

# The *Economist*: Humanity teeters on the brink of world war

James Cogan  
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The *Economist* magazine, the influential London weekly described by Karl Marx over 150 years ago as the “European organ” of the “aristocracy of finance,” has devoted its latest issue to discussing “The Next War” and “The Growing Threat of Great Power Conflict.” Its lead editorial opens with a chilling warning:

In the past 25 years war has claimed too many lives. Yet even as civil and religious strife have raged in Syria, central Africa, Afghanistan and Iraq, a devastating clash between the world’s great powers has remained almost unimaginable.

No longer ... powerful, long-term shifts in geopolitics and the proliferation of new technologies are eroding the extraordinary military dominance that America and its allies have enjoyed. Conflict on a scale and intensity not seen since the second world war is once again plausible. The world is not prepared.

The *Economist* envisages a dystopian, violent future, with the American military deploying to intimidate or destroy purported challenges to its dominance everywhere.

The *Economist* predicts that in the next 20 years “climate change, population growth and sectarian or ethnic conflict” are likely to ensure that much of the world descends into “intrastate or civil wars.” Such conflicts will increasingly be fought at “close quarters, block by block” in cities ringed by “slums” and populated by millions of people. The future for large sections of humanity is the carnage that was witnessed during last year’s murderous battles over the Iraqi city of Mosul and the Syrian city of Aleppo.

But more chilling are the series of scenarios it outlines for a major escalation in tensions between the United States and Russia and China, presented as Washington’s strategic adversaries, which at any moment threaten to spiral into a nuclear holocaust.

In July of 2016, Mehring Books published David North’s *A Quarter Century of War*, which noted:

Beginning with the first Persian Gulf conflict of 1990-91, the United States has been at war continuously for a quarter century. While using propaganda catchphrases, such as defense of human rights and War on Terror, to conceal the real aims of its interventions in the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa, as well as its confrontation with Russia and China, the United States has been engaged in a struggle for global hegemony. As the US seeks to counteract its economic weakness and worsening domestic social tensions, its relentless escalation of military operations threatens to erupt into a full-scale world war, between nuclear-armed states.

Less than two years later, much of this assessment has been echoed by one of the most significant political organs of Anglo-American capitalism. But the conclusions drawn by the *Economist*, speaking as the unalloyed representative of financial and corporate oligarchs whose wealth is bound up with American imperialist global dominance, are the exact opposite of North’s stated aim of helping build a “new antiwar movement.”

Rather, the *Economist* urges the United States to develop the “hard power” to defend itself against “determined and able challengers,” presenting the sociopathic argument that peace is best safeguarded by America’s ability to utterly destroy its adversaries.

The premise of the special report is that urgent action must be taken by the United States to stem the decline of its hegemony. It asserts that if the Chinese and Russian ruling classes are permitted to realise their ambition of dominant influence in their own regions, the “plausible” consequence will be a “devastating clash between the world’s great powers”—a world war fought with nuclear weapons.

China and Russia, its editorial in the January 27 edition declares, “are now revisionist states that want to challenge the status quo and look at their regions as spheres of influence to be dominated. For China, that means East Asia; for Russia, eastern Europe and Central Asia.”

The conclusion advanced by the *Economist* is that America must end “20 years of strategic drift” under successive

administrations, which has allegedly “played into the hands of Russia and China.” In a series of articles, its special report advocates that the US spend staggering sums on new nuclear weapons and conventional weapons systems, including robotic and artificial intelligence (AI) technology, to ensure that it retains the military superiority that has, until now, inspired “fear in its foes.”

It warns: “The pressing danger is of war on the Korean peninsula, perhaps this year ... Tens of thousands of people would perish, many more if nukes were used.”

The US military is ready to launch such a war. It has B-2 and B-52 nuclear-capable bombers forward deployed at Guam, and hundreds of jet fighters and an armada of warships in other Pacific bases. There is ample reason to believe that the confrontation Washington has provoked with North Korea, through its demand that Pyongyang give up its nuclear weapons program, is a massive rehearsal for a future nuclear stand-off with China.

The *Economist* opines that “a war to stop Iran acquiring nuclear weapons seems a more speculative prospect for now, but could become more likely a few years hence.”

It asserts that the US is threatened by the so-called “grey zone” in which China, Russia, Iran and other countries are seeking to “exploit” American “vulnerabilities” in parts of the world without provoking an open conflict. It gives as examples Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea, Russia’s annexation of Crimea and Iran’s political influence in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.

US imperialist meddling, however, is considered entirely legitimate by the *Economist*. In Syria, the US has overseen seven years of civil war for regime-change to overthrow the Russian- and Iranian-backed government. Washington’s announcement this month that it intends to effectively occupy one third of the country and assemble a 30,000-strong proxy army from Kurdish and Islamist militias has created conditions for direct clashes not only with Iran and Russia, but also with its nominal NATO ally Turkey.

Predictably, amid the frenzied moves in the US and internationally to impose state control and censorship over the Internet, the journal accuses Russia of seeking to “undermine faith in Western institutions and encourage populist movements by meddling in elections and using bots and trolls on social media to fan grievances and prejudice.”

Technology companies, it insists, must be even more integrated with the military, while Internet corporations must work with the state apparatus to suppress access to oppositional views, on the fraudulent pretext of combatting “influence operations” and the “mass manipulation of public opinion.”

It notes in passing that for the American government, which already runs annual budget deficits approaching \$700 billion, “finding the money will be another problem.”

The truth is that the subordination of every aspect of society to war preparations will be paid for by the ongoing destruction

of the living standards and conditions of the American working class, combined with the elimination of its democratic rights and repression of opposition.

In an unintended echo of George Orwell’s “Newspeak,” the *Economist* concludes that “a strong America”—armed to the teeth and permanently threatening its rivals with obliteration—is the “best guarantor of world peace.”

The most chilling aspect of the report, however, is that it is pessimistic about its own prognosis for US imperialism succeeding in intimidating its rivals into submission. The very development of an ever more aggressive military stance toward China and Russia raises, not lessens, the likelihood of war.

“The greatest danger,” it states, “lies in miscalculation through a failure to understand an adversary’s intentions, leading to an unplanned escalation that runs out of control.”

What is being referred to is escalation to a nuclear holocaust. The article quotes Tom Plant, an analyst at the RUSI think tank: “For both Russia and the US, nukes have retained their primacy. You only have to look at how they are spending their money.”

The US is upgrading its entire nuclear arsenal over the coming decades at a cost of \$1.2 trillion. Russia is upgrading its nuclear-capable missiles, bombers and submarines. China is rapidly expanding the size and capability of its far smaller nuclear forces, as are Britain and France. Discussions are underway in ruling circles in Germany, Japan and even Australia on acquiring nuclear weapons so they can resist the nuclear-armed states.

The madness of a nuclear arms race in the 21st century arises inexorably from the contradictions of the capitalist system. The struggle among rival nation-states for global geostrategic and economic dominance is the inevitable outcome of capitalism’s intractable crisis and the ferocious conflict for control over markets and resources.

The epoch of world war, wrote the Marxist revolutionary Vladimir Lenin, is the epoch of world socialist revolution. The overthrow of the capitalist system, which gives rise to the war danger, is an urgent necessity for the survival of human civilization.

The International Committee of the Fourth International and its sections are working to build an international anti-war workers’ movement fighting for socialism. The open discussion on the prospect of nuclear war in the pages of journals like the *Economist* should motivate all serious workers and young people to join our struggle.



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