

UN chief warns against the march to world war

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The warning issued Tuesday by the secretary general of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres, that the confrontation developing on the Korean peninsula increasingly resembles the events that led to the outbreak of the First World War over a century ago deserve to be taken with deadly seriousness.

“Wars usually do not start by a decision taken in a moment by the parties to go to war,” he said. “If you look at the history of the First World War, it was on a step-by-step basis, one party doing one thing, the other party doing another, and then an escalation taking place... This is the risk we need to avoid in relation to the situation of North Korea.”

Without mentioning Donald Trump and the cabal of active duty and retired generals who are overseeing the ever-more bellicose and reckless US policy by name, Guterres was clearly referring to them in warning that “Confrontational rhetoric may lead to unintended consequences. The solution must be political.” He added, “The potential consequences of military action are too horrific.”

While couched in the solicitous rhetoric that the United Nations reserves for dealing with the worldwide crimes and provocations of US imperialism, the significance of Guterres’ remarks was unmistakable. The “unintended consequences” of the provocative threats being made by Washington to launch a so-called “preventive war” against North Korea may prove to be a military clash that escalates into a global nuclear war.

The founding charter of the United Nations declared in its first sentence that the mission of the organization was “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind.” That the head of the organization warns humanity that it is facing such “untold sorrow” for a third time on a scale that would far eclipse the carnage of World War I and World War II is, one would think, a matter of no small public interest.

Nor are Guterres’ statements unique. Last month, German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel compared the standoff between the US and North Korea to the descent of Europe into World War I. The danger, he said, was that “like in World War I, we will sleepwalk into war. Only this time it might be a nuclear war.”

Similarly last month, James Clapper, until January of this year the US Director of National Intelligence, stated in a television interview that the situation on the Korean Peninsula was “somewhat reminiscent to me of the history of World War I and how the world kind of blundered into that. I hope people learn from history here and don’t repeat that.”

These stark warnings, however, have largely fallen on deaf ears. There is no reporting or serious commentary concerning the threat of nuclear war and its implications for the population of the United States and the entire planet in the US corporate media. No major figure in either the Republican or Democratic Party has issued a warning or called for a debate over the intensely dangerous and provocative course being pursued by the Trump administration in relation to North Korea.

The various organizations and publications of the pseudo-left, which orbit around the Democratic Party, are maintaining strict radio silence on the war danger. None of them have any interests in exposing this threat to the American people, much less in fighting to organize a movement of workers and youth against it.

The grim reality of what is being prepared is being discussed more frankly in military think-tanks and publications. One such article, written by Rob Givens, a former Air Force general who served as the deputy assistant chief of staff for US military operations in Korea, warned that war on the Korean Peninsula “once unimaginable is becoming more possible.”

The opening of such a conflict, he writes, would see “US bombers from around the world” brought in, so that “Every square foot of North Korea would be in range.”

“North Korea’s casualties would be appalling,” he writes. “The estimates are that we would inflict 20,000 casualties on the North each day of combat.” At the same time, he writes, it is estimated that North Korea would “inflict 20,000 casualties a day just in Seoul during the first few days.”

Massive loss of human life, he warns, “would be unavoidable.”

“We will use cluster weapons that spread bomblets over areas the size of football fields,” he writes. “We will return artillery fire wherever enemy batteries are firing. When optimum for military conditions, we will hit targets in the middle of urban areas; it would be impossible to prevent civilian casualties. To fight effectively, we will have to bomb command facilities in the heart of neighborhoods. We will destroy missiles on mobile launchers even if they are placed in sensitive areas. Our ground forces will pour fire into the enemy without an excessive regard for damage. And, yes, we will bomb targets more widely than in recent decades.” The death toll, he affirms, would make the millions killed and maimed during “our last 16 years of active combat in the Middle East pale in comparison.”

What is described here is a war crime of Hitlerian dimensions. And yet, it is, in the insane calculus of modern imperialist war planners, the “best case scenario” in which a new Korean War involves neither an exchange of nuclear attacks, nor the drawing in of nuclear-armed China and Russia, which both border North Korea and are both locked in tense confrontations with Washington from the South China Sea, to Syria and Eastern Europe.

Avoiding either catastrophic eventuality is unlikely, as was made clear over the past two days, with the US deploying additional launchers Thursday for its THAAD missile defense system in the face of popular protest in South Korea and denunciations by Beijing that the system is really aimed at China, and would facilitate a nuclear first strike against it. Two days earlier, China tested its own anti-missile systems near the North Korean border. Signaling that the exercise was in preparation for confrontation with the US, the *South China Morning Post* quoted a Beijing-based naval expert as saying the drill demonstrated that “China is prepared and able to stop any power that threatens stability in the region.”

While the rapid escalation of military confrontation between June and August of 1914 that produced the slaughterhouse of World War I no doubt involved “unintended consequences” and “blunders,” on the part of the various ruling dynasties and bourgeois

governments of Europe, the cause of the war was rooted in contradictions of the global capitalist system as a whole, above all between the global advance and integration of humanity’s productive forces and the continued division of the planet by the system of rival nation-states in which the capitalist system is rooted.

As Trotsky explained in *The War and the International*, written in 1915 in the midst of the war, the capitalist powers sought to resolve this contradiction not through the “intelligent, organised cooperation of all of humanity’s producers, but through the exploitation of the world’s economic system by the capitalist class of the victorious country.” The war, he wrote, represented “the most colossal breakdown in history of an economic system destroyed by its own inherent contradictions.”

A century later, these contradictions, far from being resolved, have been intensified by capitalist globalization and the unrelenting drive by US imperialism to counter its decline on the stage of world capitalism by asserting its global hegemony through the ever more aggressive and reckless use of military force.

But war is not the only expression of insoluble contradictions of the world capitalist system. They also lay the objective material foundations for social revolution. The taking of power by the Russian working class under the leadership of the Bolshevik Party 100 years ago sounded the death knell of the First World War.

The task confronting the working class today is to prevent the outbreak of a third world war, which could only end in a nuclear conflagration that humanity would not survive. The most urgent task is the development of a mass political movement of the working class in opposition to war and its source, the capitalist system.

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