

EU leaders call for rapid British exit and European military buildup

Alex Lantier
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German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French President François Hollande and Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi met in Berlin yesterday to discuss Britain's vote to exit the European Union. The leaders of the three largest euro zone economies held a joint press conference in advance of a two-day EU summit that begins today in Brussels. At the press conference, they pushed for a rapid exit by Britain and a massive build-up of EU military and police operations.

Despite the carefully scripted character of their remarks, it was clear that the Brexit vote has unleashed a series of financial and political crises with vast global ramifications. Stunned by Brexit, the EU is trying to integrate its remaining 27 member states on the basis of a further shift to the right, including increased austerity and a militarist foreign policy. This sets the stage not only for an escalation of attacks on the working class, but also for explosive international conflicts, including with Washington.

Merkel had previously distanced herself from demands that Britain immediately invoke Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty to initiate talks on the terms of its exit from the EU. Following the unexpected victory of the Leave campaign in last Thursday's referendum, British Prime Minister David Cameron had announced that he would resign as Conservative Party leader and prime minister following the party conference in October and leave it to his successor to invoke Article 50.

Yesterday, however, Merkel aligned herself with European leaders demanding that London move rapidly to leave the EU. She declared, "We are united in considering that Article 50 of European treaties makes very clear that an EU member state that would like to leave the EU must notify the EU Council. Before this has taken place, no further step can be undertaken... This means, and on this we are united, that no informal or formal talks on a British exit from the EU can take place before a formal request on a British exit from the EU lies before the EU Council."

Warning against anything that could "strengthen centrifugal tendencies," Merkel called for a new "impulse" to drive forward the EU after Brexit. She identified as key issues the buildup of military and police forces and the boosting of business competitiveness.

With European and American stock markets continuing to

tumble, Hollande cited the danger of a financial panic to justify a rapid separation of the EU from Britain. "Our responsibility is not to lose time in dealing with the issue of the British exit from the EU," he said, "or [providing] the new impulse we need to give to the 27-member EU." He added, "Nothing is worse than uncertainty. It generates political conduct that is often irrational. Uncertainty also generates financial conduct that can be irrational. The UK is already undergoing painful experiences of this, both financially and politically."

After endorsing Merkel's proposal to boost military and security spending, Hollande called for "social and budgetary harmonization in the euro zone," saying that "this is one of our priorities." With the euro zone countries already carrying out draconian attacks on wages and social rights, boosting military spending and standardizing EU countries' budgets will inevitably involve new, even deeper attacks on working-class living standards.

Renzi, whose government is seeking EU approval for a new €40 billion bailout for the country's banks, said, "We are sad about the decision of the British citizens, but it is a new era for Europe."

EU calls for harsh treatment of Britain are exposing not only the breakdown of relations within Europe, but also a growth of tensions between Europe and the United States. US Secretary of State John Kerry flew to Europe yesterday to meet top EU and NATO officials. He warned the EU not to "start dreaming up vengeful premises" about how to deal with the Brexit crisis. Speaking to Italian Foreign Minister Paolo Gentiloni, he pointedly said that 22 EU member states were also in NATO, and that there should be "as much stability, as much certainty as possible."

In an article on Monday titled "With Brexit, Washington's Direct Line to the Continent Suddenly Frays," the *New York Times* aired concerns of US officials that Brexit has undermined the US-European alliance. Compared to Britain, the *Times* wrote, "few nations were as willing to put a thumb as firmly on the scales of European debates in ways that benefit the United States." The article, by David Sanger, the newspaper's chief Washington correspondent, went on to lament, "Now that quiet diplomatic leverage—including moderating European trade demands and strong-arming nations

to contribute more to NATO military missions—is suddenly diminished.”

Warning that “Germany still harbors deep suspicions of the United States,” and that “Paris often goes its own way,” the *Times* wrote that what made the US-UK relationship “special in an era of global diplomacy was Britain’s ability to act for Washington with the Europeans, to bridge the gap.” Sanger continued, “Now, as one White House official put it, the bridge has been wiped out by a surge that few predicted.”

The immediate aftermath of the referendum has already made clear that the Brexit crisis marks a historic turning point on a world scale, and that the rising conflict between the UK and the EU is charged with far wider conflicts deeply rooted in the contradictions of world imperialism.

The Brexit vote itself reflected the breakdown of the EU, undermined by deepening antagonisms between EU countries and widely discredited in the eyes of the working class as a result of years of austerity and social and economic retrogression. The bankruptcy of the EU and the impossibility of unifying Europe on a capitalist basis are only the expression within Europe of a broader, insoluble contradiction between globally integrated production and the nation-state system.

The last great crisis of British-European relations, French President Charles de Gaulle’s veto of British entry into the European Common Market in 1963 and 1967, was closely bound up with conflicts with Washington. Angry over rising US influence in France’s former colonial sphere, notably during Algeria’s war for independence from France, and frustrated by the economic advantages Washington derived from the dollar’s role as the world reserve currency, de Gaulle sought to limit US influence in Europe.

He withdrew France from the NATO military command and bluntly attacked Britain as a “Trojan horse” for US influence in Europe. After de Gaulle’s death, however, France bowed to the desire of other European countries to include Britain in the common market.

Over an entire period, however, tensions have been rising in US-European relations. The Stalinist dissolution of the USSR and the restoration of capitalism across Eastern Europe deprived the NATO alliance of the unifying effect of sharing a common adversary. Over the same period, the United States’ economic decline and its attempt to offset this decline by waging ever wider and bloodier wars in the Middle East and Africa, further intensified US-European tensions. France and Germany openly opposed the illegal 2003 US invasion of Iraq.

It is increasingly evident that the escalating US war drive against Russia and China in the aftermath of the 2008 Wall Street crash, which threatens to provoke a global nuclear war, has triggered deep opposition in sections of the European bourgeoisie. The EU countries defied the US “pivot to Asia” last year by joining China’s Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

Even though Berlin supported the 2014 Kiev putsch that

installed a pro-NATO government in Ukraine, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier recently denounced NATO military exercises led by the US and aimed at Russia as “warmongering.”

Now, threatened with being torn apart by the Brexit crisis, the EU is trying to survive by effecting a massive integration of its military and police forces, directed both at rising social anger at home and at external rivals, including the United States. This emerges clearly in documents prepared in advance of the EU summit that starts today—one by EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini and a second authored jointly by Steinmeier and French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault. Both are predicated on developing the EU’s ability to act militarily independently of Washington.

The Mogherini paper calls for “structured cooperation,” in which EU countries pool military equipment, units and their chains of command—essentially laying the basis for forming a common European army. “The EU will systematically encourage defense cooperation and strive to create a solid European defense industry, which is critical for Europe’s autonomy of decision and action,” the paper states.

The document reportedly indicates that Brexit will help repair the EU’s political and economic relations with Russia, which nosedived after Washington demanded that the EU impose punishing sanctions against Moscow. It says that the EU and Russia are “interdependent,” and pledges closer ties: “We will therefore engage Russia to discuss disagreements and to cooperate if and when our interests overlap.”

The Steinmeier-Ayrault paper, for its part, declares: “In an international environment ever more strongly characterized by diverging great power interests, France and Germany must work to develop the EU step by step as an independent global actor. The goal is to translate our knowledge and our civilian and military equipment into an ever more effective and realistic policy.”



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