

European powers criticize Trump's threats against China

Alex Lantier

17 December 2016

A month before Donald Trump's inauguration as US president, tensions are already emerging with the European powers over his "America first" program. This week, French and German officials publicly distanced themselves from Trump's questioning of the "One China" policy that has governed relations between the imperialist powers, Taiwan and China since the 1970s.

On Wednesday, as the chief of the US Pacific Command, Admiral Harry Harris, threatened to confront China in the South China Sea, French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault told France2 television that Trump's China policy was unacceptable. "Watch out with China," he said. "It's a big country. There may be disagreements with China, but you don't speak to a partner that way."

Ayrault warned that implicitly threatening China's territorial integrity by repudiating the "One China" policy could have disastrous consequences. "One should avoid getting into dangerous spirals," he said, adding, "When China feels that its unity is being put in question, that's not very clever. We will have to be very careful, but hopefully in the coming days [Trump's] new team will learn enough to manage a very uncertain presidential term with composure and responsibility."

Trump's aggressiveness against China is neither an accident nor the product of inexperience. It flows inexorably from the strategic imperatives of the "America first" program. Trump aims to reverse the growth of China's economic weight and influence in the decades since the Stalinist regime opened China to foreign capital in 1979. He wants, by means of a decisive showdown with Beijing, to maintain US imperialism's role as the world hegemon, despite its protracted economic decline.

Powerful sections of the European capitalist class sense that this policy could lead to catastrophic clash between Europe and the United States, particularly if Washington turns against Europe the measures it is threatening to apply to China.

This week, French Industry Minister Christophe Sirugue told the *Financial Times* that Europe could not be a "spectator" if Trump imposed punitive tariffs on European goods, and that Europe should prepare for trade war with Washington. "If he adopts the protectionism that he promised during the campaign, Europe would need to react to that... There are fiscal tools, there are regulatory tools, there is a whole pallet of reforms that could be put in place" against the United States, Sirugue said.

The comments of Ayrault and Sirugue reflect the views of more than France's Socialist Party, which is widely expected to lose power in next year's presidential election. On Monday, just after Trump challenged the "One China" policy, Chancellor Angela Merkel stated that Germany, Europe's leading economic power, would not align itself with Trump's policy. She said, "We continue to stand by the One China policy and we will not change our position."

Trump's policies also were attacked in the press. On his China policy and talk of relaxing sanctions on Russia, the French daily *Le Monde* wrote: "These radical changes will have important practical consequences for Europe on security, trade and economics. For Western firms, what will be the impact of inevitable Sino-American tensions?... US voters chose Donald Trump. The rest of the world was not consulted. But this is a president that one has to work with. Fasten your seat belts."

German state radio *Deutsche Welle* declared: "Trump's offensive is a dangerous miscalculation. He is starting a game that can have no winners. Due to their comprehensive economic interdependence, the United States and the People's Republic of China will both suffer massively from a deterioration of relations, let alone trade war... There are enough unresolved crises around the world for now. It is completely incomprehensible why Trump would needlessly stoke further crises."

Such statements reflect a growing awareness in

European ruling circles that an “America first” policy threatens to provoke a devastating trade war, or a horrific shooting war, on a global scale. After Trump cast doubt during his campaign on the viability of the NATO military alliance between the United States, Canada and the European powers, it is clear that key political institutions of world capitalism are on the verge of collapse.

The Soviet bureaucracy’s dissolution of the USSR a quarter century ago, by depriving the NATO alliance of its common enemy, intensified the contradictions between the NATO powers. Calling for a “multipolar” world, France and Germany opposed the illegal US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

While they abandoned this opposition in the years before the 2008 Wall Street crash, and then joined Washington in launching a wave of new wars—in Libya, Syria, Mali and beyond—the underlying conflicts between the major powers have only intensified.

In a recent note on China, the European Council on Foreign Relations pointed to the growing strategic uncertainty in US-European relations. “Europe still matters to the United States,” it wrote, “but it does much less for itself than Asia in security terms, having left all the heavy lifting to the US in recent decades. It lacks a coherent foreign and security policy, and has terrible relations with the two regional powers, Russia and Turkey. In this context, engineering an alliance with the likes of Russia, India and Japan in order to cap China’s ambitions could well be more valuable to Trump’s United States” than Europe.

In 2014, as the imperialist war drive escalated into a US-led confrontation with Russia over the Syrian civil war and Ukraine, and the US “pivot to Asia” against China, economic tensions rose between Washington and the European Union. With Europe’s economy smothered by EU austerity measures targeting the working class and economic sanctions against Russia, the EU powers defied Washington’s call not to join China’s Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

They aim to have a leading seat at the table as Beijing distributes investments and contracts under its One Belt-One Road (OBOR) plan. This plan would spend \$1 trillion in the next decade, and up to \$3 trillion in total, on port, rail, road and industrial infrastructure linking up the Eurasian landmass. *Fortune* magazine estimates that investment at 12 times the inflation-adjusted size of the US Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe after World War II.

The prospect of a major US trade conflict with China

places the European bourgeoisie before an insoluble dilemma. Since China exported fully \$482 billion in goods to the United States and €350 billion to the EU last year, it is clear that this entails a catastrophic trade conflict.

On the one hand, it could submit to Trump’s initiatives and aid Washington in isolating and strangling China. This would come at a huge cost to Europe’s already moribund economy, however. It would cut off access to Chinese investment and give US regulators authority over whatever joint EU-China projects did continue. Already, US regulators have blocked numerous such operations on national security grounds—most recently, the bid of Fujian Grand Chip Investment Fund for German chip equipment maker Aixtron.

Anticipating such a scenario, some European officials are calling for European trade war measures against China. “If Trump imposes punitive duties on China, that could lead to massive diversions of trade flows towards Europe,” said Ulrich Ackermann of Germany’s Mechanical Engineering Industry Association. Chinese firms would “look around for other markets, and their attention is bound to shift to Europe. Then we must be able to protect our markets.”

On the other hand, the major European powers could try to oppose a US confrontation with China. As the Pentagon escalates its presence in the Pacific, however, this runs the risk of provoking a military collision with US forces, for which the European powers, even though they are spending billions of euros on unpopular defense budget increases, are still unprepared.

Either course of action, or some attempt to tack between the two, will profoundly destabilize relations among the European countries, which are already deep in crisis over the British vote to exit the EU, and sharpen class tensions in Europe.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact