionism” and “aggression.” If anything, it cautiously highlights Washington’s confrontational approach to Beijing, especially under the Obama administration. As part of his “pivot to Asia,” Obama has deliberately inflamed dangerous regional flashpoints including disputes in the South China and East China Seas as a means of isolating China from its neighbours.

The report explains: “In 2009, the Obama administration broke with past policy by emphasising it would use military force to police long-simmering disputes between China and its neighbours over competing sovereignty claims. The change responded to PRC [People’s Republic of China] statements describing its sovereignty claims as a ‘core interest’. The United States backed up its new policy with new military bases, deployments, and exercises in the region. It sailed US Navy task forces into PRC-claimed

waters that the United States does not normally patrol. The stated objective has been to compel a compromise on PRC sovereignty claims. The PRC responded by accelerating ongoing island-building activities, excluding foreign fishing vessels from disputed waters and constructing new military facilities in the region.”

While it refers to potential triggers for conflict, the UCS paper is focussed on the rising risk of a clash spiralling into nuclear war. The US, which has engaged in one war of aggression after another over the past 25 years, outspends China on the military both in absolute terms and relative to GDP. Yet as the UCS explains, the Pentagon is deeply concerned that China’s military modernisation threatens America’s absolute dominance in Asia by potentially restricting US military operations in the Western Pacific.

The report states:

“The Obama administration decided to counter those perceived threats by investing in new submarines, a new stealth bomber, improved missile defences, and anti-satellite weapons... Currently, the United States plans to invest more than a trillion dollars in comprehensive upgrades to its nuclear forces. It also plans to spend several hundred billion dollars modernising the US nuclear weapons complex—the laboratories and facilities that research, design, produce, and maintain nuclear weapons. These plans include developing two nuclear weapons intended for fighting a nuclear war against the PRC: the Long-Range Stand-Off nuclear-armed cruise missile and a redesigned B61 nuclear gravity bomb.”

China, which has a relatively small nuclear arsenal—an estimated 260 war heads as opposed to about 7,000 for the US—confronts the possibility that a US first strike could completely destroy its ability to retaliate and render it completely vulnerable. It has not

increased the number of weapons but has taken some measures to protect its nuclear deterrent against a US attack.

The issue is at the heart of the failure of limited talks between the US and China to ease nuclear tensions. The UCS report noted that while discussions have produced some limited confidence-building measures on other military matters, “strategic dialogues on their nuclear forces, missile defences, and anti-satellite weaponry are perfunctory.”

The paper highlighted what it regarded as “one critical set of bilateral dialogues” that focussed on “preserving strategic stability—a euphemism for making sure that if a conflict starts it does not end in a nuclear exchange.” Chinese experts proposed that, like Beijing, Washington adopt a no first strike policy. But as the report explained: “The Obama administration considered this option but concluded that there is ‘a narrow range of contingencies’ where the United States may need to resort to the first use of nuclear weapons” to counter conventional attacks including by China.

Chinese officials then sought an assurance from their American counterparts that the US would not seek to negate China’s ability to retaliate with nuclear weapons if struck first. Again, the US was not prepared to offer such a guarantee, with some officials concerned this would be “a sign of appeasement”. In other words, Washington is determined to achieve what is known as nuclear primacy over China—the ability to strike first and obliterate China’s nuclear arsenal, as well as tens if not hundreds of millions of its people.

China’s determination to preserve its ability to respond to a US first strike is compounding the danger of war. It is increasing the sophistication of, and protection for, its nuclear weapons and delivery systems, and also reportedly discussing a policy of “launch on warning”—that is, to fire off nuclear-armed missiles if a US nuclear attack is perceived to be underway.

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The UCS report declared:

“It is not difficult to imagine situations that could trigger an inadvertent or accidental nuclear war. For example, PRC leaders could underestimate US willingness to use nuclear weapons to stop a conventional war. US leaders could underestimate PRC

willingness to retaliate after a tailored US nuclear attack. The PRC could launch a retaliatory nuclear attack if the United States were to launch conventional missile strikes that China mistakenly believed were nuclear. The United States could make the same mistake.”

While graphically warning of the danger of nuclear war, the UCS, a pressure group of scientists established in the late 1960s, has no proposal to prevent it—other than a vain hope in a diplomatic solution. Its inadequate explanations for the escalating tensions between the two countries boil down to it being the product of competing Cold War ideologies or conflicting regional ambitions. No attempt is made to explain why this is taking place now.

The growing danger of war is rooted in the irresolvable contradictions of capitalism between world economy and the outmoded nation-state system that have been profoundly exacerbated by the worsening global crisis of the profit system since 2008/09. The United States regards China as the prime threat to its global dominance, and, confronting a historic economic decline, is determined to retain its world position through military means. The aim of the “pivot to Asia” is nothing less than the complete subordination of China to American strategic and economic interests by any means, including war.

As in the 1960s, in the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis, the threat of nuclear conflict will inevitably produce broad anti-war opposition among workers and young people internationally as the danger becomes more immediate and palpable. The crucial issue is what political perspective must guide such a movement. The only realistic means of ending the danger of war is to abolish the social order that gives rise to it on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.



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