

German think tank warns of growing nuclear war danger

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In September, the German pro-government think tank “Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik” (SWP) published a study on the implications of US policy towards Russia and European security. [1] The 28-page document is aimed at a professional audience and is written in political and military jargon that couches the annihilation of millions of human lives in matter-of-fact terms, as if dealing with the solution to a technical problem.

But this prosaic language conceals a nightmare scenario. American policy towards Russia, as described by the SWP study, focuses primarily on preparation for a nuclear war, which would involve large parts of Europe. If the results of the study are to be taken seriously, then the risk for the present generation of dying in a violent atomic storm is alarmingly high.

The study’s author, Dr. Peter Rudolf, an SWP employee, not only provides his own assessment, but references every paragraph with other sources. The text contains 118 footnotes, each of which refers to multiple articles in foreign policy and military journals and statements by leading politicians. The study summarizes the debate that is currently taking place in leading circles of the military and political establishment.

At its very beginning, the study stresses that the nuclear war danger is not an abstract, hypothetical risk. As “the *first* and most important structural feature” of US-Russian relations, the study names the “mutual nuclear annihilation capability.”

Even 25 years after the end of the Cold War, the United States and Russia, who together possess “approximately 90 percent of all nuclear weapons in the world,” maintain their strategic nuclear weapons “in constant combat readiness.” “They want to guarantee,” the study says, “if necessary under extreme time pressure, that they are able to make the decision to use nuclear arsenals... This is to prevent one’s own nuclear weapons being eliminated by a first strike.”

The study points to the very short time frame for decisions as “anything but conducive” to “crisis stabilization.” The flight times of ballistic missiles between the two countries run to “11 minutes for sea-based and 30 minutes for land-based missiles.”

The risk that a political crisis could “accidentally” result in a nuclear exchange due to these short reaction times is thus extremely high. This risk is further elevated by the ruthlessness with which the US and its NATO allies are escalating the conflict with Russia in Eastern Europe and Syria, and by the advanced planning for a nuclear war.

According to the SWP study, “a reinvigorated Russia, at least from the perspective of military planners in the Pentagon,” is regarded “as a potential enemy in a time of newly unfolding great power conflicts, as an enemy who—like China—needs to be deterred by the capacity for conflict dominance.” For this deterrent, according to the study, there

are three strategic approaches in the US.

The first school of thought, which the study refers to as “confrontational, ‘Neo-Containment,’” focuses on unconditional confrontation. It regards “consideration of alleged or actual Russian security interests” to be inappropriate. “Rather, external pressure should be increased and Russia forced into an arms race, in the opinion of this school.”

The second school advocates a “*realpolitik* approach to the management of US-Russian relations.” It proposes to recognize Russia’s claim to spheres of influence on its periphery, “in the interests of a regulated power rivalry,” while “at the same time signaling clearly that any aggression against a NATO member would be answered militarily.”

And finally, there is the school of thought that takes a “cooperative and inclusive approach.” It postulates self-critically “that the US bears a share [of the blame] in the deterioration of bilateral relations, especially through the expansion of NATO in a period of Russian weakness, and by promoting missile defence,” and advocates “a differentiated approach, combining a readiness to cooperate and risk mitigation.”

The study counts the Obama administration as part of this third, “cooperative-integrative,” school. This is remarkable, when one considers that Barack Obama is the first American president during whose entire eight years in office the country has continuously waged war. Obama’s political record includes: supporting the right-wing coup in Kiev directed against Russia; the massive deployment of NATO troops to Russia’s western border; the unconditional guarantee of military assistance to the aggressive Baltic states, and the escalation of the Syrian war, which could provoke a direct confrontation between the Russian and American military.

One can easily imagine, therefore, what would happen if one of the two other, more confrontational schools of thought prevailed, within which the leading contender for the American presidency, Hillary Clinton, holds considerable sway. On this question, Clinton attacks her semi-fascist challenger Donald Trump from the right by accusing him of weakness towards Russia.

How far the plans and preparations for a nuclear war against Russia (and China) are already advanced in the strategic think tanks and leading military circles is made clear in the SWP study’s chapter, “New confrontation and its consequences.” The risks of a nuclear escalation of the conflict with Russia are now higher than during the Cold War, and continue to increase.

The “informal rules and regimes” that could moderate the ever-present risk of a military escalation of the East-West conflict at that time have been lost, according to the study. “What has disappeared is

also the political sensitivity in dealing with military risks, and precisely the risk of a potential nuclear escalation, should deterrence fail.”

The study comprehensively shows how “the strengthening of conventional deterrence” by NATO—i.e., the stationing of troops on the Russian border, the plans for bringing in reinforcements, etc.—sets in motion an arms dynamic that inevitably leads to nuclear escalation. “The new policy of deterrence in Europe will hardly, as is sometimes assumed or hoped, be restricted to the conventional level,” it states. “The credibility of extended deterrence always rested on the nuclear escalation option.”

It is in this context that the final document of the Warsaw NATO summit in July 2016 should be understood. “It says, NATO remains a ‘nuclear alliance,’ and in the case of a threat to the fundamental security of a member state, has the capability and determination to impose unacceptable costs on an opponent.”

“For the first time since the end of the East-West conflict,” the study continues, “there are again in NATO considerations to conduct exercises with a view to scenarios where there could be a nuclear escalation. The danger of nuclear war in Europe as a result of an escalating crisis threatens to return.”

Among the texts to which the study refers on this issue is the essay, “Why a nuclear war would most likely begin in the Baltic states,” [2] which appeared in the conservative US foreign policy journal the *National Interest* on July 20, 2016.

The article accuses the US government of not taking the possibility of a nuclear war between America and Russia seriously enough following the end of the Cold War, and of having neglected atomic weapons capabilities. In reality, it says, such a possibility not only exists, but is becoming more likely. Then the article lists eight reasons why the greatest danger for such a war exists with regard to the three Baltic states.

It refers to the statement of President Obama during a visit to Estonia two years ago that the defence of the capitals of the three countries was “just as important as the defence of Berlin and Paris and London.” This is “an extraordinary assertion,” when one considers that “the population of metropolitan London (about 8 million) is greater than that of all three Baltic states combined (about 6 million), and that the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea is so close to the Russian heartland.”

It then argues that, due to the superiority of conventional Russian forces in the region, compliance with the guarantee of security for the Baltic states would almost automatically lead to a nuclear escalation.

“The bottom line is that all the ingredients are present in the eastern Baltic area for an East-West conflict escalating to nuclear weapons use,” the article concludes. This is a “prescription for catastrophe.”

The study of the SWP, which generally promotes a pro-US line, does not delve into the causes and the background of the US drive towards war. Only at one point does it hint that it has to do with the quest for world domination. The US sees itself “in a time of renewed great power conflict,” it says. “Russia and China are the potential enemies that must be deterred by superior military power—and through the ability for conflict dominance.”

The changes in the international security situation have “activated the old, never vanished but seldom openly articulated core power interests of the USA, which, in the 1940s, under the influence of geo-political thinking... developed and were since followed: namely, to prevent one or more hostile great powers controlling the resources of Eurasia and acquiring a power potential that could endanger American

supremacy.”

The SWP study does not deal with European reactions, although the openness with which it addresses the danger of a nuclear war expresses a certain concern regarding the consequences of America’s Russia policy. One might have expected the European governments to show more restraint in face of this imminent danger threatening to incinerate large parts of Europe. However, the opposite is the case.

While Germany and France refused to actively support the Iraq war in 2003, and Germany stood aside in the 2011 Libyan war, Paris and Berlin, like London, are now participating in both the escalation of the conflict with Russia in Syria and the NATO deployment to the Russian border.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault has publicly accused Russian President Vladimir Putin of war crimes. President François Hollande has cancelled a meeting with Putin in Paris. British Foreign Minister Boris Johnson is calling for demonstrations outside the Russian embassy. Berlin has increased its troop contingent in the Middle East. And the German media are full of inflammatory articles against Russia.

That does not mean that political agreement exists between Europe and the United States—in fact, political and economic tensions are growing. But Europe’s ruling classes are reacting to the same objective developments that prevail in the US. In response to the global financial and economic crisis, unresolved since 2008, growing social tensions at home and the risk of violent class struggles, they react by turning to militarism, war and authoritarian forms of rule.

The danger of nuclear annihilation will not deter them from this course, just as the foreseeable catastrophe did not stop them in 1914 and in 1939 from plunging humanity into the inferno of the First and the Second World Wars. Only an independent, international movement of the working class against war and its cause, capitalism, can prevent a nuclear catastrophe.

Notes:

[1] Peter Rudolf, “Amerikanische Russland-Politik und europäische Sicherheitsordnung” (“American policy on Russia and European security order”), SWP Research Paper September 2016

[2] Loren B. Thompson, “Why the Baltic States Are Where Nuclear War Is Most Likely to Begin”, *The National Interest*, 20.7.2016



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