

# Tensions rise at Franco-British and Franco-German summits

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7 March 2016

Both the March 3 Franco-British summit in Amiens and the meeting between French President François Hollande and German Chancellor Angela Merkel on March 4 in Paris lay bare deep tensions rising between the major European imperialist powers.

The “34th Franco-British meeting” between Hollande and Prime Minister David Cameron, together with their foreign and defense ministers, had broad symbolism and consequences. It was linked to the commemoration of the Battle of the Somme, one of the deadliest offensives against Germany during World War I, and stressed Franco-British “sacrifice.”

There was stunning absence of any representative of the German government in the ceremonies, and of any allusion in official statements to German losses, which at a half-million men was on the same level as the Franco-British forces. At a press conference at the Amiens museum, Hollande said, “I want to stress that the British Commonwealth paid a heavy price, a heavy sacrifice, to defend our country and to preserve liberty. Again, I want to salute the memory of the fallen.”

The summit mainly centered on reinforcing military ties between France and Britain. Officials from the two countries stressed above all the importance of military cooperation and decided on a series of measures in this area.

The common declaration stated, “France and Great Britain are the main guarantors of security in Europe and the main investors in European defense. Our strategic defense partnership is essential to allow us to attain our common objectives across the world.”

An associated declaration on “security and defense” containing specific measures on military cooperation reaffirms the importance of the 2010 Lancaster House treaty between France and Britain, which it called an “unprecedented ambition.” It adds, “bilateral defense

relations, already rich, have been intensified. ... We are determined on this issue to push for a new stage of these relations in 2016.”

These measures include the accelerated development of common weapons systems, including a 2 billion-pound program to develop a military drone. Another project is the development of a joint expeditionary force of 7,000 men that will carry out its first operations next month in Great Britain.

“We have attained an unprecedented level of interoperability. France and Britain can from now on consider planning and carrying out a first deployment with rapid reaction forces of both countries,” the statement declared. It also stressed the independent and common role of the two countries' nuclear forces. It stated, “France and Britain reaffirm the unique and essential role that nuclear deterrence continues to play in their respective defense strategies.”

On the nuclear issue, the two countries announced the upcoming construction of two nuclear reactors at Hinckley Point on the west coast of Britain.

The Franco-British rapprochement occurs amid a surge in tensions between Paris and Berlin. These emerged openly at last month's Munich Security Conference, where French Prime Minister Manuel Valls publicly attacked Merkel's refugee policy.

Since the 2011 NATO war in Libya, which Germany refused to join, Berlin's foreign and military policy has shifted radically. In early 2014, its leaders proclaimed an aggressive foreign policy and the end of “military restraint.” Since then, they have launched a return to great-power geopolitics and a policy of rearmament, triggering broad fears among Germany's European rivals. Germany plays an increasingly active role in numerous conflicts, including in Africa and in Syria, and an increasingly important role inside NATO.

Leaders of French and British imperialism are terrified and feel the need for a common alliance. This is what the regional newspaper *Courrier Picard* expressed in its article after the Amiens summit, in an article titled “The *Entente cordiale* resurrected in the Somme,” referring to the World War I-era Franco-British alliance against Germany.

The fundamental rivalry between French and British imperialism remains. When Cameron proposed a referendum on Brexit and demanded concessions for Britain to stay in the European Union (EU), he provoked overtly hostile reactions in Paris. Foreign Affairs Minister Laurent Fabius accused him of wanting “Europe à la carte.” Before the summit, Economy Minister Emmanuel Macron provocatively declared that if Britain left the EU, he would “roll out the red carpet” in Paris to financial firms now based in London but who need access to the common European market.

The March 4 meeting between Merkel and Hollande in Paris revealed the fraught state of relations between the two governments. Merkel went to Paris to try to obtain French support for her refugee policy: a hermetic sealing of the EU's external borders, the detaining of refugees by Turkey and a permanent quota system to distribute refugees among EU countries.

Hollande limited himself to repeating that France had previously agreed to greet 30,000 refugees in France, echoing Valls' comments at Munich. He only proposed to contribute one warship to the German-led NATO operation to monitor and turn back refugees in the Aegean Sea.

After the meeting, the German daily *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* wrote, “German hopes that Hollande would be favorable to Merkel's long-term plan to take refugees from Turkey, however, were in vain,” while *Wirtschaftsnachrichten* declared, “Chancellor Merkel has had to swallow a serious defeat on her refugee policy.”

Numerous commentators forecast that relations between the two countries are lastingly damaged by rising tensions between Paris and Berlin. *Zeit online* wrote, “Before the refugee summit, nothing can hide the fact that deep disagreements exist.” After the Munich conference, the German government had declared, in an attempt to maintain a semblance of normality in Franco-German relations, “Valls is not the

person who speaks to Merkel.”

*Le Monde* reacted to the failure of the summit by writing, “But where is France? Why is it not stepping up to the plate, to make the voice heard of Germany's leading political partner, as the refugee crisis turns into a nightmare threatening Europe's very existence?”

It is now clear that the enormous political and economic crisis of capitalism is creating enormous tensions between the European imperialist states that place again on the order of the day military conflicts between them, including in Europe itself. While Germany reacts to insoluble contradictions that already twice in the 20th century led it to try to conquer Europe to become a world power, France and Britain are again tending to ally themselves against their economically dominant and increasingly militarily powerful rival.



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