

German Chancellor Merkel meets Erdogan ahead of EU summit in Malta

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Prior to the beginning of yesterday's European Union (EU) summit in Malta, German Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democrats, CDU) met with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Ankara. It was the fifth trip to Turkey for Merkel in the past 18 months and her first visit since the failed coup in Turkey on July 15-16, 2016.

The meeting took place under conditions of an extremely tense foreign policy climate in the wake of the inauguration of US President Donald Trump. On Wednesday, Michael Flynn, the national security adviser to the US president, threatened Iran, which is currently closely collaborating with Turkey in Syria, with war. Mexico and China, as well as Germany and the EU, previously were targeted by Trump's nationalist and militarist foreign policy.

Brussels and Berlin are responding to these developments with their own foreign policy offensive. Since Trump's assumption of power, several media outlets, foreign policy think tanks and leading business and political figures have sharply criticised the new US administration and called for a more independent EU foreign policy to enforce their own economic and geopolitical interests, in opposition to the US if necessary.

German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel, who is currently in Washington, demanded immediately following Trump's inauguration speech that their own interests had to be "firmly" defined. In an interview with *Handelsblatt*, he declared, among other things, "If Trump initiates a trade war with Asia or South America, opportunities will open up for us." Europe had to "work quickly now on a new Asia strategy" and "make use of ... the spaces left free by America."

While the media focused in its reporting on Merkel's alleged reference to the need to defend democracy and

human rights in Turkey, it was apparent that the two-and-a-half hour talks between Merkel and Erdogan also dealt with major geopolitical and economic issues.

Shortly after the beginning of the joint press conference, Erdogan emphasised, "After our joint discussion there were further discussions among delegations. We were able bilaterally as well as jointly to evaluate various issues, on defence, the economy, trade, different areas—including, of course, terrorism—and this both nationally and internationally."

Relations between Germany and Turkey were "important relations." In addition, the issue of "what we can jointly do in the defence sector" was dealt with. Other "important issues" were "political relations within the framework of the EU, the EU process, as well as in the framework of NATO."

Despite sharp foreign policy conflicts with Ankara in recent months—the most recent caused by 40 Turkish officers who were ordered to return from NATO bases, but instead applied for asylum in Germany—Turkey is for several reasons a key ally of German imperialism as a central bridging country between Europe and the energy-rich Middle East.

An important goal for Merkel and the German government is the brutal sealing off of Europe from refugees fleeing the war zones in the Middle East. At the joint press conference with Erdogan, Merkel explicitly praised the dirty refugee deal between the European Union and Turkey, stating, "Turkey is making extraordinary efforts here every day." She said, "Everything [would be] done to ensure that the resources promised by the EU can of course be dispersed as soon as possible."

There are also the close economic ties between the countries. Like many other countries, Turkey is important for the export-dependent German economy,

above all as a sales market. In 2015, Germany supplied goods valued at €22.4 billion to Turkey, which placed 14th among Germany's export destinations. On the other hand, Germany imported goods valued at €14.5 billion from Turkey (17th place). Merkel said reassuringly in Ankara, "The economic relations are good, but they could be further intensified; we will also work on that."

Turkey is also an important ally for Germany due to the German army's interventions in the Middle East. At the Turkish airbase at Incirlik, German Tornados and up to 1,200 troops have been stationed for the operations in Syria and Iraq, the expansion of which was agreed to last November.

The Defence Ministry is currently pushing for an expansion to Incirlik, so as to be able to potentially act more independently of the US military. Spiegel Online wrote last September that the expansion of the base was "from the point of view of the military ... urgently required," because since the beginning of the German intervention, the air force "parks its jets on US army facilities, rests them in temporary accommodation and depends upon technology from allies during their surveillance flights."

Merkel's visit to Turkey exposes the hollow talk about human rights used to justify German foreign policy. The Erdogan government used the failed coup as a pretext to suppress all domestic opposition and establish an authoritarian regime. More than 120,000 state employees have been laid off since July, and more than 40,000 people detained. In April, Erdogan is seeking to win a referendum on a highly controversial constitutional amendment so that he can effectively cement his power as a dictator.

Behind the "human rights criticism" of Merkel—above all from the Social Democrats, Greens and Left Party, as well as from sections of the CDU—is not concern with the democratic rights of Turkish workers, but rather differences over how German imperialism can most effectively enforce its interests in the Middle East.

Christian Social Union (CSU) defence policy spokesman Florian Hahn declared that Turkey's behaviour was inappropriate for a NATO member and considered the option of stationing German troops in another country. "One definitely needs to consider this. But at the end of the day there cannot be a long-term

situation in which every six months we are put under pressure by Turkey over some technical issue. I believe, for example, that Jordan would be a much more reliable partner. Although this would mean a corresponding use of financial resources and time."



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