

# Trump's meeting with the UK's Theresa May and the US/European conflict

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UK Prime Minister Theresa May expected today's meeting with US President Donald Trump to be a political coup. It was to prove that Britain had a powerful ally in pursuing its exit from the European Union and could obtain a US trade deal to compensate for the possible loss of access to Europe's Single Market. Trump's support could even strengthen May's hand in negotiations with Germany and France.

It is a measure of the rapid deterioration in economic and political relations between the US and the rest of the world that May's visit has instead prompted bitter recriminations from leading voices representing British imperialism.

May arrives in Washington on the eve of triggering Article 50 and initiating a two-year negotiated exit from the EU. The British ruling class is deeply divided over Brexit, with the dominant sections that supported a Remain vote in last year's referendum fearful of losing access to the European market. In an attempt to straddle this divide, May pledged that she would explain to Trump that she did not see Brexit as "a decision about breaking up the EU."

No one believes that such promises have any significance. Commenting on Trump's inaugural speech pledging a policy of "America First" protectionism, Martin Wolf warned in the *Financial Times* that the United States' break with free trade and support for punitive tariffs means that "Its victims, particularly China, are also likely to retaliate... Mr Xi's China cannot replace the US: that would take cooperation with Europeans and other Asian powers. The more likely outcome is collapse into a trade policy free-for-all."

Fellow columnist Philip Stephens declared of Trump, "On every measure—free trade, climate change, NATO, Russia, Iran—his views collide with Britain's national

interests," including his support for "a great unravelling of the European project."

Perhaps the most extraordinary response came from the *Guardian*'s Martin Kettle, who wrote, alluding to the policy of appeasement towards Nazi Germany, "If May thinks that waving a piece of paper signed by Trump offering a US trade deal will be viewed as a triumph, she is wrong. It could make her not the new Margaret Thatcher but the new Neville Chamberlain."

Trump's ascendency is now widely understood within British and European ruling circles as marking the definitive end of the United States' post-war role as the anchor of European integration and guarantor, through NATO, of Europe's imperialist interests. Trump has described the EU as an economic rival to the US, a German instrument, and predicted that other countries would follow the UK's example in leaving.

This has left the European capitalist governments scrambling to formulate a political, economic and military response.

In Germany, Social Democratic Party leader Sigmar Gabriel, who is positioning himself as a future foreign minister, declared, "Now is the time to strengthen Europe... If Trump starts a trade war with Asia and South America, it will open opportunities for us."

In France, the centre-right candidate for this spring's presidential election, François Fillon, travelled to Berlin Monday to deliver a speech to the Konrad Adenauer Foundation on how to defend Europe's place "between Donald Trump's United States, Vladimir Putin's Russia and Xi Jinping's China." He urged deeper integration of the EU, including a European defence community with a joint budget for foreign military deployments and, most controversially, for Russia to be accepted as "a major partner" of Europe. His rival, former Social Democrat, now independent,

Emmanuel Macron, gave the same message on the EU in the *Financial Times*, only shorn of any suggestion of a rapprochement with Moscow.

Trump's threats against China, Mexico and Europe have been generally treated by bourgeois commentators as an inexplicable break from the policies pursued by his predecessors. This not only fails to explain how he has risen to the leadership of the United States, but also why similar far-right movements have emerged throughout Europe. In France, the National Front of Marine Le Pen is in the leading position in the presidential election, and Geert Wilders of the Dutch Party for Freedom is leading in the polls ahead of the March general election in the Netherlands.

The resort to extreme nationalism, intimidation and violence flows inexorably from the declining global position of US imperialism, under conditions of a general breakdown of world capitalism signalled by the 2008 crash. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US has sought to counteract its economic decline through an assertion of military might. However, a quarter-century later, the wars waged by Washington have proved disastrous while its economic position has continued to deteriorate, as expressed above all in the rise of China as a rival power.

This has left the US unable and unwilling to any longer place itself at the centre of a network of economic and political mechanisms, including the EU, that are seen as imposing restraints on Washington's drive for unchallenged global hegemony. The assertion of US military supremacy in the Middle East and North Africa has metastasized into threats of war against both Moscow and Beijing, along with a growing hostility to Germany as America's major European rival. Increasingly, the US is pursuing a policy of divide and rule throughout the continent.

The destabilisation of world politics through the efforts of Washington to buttress its position as the world's dominant power drives the European powers into conflict with the US. This is the road of trade war and military conflict.

May's pilgrimage to Trump can do nothing to resolve these deep and escalating conflicts. They are rooted in the irreconcilable contradictions of the world capitalist system—between a globally integrated and interdependent economy and the division of the world into antagonistic national states; and between the

socialized character of global production and its subordination, through the private ownership of the means of production, to the accumulation of private profit by the ruling capitalist class.

These same contradictions are also driving the working class into struggle. Everywhere, the destruction of jobs, wages and essential services accompanies trade war and military aggression. Only the working class in Europe, the US and throughout the world, united in a revolutionary struggle against capitalism, can bring an end to austerity, political reaction and war.



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