Is Trump preparing an “October Surprise”?

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With the US presidential election barely five weeks away, Washington is stoking dangerous conflicts across the globe. With the danger that any one of them could escalate into a military confrontation, the question that is increasingly being discussed in US foreign policy circles and by worried governments around the world is whether US President Donald Trump is preparing an “October Surprise.”

There is a long history of events taking place in October, either planned or unplanned, which have major effects on an upcoming presidential election. In 1956, the eruption of the Sinai War and the Hungarian Revolution helped solidify support behind President Dwight D. Eisenhower. In 1968, the Johnson government’s announcement that it would suspend the bombing of North Vietnam almost swung the election to Democrat Hubert Humphrey. In 1972, Henry Kissinger infamously declared that “Peace Is at Hand” in Vietnam, giving Nixon a boost in the polls over George McGovern.

But the phrase “October Surprise” was coined by William Casey, Republican candidate Ronald Reagan’s campaign manager in 1980 and subsequent CIA director. In the case of Reagan and Casey, the “surprise” in question was the prospect that Iran would release US personnel taken hostage in the 1979 seizure of the American Embassy by Iranian students. According to both US and Iranian officials, Casey and the Reagan campaign conducted secret negotiations with Tehran to prevent the hostages’ release until after the election.

Today, the threat is that the “October Surprise” will come in the form of an eruption of American militarism.

Washington Post columnist David Ignatius wrote in a column last week warning, “Iraq is the place where a U.S.-Iran confrontation could explode in the next few weeks, creating an ‘October surprise’ before the U.S. presidential election.” It is doubtful that Ignatius, who has close connections with the US military-intelligence apparatus, is using this phrase loosely.

He was referring to an ultimatum delivered by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Iraq’s new Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi that Washington will close its Baghdad embassy unless the regime cracks down on Iraqi Shi’a militias aligned with Iran that have lobbed rockets in the general vicinity of the US facility. Such a crackdown would likely trigger the government’s downfall.

Ignatius pointed out that the embassy’s “closure could also be a prelude to heavy U.S. airstrikes against the militias.”

Such military action could quickly escalate into a confrontation with Iran, which is already escalating on other fronts. A US Navy carrier strike group has been sent through the strategic Strait of Hormuz into the Persian Gulf for the first time since last November. The deployment comes as the Trump administration has arrogantly claimed the right to unilaterally reimpose United Nations sanctions that were lifted under the 2015 nuclear agreement between Tehran and the major powers, a deal that Washington unilaterally abrogated.

Chief among the sanctions that the US is now claiming is the right to enforce a ban on the export of conventional weapons to Iran that is set to expire in the middle of next month. Both Russia and China are prepared to resume such exports. The US vow to continue enforcing the ban raises the prospect of American warships seizing Russian or Chinese vessels in the Persian Gulf or on the high seas.

The threat of direct conflict between US imperialism and its two major nuclear rivals continues to escalate across a wide field of military operations.

The Pentagon is staging nearly continuous provocative military exercises on Russia’s borders. Last week, it brought along NBC’s chief foreign correspondent Richard Engel, who flew in an Air Force F16 as US warplanes simulated large-scale “dogfights” on the border with Russia. As an “embedded” reporter, Engel cast the aerial provocation in heroic terms.

This operation follows by only weeks, live fire exercises in Estonia involving what the US Army described as “multiple launch rocket systems” in shooting range of Russia. Moscow’s embassy in Washington described the

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action as “provocative and extremely dangerous for regional stability.” It asked, “How would the Americans react in the event of such shooting by our military at the US border?”

Meanwhile, Washington is staging relentless provocations against China, particularly over the island of Taiwan, where a pair of visits by high-level US officials over the past two months, combined with multibillion-dollar arms sales, have been directed at strengthening US-Taiwanese relations and effectively overturning the “One China” policy that has been central to US-China relations for more than 40 years.

In what Beijing has justifiably interpreted as a gross provocation and unconcealed threat, *Military Review*, the US Army’s principal publication, dedicated its entire September-October issue to the prospect of a US war with China over Taiwan, based on the premise of Beijing’s military takeover of the island.

One article in the Army journal is titled “Drive Them into the Sea” and advocates “dispatching an Army heavy corps to Taiwan” that “will drive the enemy into the sea.”

Another, written by a US Marine Corps officer, titled “Deterring the Dragon: Returning U.S. Forces to Taiwan,” expresses concern over the People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) military advances, particularly in terms of intermediate range missiles, and calls for deploying American troops to Taiwan. It concludes, “America needs to posture its forces in a way that would inevitably trigger a larger conflict and make plain its commitment to Taiwanese defense,” adding “it would be extremely unlikely that the U.S. government would not commit to a larger conflict after U.S. ground forces were engaged in Taiwan.”

The triggering of a direct military conflict in any one of these arenas could provide Trump with his “October surprise” at the potential cost of a massive loss of life and a spiraling conflict leading to world war. The aim would not be so much to sway voters, as Trump is not pursuing a strategy based on the popular vote which he failed to win in the 2016 election, but rather on creating the conditions for a coup d’état aimed at consolidating a presidential dictatorship and violently suppressing all opposition. War could serve as the pretext for making good on his threats to invoke the Insurrection Act and impose martial law.

Trump’s ostensible political opposition, the Democratic Party and its presidential candidate Joe Biden, have only helped to create the conditions for such a military provocation and its far-reaching political consequences. They have repeatedly denounced Trump for being too “soft” on Russia and China, including in the wake of a recent crash between US and Russian armored cars in Syria, in which they demanded retaliation for the minor injuries suffered by American soldiers.

Given this reality, in the event of a US military engagement against Russia or China, the Democrats would throw their support behind Trump’s war effort.

Underlying the threat of war is the insoluble crisis of the capitalist system and the turn by US imperialism toward military aggression as a means of offsetting the decline of its global hegemony. This has only been intensified by the uncontrolled spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, mass unemployment, poverty and growing social unrest. America’s ruling oligarchy seeks to divert these intense and insoluble domestic tensions outward in the form of an eruption of militarism.

The struggle against war, along with the fight against the devastation of jobs, living standards and the very lives of workers, as Republicans and Democrats alike pursue the homicidal back-to-work and back-to-school agenda, cannot be waged within the framework of the Trump-Biden electoral contest. Regardless of the outcome of the 2020 election, the drive toward war and dictatorship will continue.

The threat of war and all of the life-and-death questions confronting the vast majority of the American people can be confronted only by means of the independent political mobilization of the working class in the fight for socialism. This poses the need for the formation of rank-and-file workplace and neighborhood committees to organize this struggle and the fight for a political general strike to halt Trump’s dictatorial conspiracies and topple his government.

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