No "Peace on Earth" in 2016

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"Peace on Earth, and goodwill to men"—so goes the line of an oft-sung Christmas carol. The end-of-the-year holidays are a season in which such sentiments are generally expressed, genuinely by broad sections of the population, with utmost cynicism and hypocrisy by various figures in the political establishment.

The actual trajectory of world politics, however, was perhaps best reflected in a tweet from the soon-to-be president of the United States. "The United States must greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability," Trump declared on Thursday. This was followed by a statement from MSNBC host Mika Brzezinski on Friday: "Let it be an arms race. We will outmatch them at every pass and outlast them all."

The statements from Trump, part of an exchange with Russian President Vladimir Putin, in which both men boasted of the nuclear arsenals of their respective countries, seems like a fitting close to a year of bloodshed.

In 2016, large portions of the globe were engulfed in military conflict. And those states that were nominally at peace spent their time preparing for war and mistreating refugees from armed conflict.

Although definitive figures have not yet been released, at least 150,000 people have been killed in armed conflicts throughout the world in 2016. There were three "major wars," with a 2016 death toll of over 100,000:

? The Syrian civil war, in which 46,442 people were reportedly killed this year. Since the US began backing the Islamist insurgency in 2011, up to 470,000 people have died. The war has forced 4.9 million people to flee abroad and displaced 6.6 million people within Syria itself.

? The Iraq war, in which 23,584 people were killed this year. Since the United States invaded the country in 2003, more than a million people have died. As of November, 3.1 million people were internally displaced in the country, and millions more had fled abroad.

? The war in Afghanistan, in which 21,932 people were killed this year. Since the United States began providing arms to the Mujahedeen, the predecessor of Al Qaeda, in 1978, more than two million people have been killed in that country, which was torn apart by the 2001 invasion and occupation.

These three conflicts accounted for two-thirds of global deaths in military conflicts. They have also led to a refugee crisis unparalleled in scale since World War II. According to the United Nations, there were 65.3 million displaced people at the end of 2015, up by 5 million since 2014, and by nearly 25 million since 2011.

The surge in refugees, together with their increasingly cruel treatment by destination countries, has led to the highest number of refugee deaths ever recorded by the International Organization for Migration.

Some 7,100 refugees died last year, up from 5,740 in 2015. Half of the fatalities took place as refugees sought to enter Europe across the Mediterranean Sea from war and devastation in the Middle East and North Africa.

This year, Europe shut its doors to refugees. The EU agreed to pay Turkey to serve as the gatekeeper of Europe and block refugees from entering, as it militarized its border patrol and deployed the navies of its member countries to stop "people smuggling."

This change is best exemplified by Germany, the region's most powerful state, which is rapidly militarizing as it asserts itself as the dominant European power. While Chancellor Angela Merkel hypocritically proclaimed a "welcoming culture" toward refugees in 2015, this month she adopted large sections of the program of the fascistic Alternative for Germany, calling for a ban on the full-face veil and demanding a further crackdown on refugees.

Beyond the "hot wars" of Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, the drive of the US to militarily encircle China has poured fuel on the world's regional flashpoints. This year, nearly 300 people died in raids and shelling over the border between India and Pakistan, both nuclear-armed powers. Meanwhile military tensions between North and South Korea, which also threaten escalation into nuclear war, have dramatically intensified.

A quarter century of unending and expanding war is reaching a new and even more explosive stage. Beginning with the first Gulf War of 1991, which directly preceded the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the United States has sought, through a succession of adventures abroad, to reverse its long-term economic decline.

Obama will leave office as the first US president to serve two full terms under continuous war. He will go down in history as the man who proclaimed the right of the president to assassinate US citizens without due process, and who personally authorized drone "hits" that led to the deaths of thousands of people.

These unending wars, however, have failed to achieve their desired end. Over the past fifteen years, China has tripled its share of the world export market, while America's share of exports has declined. US military operations, from Iraq to Afghanistan to Libya, have turned into quagmires and debacles. The defeat of the CIA's Islamist proxies in Syria this month has hammered home the failure of the United States to impose its will upon the Middle East and the world.

But only a fool would believe that these failures will turn America's warmongering ruling elite into pacifists. Rather, they have led the American ruling class to focus ever more directly on its larger competitors.

The inauguration of Donald Trump will mark a new phase in global conflict. Trump's provocations against China and his declaration that he welcomes a new arms race with Russia are only the initial indications of the lengths to which his administration is prepared to go to preserve the interests of the American oligarchy.

The year 2017, the centenary of the Russian revolution of 1917, will once again place the struggle against war as the highest and most urgent political task facing mankind.

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