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USA

Endless Wars, Swirling Chaos.

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Below we publish two pieces on the Singapore summit from comrades in Solidarity in the United States. The first is the editorial in the next issue of their magazine *Against the Current*, which went to press before the summit itself. The second from David Finkel, was written afterwards.

The Singapore summit happened, and both principals got what they were looking for. Kim Jong-un received an important measure of international recognition, apparent suspension of U.S.-South Korean war exercises, and implicit promises against tighter sanctions; Donald Trump's prize was a well-orchestrated photo-op and press conference in the wake of his disastrous G-7 conference performance. (To our knowledge, plans for a Trump Tower in Pyongyang haven't crystallized.)

As our readers well know, it's unusually confusing and difficult to discern elements of policy within the swirling chaos of scandal, nationalist bluster and Trumptweet emanating from the administration. Furthermore, the string of war threats with North Korea before the summit, and more menacingly with Iran can't be neatly separated from the vicious reactionary, racist and ecocidal domestic agenda of Trump and his Republicanmen.

A toxic combination of factors the permanent imperialist U.S. drive to rule the world (so-called "strategic interest"), ideologically driven folly, Trump's ego and blatant political pandering to his base are involved. We'll try to partially sort out some of them here, recognizing that things can change quickly and unpredictably.

Endless war, of course, didn't begin with Trump and his cons. It's conventionally repeated that Afghanistan, since the post 9-11 U.S. invasion, has been "America's longest war." Actually, that's not even close: The Korean War, beginning in 1950 with an armistice reached in 1953, never officially ended. It's a story barely mentioned in American history school curricula, since it didn't end in "victory."

Korean Division and Crisis

With Japan's defeat in World War II and the end of its occupation of Korea, the victorious powers divided the peninsula between a Communist government in the north and a U.S.-occupied southern zone. Following rounds of provocations on all sides, war broke out in 1950.

After halting an initial North Korean invasion, U.S. General Douglas MacArthur carried an offensive into the North all the way to the Chinese border, bringing China into the war. The United States bombed the North into near-oblivion, including its agricultural dikes.

The fighting ended in a bloody stalemate, leaving two Koreas in a permanent state of imminent confrontation. The global Cold War ended with the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, but the Korean conflict seemed permanently frozen with periodic bloody flare-ups.

Over the decades, North Korea devolved into a grim semi-autarkic extreme nationalist family dynasty (Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, Kim Jong-un) flying a Communist flag of convenience. South Korea meanwhile suffered a long period of U.S.-supported military and presidential dictatorship where popular opposition movements were brutally crushed

with over 600 people killed in the May, 1980 Kwangju massacre alone.

After long democratic struggles, South Korea has developed a political system with not only free elections, but where the recent corrupt president Park Geun-hye was removed from office, convicted and even imprisoned a development comparing favorably to a certain country that we won't name here. Her successor Moon Jae-in moved to open up what might possibly be a generational opportunity to resolve the crisis of the Korean peninsula.

Trump appeared to blow up that chance, citing North Korea's expressions of "tremendous anger and open hostility," diplomatic interventions salvaged the U.S.-North Korean summit that took place just before our press time.

Whatever may eventually result from the meeting, a relaxation of tensions and U.S. "fire and fury" threats is obviously a good thing. The official U.S. expectation that North Korea's "denuclearization" would be unilateral, irreversible and essentially instantaneous is an obvious non-starter. The reality is that North Korea is now an actually-existing nuclear state and isn't going to disarm unilaterally, let alone quickly.

Will the United States recognize that in practice, if not officially? It would actually make strategic (although not ideological) sense to do so, since North Korea hasn't proven the technical capacity to deliver a bomb-carrying missile to the North American continent and the Pyongyang regime certainly knows that it's much safer without that apocalyptic ability, so long as its real status is accepted in practice.

There does happen to be one meaningful case of a state giving up its nuclear weapons capacity in exchange for entering the commercial and political "international community" not Muammar Qaddafi's Libya or Saddam Hussein's Iraq, but post-apartheid South Africa. Why the U.S. administration doesn't mention that example is left as an exercise for the reader (maybe because there's no Trump Tower in Johannesburg?).

Iran, Palestine: Strategy and Ideology

Meanwhile, Team Trump finished dynamiting the corpse of the Israel-Palestine "peace process" by moving the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. The grotesque ceremony unfolded while unarmed Palestinian protesters and medical workers at the Gaza border were being mowed down by Israeli snipers with the most sophisticated weapons and high-velocity bullets on the very anniversary of al-Nakba, the Palestinian catastrophe that birthed the Israeli state in 1948. [1]

This action had little to do with strategic interest, but was about U.S. domestic politics mainly targeting Trump's most loyal evangelical Christian fundamentalist base, for whom protecting Israel's supremacy is a sacred American duty, a sign of the coming Rapture and Armageddon.

Most ominously, Trump has severed U.S. participation in the multilateral nuclear deal with Iran, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action [2]

While Trump spews tweets like the Kilauea volcano spits lava flows, in politics as in geology what happens under the surface is more important. A great Israeli human rights campaigner and political critic, Professor Israel Shahak, observed that the actions of state powers and elites in their strategic or material interests were dangerous, but ideologically motivated acts much more so.

Shahak had in mind examples from European history and the modern Middle East, particularly the influence of Jewish religious fundamentalism in Israel. How to understand the toxic tangle of U.S. motivations in the Middle East today?

The catastrophic 2003 invasion of Iraq was motivated in part by a drive to control oil supplies and markets, in part by domestic political calculations, but also partly by ideological conviction that the United States was mandated to control and reshape the Middle East to its own wishes leading to imperial overreach with the most devastating consequences. That's how Iran became the power it is today.

Trump's withdrawal from the Iran deal is at least as ideologically driven as George W. Bush's war, if not more so. With today's climate changing in more ways than one it has much less to do with direct control of oil, in the context of a glutted market and depressed prices.

In part it's an exercise to show that the United States can not only impose crippling economic sanctions on Iran, but enforce them on global corporations despite European, Russian and Chinese opposition. Trump is trying to demonstrate his power to ram the unilateral U.S. policy on Iran down the throats of a weakened European Union and particularly the EU's main leader, German chancellor Angela Merkel. This power play intersects with Trump's crude attempt to impose U.S. trade terms on Europe and on the NAFTA negotiations and with his friendships with Israel and the Saudi monarchy.

On the other hand, the absurdity of the demands on Iran laid out by new Secretary of State Mike Pompeo that Iran not only surrender its entire enrichment capacity but end its regional commitments in Syria, Yemen and Lebanon crosses the line into other-worldly ideological fantasy and a road toward war. The dead-end neoconservatives who still think that invading Iraq was a good idea now want to double down on it having had Iran in their sights as the ultimate prize back then, and believing that the present is their moment to "finish the job." Why would the Iranian regime give in to arrogant U.S. demands now, when Washington has so isolated itself?

It's necessary to review what the JCPOA was, what it wasn't and what it could never be in the real world. The deal with Iran halted regional nuclear proliferation on a verifiable basis. It did not change the character of any hideous regime not Iran, not Saudi Arabia, not Egypt or any other. It could not prevent the malicious mischief perpetrated by regional and outside imperial powers Iran and Saudi Arabia and Turkey, Russia and the United States.

It could not put an end to the civilian holocaust in Syria or the endless disaster in Afghanistan, or Israel's continuing massacre and settlement expansion in Palestine.

The Iranian rulers for their part, despite all their "marching on Jerusalem" rhetoric, have never intended to go to war with Israel. The nuclear program they undertook in the 1980s was a response to Saddam Hussein's Iraq, which invaded Iran with U.S. encouragement and began a decade-long war that included the use of poison gas and the danger of biological and chemical warfare.

The U.S. military command, for its part, is aware that war with Iran is "winnable" only with all-out firepower up to and possibly including "tactical" nuclear weapons. That's where ideological insanity and strategic reality would meet, with incalculable consequences.

New Antiwar Movement Needed

Is the United States on the road to (a) war, (b) fiscal bankruptcy, (c) political and Constitutional crisis, (d) all of the above? The present regime occupying the White House has a legitimate shot at hitting the trifecta and that doesn't even count provoking a trade war with Washington's closest allies in North America and Europe. These are not inevitable outcomes, and political action and social struggle can influence the results.

The United States' drive to control the world obviously didn't begin with Trump. His delusional belief in unilateral U.S. muscle in military as well as trade matters is dangerous and frightening, but runs up against real-world facts that North Korea is a nuclear-armed state, that Washington by itself can't bring down the Iranian regime, that the Palestinian people will not surrender or disappear.

Meanwhile, the United States can't extricate itself from Syria and Afghanistan, despite president Obama's efforts and Trump's bluster, and Washington's efforts to conceal the real extent of its continuing military involvements.

At the same time, the U.S. population is sick of these endless wars and certainly doesn't want another one not Trump's voter base, nor the majority who detest him. Even conventional militarists think it's a bad idea. Only ideologues and some half-crazed Christian fundamentalists think that war with North Korea or Iran would solve anything or "make America great again."

Right now, a U.S.-backed Saudi offensive is creating an unimaginable catastrophe in Yemen. Yet at this dangerous moment, the peace movement itself is weak. The mid-April antiwar actions in several cities were generally small and had little ongoing impact. In part, of course, a great deal of energy is quite rightly devoted to fighting this administration's brutal policies at home. And frankly speaking, antiwar organizing is weakened and divided on the one hand, by forces who want to channel the movement into Democratic Party electoral campaigns, and on the other by the sick politics of some left currents that support the Syrian Assad and North Korean regimes.

These obstacles won't be overcome quickly or easily. But in the event that today's dangerous flashpoints erupt into shooting wars, the existing antiwar sentiments of tens of millions of people in this country will need to be crystallized and organized. We salute the work of Code Pink, Voices for Creative Nonviolence and others who carry on the heroic tradition of resistance to the insanity of war.

It will be incumbent on the healthy currents of the peace movement to recognize that we represent the feelings of the majority, and take responsibility to act accordingly.

July/August 2018

After Singapore, Are We Safer and What Next?

"Little rocket man" is now, in Donald Trump's tweetworld, "the very talented and smart leader who loves his people." Even better, when Kim Jong-un speaks, "his people sit up and listen. I wish it was like that here." Indeed.

To be fair, Trump is not solely responsible for the twisted form the debate over North Korea has taken after the Singapore summit. While he proclaims that the "North Korean nuclear menace" is over, leading Democrats seem to be channeling their inner John Bolton, denouncing Trump for giving Kim respectability and suspending provocative war games (yes, that's what they are) without getting tangible concessions from Pyongyang.

Let's state the most important fact first. Yes, after Singapore the world is a little safer, because the main threat of catastrophe on the Korean peninsula has receded: the immediate danger that the United States, as Bolton advocated, would launch an attack on North Korea or that the North Korean military might mistake a too-well-simulated U.S. attack for the real thing, with incalculable consequences. That the United States was the most dangerous potential aggressor remains, of course, unstated in post-summit punditry.

As for the summit itself, who got "played" by whom? Both principals got what they wanted: Kim Jong-un got a measure of international recognition and an implicit promise of relaxed sanctions almost surely, China and Russia will unofficially be letting up on sanctions enforcement -while Trump got his big-time photo-op and press conference (and maybe long-term dreams for Trump Towers and resorts on those fabulous beaches).

The aftermath is less clear. North Korea is now, in fact, a proven nuclear-armed state, and the question is whether the United States will accept that reality in fact, although obviously not officially. The delusion of "complete, verifiable and irreversible de-nuclearization" is a fantasy that can only have further destabilizing implications. (For some historical background and context on the post-World War II division of Korea, see the editorial statement above.)

Meanwhile, an even more dangerous scenario is developing as the U.S. administration is seeking to destroy what's left of the multilateral nuclear agreement with Iran a campaign setting the Trump regime against the closest U.S. European allies, the overwhelming majority of world public opinion, and elementary common sense, although the Democrats' defense of the deal negotiated by president Obama has been rather feeble. It's a far "better" deal, in fact, that anything the United States can ever hope to get with North Korea.

Since the nuclear deal was negotiated under the Obama administration, there's been a wave of pro-American popular feeling in Iran. That will now change, as people's hopes for improvement in their lives are dashed. Further, Trump's move immediately plays into the hands of the most reactionary forces in Iran's internal factional blood feud, at the expense of the reform-minded moderate supporters of president Hasan Rouhani. New arrests and repressive crackdowns on women and human rights defenders like attorney Nasrin Sotoudeh show that religious fundamentalists who control the courts are emboldened. Tight U.S. sanctions on Iran, while they badly hurt Iran's economy and ordinary people, also enable leading elements in the Revolutionary Guards to enrich themselves through control of smuggling and sanctions-busting schemes.

The Trump gambit also aims at forcing European companies to withdraw from investing in Iran, due to the pressure of crippling U.S. secondary and financial sanctions. It's doing this when the European Union is severely weakened by crises that could threaten the future of the eurozone and even the EU itself and at the same time that European states and the U.S. may be locking into a round of mutually damaging tariffs and counter-tariffs. Although the major European nations have said they intend to protect their companies against U.S. financial blackmail, whether they can effectively do so is very much in question. Chinese investment will step in to partly fill the gap.

If the deal collapses completely, the Iranian regime will resume nuclear enrichment and the world will be a step closer to the war that Israel and Saudi Arabia, Trump's closest Middle East allies, openly advocate.

Exploiting European weakness, the Trump gang is aligning with Israel and Saudi Arabia in the expectation of crushing Iran and restoring U.S. rule over the world. Already, the nation of Yemen is "collateral damage" as the United States enables the Saudi and United Arab Emirates' destruction of that country.

What might happen first another hideous Middle East war, or a full-scale U.S.-China trade war that crashes the global markets? Do we really want to find out? If not, we need a new antiwar and social justice movement on a scale we haven't seen in decades.

June 22, 2018

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[1] For the extent of the resulting medical horror in Gaza, see the report in the British Medical Journal, <https://www.bmj.com/content/349/bmj...>

[2] JCPOA. A statement by Solidarity, "Trump's Road to War Why?" is online at https://solidarity-us.org/trump_war_dash/