

Divisions grow at EU summit over trans-Atlantic trade, war drive against Russia

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A two-day European Union (EU) summit ended yesterday in Brussels without agreement on the war in Syria, the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) with Canada, or Britain's exit from the EU.

It is ever clearer that this summer's Brexit vote marked a major step in an ongoing disintegration of the EU. Torn by multiple conflicts, above all over the US-led war drive against Russia and China and its relations with Washington, the EU is incapable not only of reaching a common agreement on policy, but of hiding the increasingly sharp tensions among its member states.

Monday's foreign ministers summit showed that the EU would reject US pressure for more sanctions against Russia over Syria, which threaten to cripple the EU's already moribund economy. Germany, Britain and France nonetheless hoped to push through an EU resolution hypocritically condemning Russian bombing of NATO-backed opposition militias in Aleppo and referring to the possibility of imposing more sanctions against Russia sometime in the future. This failed, however, due to opposition from Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi.

After long debates on Thursday night, EU leaders emerged after 2a.m. on Friday to lay out their conflicting positions on Syria and Russia.

With the Italian banking system on the verge of collapse and a constitutional referendum scheduled for December 4, Renzi apparently calculated that even mentioning sanctions was an intolerable threat to Italy, which has close trade and energy links to Russia.

"I think that to refer in the text to sanctions makes no sense," he said. "So I think the words we wrote in the final document are the right ones—to say we need to do everything possible to promote an agreement in Syria."

Renzi's comments drew a sharp retort from Warsaw, which has closely aligned itself with the US-led war drive against Russia. Polish Deputy Foreign Minister Konrad Szymanski claimed there was an "unequivocal" support for action against Russia. "All options cover sanctions, various tools limiting Russia in relation to what is happening in Syria today," he said. Any "lack of change to Russian behavior in Syria will cause us to return to this topic very quickly."

Tension also erupted between Warsaw and Berlin over the conflict with Russia. Szymanski penned a comment in the *Financial Times* attacking the Nord Stream gas pipeline connecting Russia and Germany via the Baltic Sea. Poland and other Eastern European states have long opposed the pipeline, negotiated in 2005 by Moscow and Berlin, fearing Germany could resupply itself with gas even if conflicts with Russia led Moscow to cut off their energy supplies.

Calling the pipeline a "Trojan horse capable of destabilizing the economy and poisoning political relations inside the EU," Szymanski warned that it "may be subject to legal challenge by Poland or other countries, in the court [the EU Court of Justice] if need be."

The intractable contradictions arising inside the EU reflect bitter conflicts among the major imperialist powers amid the reckless, US-led war drive against Russia and China.

Next year will mark a quarter century since the signing of the Maastricht Treaty, which founded the EU. Since then, illusions that the restoration of capitalism in the USSR and the founding of the EU would unify Europe, bringing peace, prosperity and democracy to all, have been shattered. Europe's economy is stagnating amid mass unemployment and attacks on social rights, despite trillion-euro handouts

to the banks. Meanwhile, Europe is being re-militarized as NATO deploys tens of thousands of troops to the Middle East and along Russia's borders in Europe.

The EU is recklessly whipping up anti-Russian propaganda, covering up its own role in the arming of Syrian Islamist opposition militias in Aleppo and the bloody assault on Mosul. While it echoes Washington's line to justify military spending increases and incite police-state hysteria at home, the inter-imperialist rivalries inside NATO are increasingly impossible to hide.

Unwilling to give up access to profit opportunities in Russia and China, most EU powers have rejected US calls for major economic sanctions on Russia or for action against China, such as a boycott of its Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

This goes hand-in-hand with ever more visible military and economic tensions. Last year, Berlin and Paris opposed CIA plans to arm Ukrainian nationalist militias against Russia, which they feared would provoke military retaliation from Russia; this year, EU officials declared that they would not take a position in Washington's dispute with Beijing in the South China Sea. EU officials are now announcing plans for an EU army independent from Washington, provoking open declarations of hostility from the British government.

These tensions threatened to erupt into trade war this autumn, as the EU imposed a multi-billion-euro fine on Apple for tax evasion in Ireland, and Washington retaliated with a massive fine on Germany's ailing Deutsche Bank. These escalating inter-imperialist conflicts underlay the summit's failure to reach further agreement on CETA and Brexit.

Talks on CETA failed yesterday, less than two months after German and French officials called for an end to talks with Washington on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. Opposition emerged from the francophone Belgian region of Wallonia, which demanded more protection for EU farmers from Canadian competition. Walloon officials also reportedly aimed to undercut Belgium's economically dominant Flanders region, whose government supports CETA.

As she left Belgium, Canadian Trade Minister Chrystia Freeland said: "It seems evident for me and for Canada that the European Union is not now capable of having an international accord even with a country

that has values as European as Canada ... Canada is disappointed, but I think it is impossible."

The difficulty of negotiating such trade agreements also points to the deep conflicts that are set to arise as London begins the process of leaving the EU and tries to renegotiate its trade deals, which until now have been made under the aegis of the EU. While few details emerged of Thursday night's talks on Brexit between EU officials and British Prime Minister Theresa May, who was attending her first EU summit, tensions are clearly mounting behind the scenes.

European People's Party leader Manfred Weber threatened London because it is blocking plans for an EU army and military capability that would be independent from the US and Britain.

"When somebody wants to leave a club, it's not really normal that such a member who wants to leave a club wants to decide about the future of this club. That is really creating a lot of anger, the behavior of the British government," he told the BBC. He added, "I think it's totally understandable if we, as Germans, as French, as Italians, think about our—not your—long-term project. Please don't stop it, don't block it, because that will have a lot of impact on the Brexit negotiations if you do so."



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