

The Libyan war and the deepening inter-imperialist conflict

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The joint statement issued Thursday by US President Barack Obama, President Nicolas Sarkozy of France and British Prime Minister David Cameron on Libya not only escalates the war. It also intensifies the political divisions within Europe that are in the background of the neo-colonial operation in North Africa. While the war is marketed as a “humanitarian” enterprise, little if any attention is being paid—at least in public—to the increasingly bitter dispute between France, Britain and the United States on one side and Germany on the other.

The most remarkable feature of the joint statement was that it was not issued by the European Union (EU) or even the NATO military alliance. Rather, it appeared in French and English, under the byline of President Sarkozy of France, Prime Minister Cameron of Great Britain, and President Obama of the United States. The statement did not include the byline of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, whose government had earlier abstained on the United Nations resolution authorizing the initial assault on Libya. And yet, this statement vastly expands the war aims of the participating powers—from the defense of civilians to a policy of regime change in Libya. Headlined “The bombing continues until Gaddafi goes,” and published in the *Washington Post*, the *Times* of London, *Le Figaro*, the *International Herald Tribune* and *al-Hayat*, the statement proclaims that “it is impossible to imagine a future for Libya with [Colonel Muammar] Gaddafi in power.” It dismisses any other outcome of the conflict as a “betrayal.”

The split between Germany and France is of great significance, as the two countries have historically played the leading role in creating the political framework of post-World War II Europe and are the largest economies using the euro, the common European currency.

Though many observers expressed surprise over the German government’s abstention on last month’s vote, it followed logically from differences that had previously emerged when Germany opposed Sarkozy’s efforts to build a French-dominated Mediterranean Union (UM). Sarkozy first proposed creating such an institution

during his election campaign in 2007.

Berlin criticized the proposal as an independent initiative, made outside a European context and conceived in the interests of France. As initially outlined, it would have included only countries with Mediterranean coastlines—excluding Germany, Britain and the Scandinavian countries. It would have provided financial subsidies and a privileged forum for France’s dealings not only with its former colonies in Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, but also with key trading partners of Germany in the Balkans and Turkey.

Sarkozy calculated that the new union would boost France’s strategic influence while at the same time producing gigantic profits on the backs of workers on the European and Arab shores of the Mediterranean. As French trade deficits with Germany rose, French economists and politicians hoped that these UM plans would help Paris pursue policies of outsourcing and industrial collaboration with cheap-labor Mediterranean countries and help them compete with German firms.

The Northern European political establishment opposed Sarkozy’s plans for “throwing fresh millions southwards over the sea,” in the words of Switzerland’s *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*. Merkel persuaded Sarkozy to allow all the EU countries into his planned UM in March 2008.

In the March issue of *Mediterranean Politics*, Tobias Schumacher of the University Institute of Lisbon explains the German objections:

“Merkel argued that the creation of a UM that included only Mediterranean riparians [i.e., states with Mediterranean coastlines] had the potential to set in motion gravitational forces within the EU that could generate a process of fragmentation and, eventually, disintegration. She reminded Sarkozy, and hence all other EU governments, that the use of EU funding for the pursuit of exclusively national interests could not be justified. Fully aware that these arguments would raise concern among the governments of other EU member states, she hardly missed an occasion to

make her message heard, with the aim of bringing potentially diverse perceptions in line with one another and thereby signaling to other potential veto-players that Germany was determined to oppose any proposal based on exclusion of some EU member states. Obviously, this strategy was intended to portray Merkel as acting in defense of the ‘common good,’ i.e., the very existence of European integration and EU-European commonality. On the other hand, the rationale underlying this strategy was to prevent France from becoming *primus inter pares* in European foreign policy matters and thereby undermining Germany’s role as the leading actor within the EU and to preclude a resurgence of French colonial ambitions.”

Significantly, Gaddafi was another outspoken opponent of Sarkozy’s UM plans. He called the initiative “an insult” that was “taking us for fools” and insisted that European powers “go through Cairo and Addis Ababa,” the headquarters of the Arab League and the African Union, respectively.

Apparently sensing the vast interests and dangers involved in such plans, Gaddafi backtracked on plans for multi-billion-dollar purchases of French Rafale fighter jets. This further incensed the French government, which was desperate to market these planes.

After the 2008 US mortgage collapse, the financial imbalances inside Europe led to the debt crisis that began in Greece in 2009. Tensions rose as the European powers fought over economic policy and handouts to their respective banks. After a meeting last May where Sarkozy allegedly threatened to pull France out of the euro in order to force Germany to contribute to a bailout fund, European Central Bank chief Jean-Claude Trichet said that Europe faced “the most difficult situation since the Second World War.”

Despite French chagrin over the overthrow of the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia in January, the ensuing unrest in Egypt and throughout the Middle East provided Sarkozy with an opportunity. He seized upon the unrest in Libya as a means of advancing the same French interests in North Africa that had been previously blocked by Germany. On March 10, Sarkozy became the first head of state to recognize the Benghazi-based Transitional National Council as the Libyan government, and then pressed for a UN Security Council resolution to allow him to go to war with Gaddafi.

As he pursued this game, Sarkozy knew that he could rely on the fraternity of pseudo-left parties—such as the Socialist Party, the New Anti-Capitalist Party and the Green organizations to beatify an imperialist war as a humanitarian exercise in protecting civilian lives. With their typical

combination of stupidity and deceit, these parties obliged, exposing their role as trusted cogs in the imperialist propaganda machine.

It is difficult to believe, however, that the Western governments can have been completely blind to the broader historical implications of their actions. For its part, Britain has encouraged Sarkozy’s ambitions in order to wean France from its ties to Germany and undermine the political influence of Berlin. Washington, by consenting to France’s assault on Libya, calculates that it will not have to contend with opposition to future American military operations from Paris.

The common front of what former Defense Secretary Rumsfeld derided as “Old Europe” has broken apart. However, it is not to be assumed that Obama has fully worked through the implications of his support for Sarkozy’s schemes. By participating in a war publicly opposed by Berlin, Washington has all but repudiated its decades-long policy of maintaining the political and military unity of Western Europe. It is exacerbating intra-European tensions on a continent already riven by conflicts over economic policies. As has happened in the past, Germany—fearing that it has been outmaneuvered and isolated by its historical adversaries—will look for other means to protect its interests. Once again, Washington has set into motion events which will have disastrous consequences.

The war on Libya is but one move on a global imperialist chessboard. The war-makers are not playing with wooden pieces, however, but with the lives of millions in Libya and throughout the world. With its far-reaching impact on the geo-political stability of the international capitalist order, the war sets the stage for far wider and more devastating conflicts.

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